The Chronicle of the Seeker

Mahmud Kati, the author of The Chronicle of the Seeker, was a high-ranking official of the Songhai Empire, the empire that followed the Mali Empire and its famous ruler Mansa Musa. Kati served as a judge in the Islamic courts. He was also the imperial minister of finance. He organized the first census taken of the Songhai Empire. He was so well respected that he was second in line for the throne of Askia Muhammad.

1. Who was Mahmud Kati? What role did he serve in the Songhai Empire?

Mahmud Kati was also a scholar. Aside from writing the history of the West African empires in his work The Chronicle of the Seeker, Kati also collected many books and manuscripts. These have survived for centuries in the possession of some of his descendants. In 1999, historians and archivists began reassembling Kati’s collection. The more than 7,000 manuscripts will be housed in a library and made available to scholars throughout the world, who will use them (and copies scanned into computers) to gain new insights into the history, culture, and economy of West Africa.

2. What type of scholar was Mahmud Kati? How did his books survive?

3. Why have historians been studying his manuscripts?

Background: The Chronicle of the Seeker is a history of Islam in West Africa, written by the Muslim scholar Mahmud Kati. Kati began to write his history around 1519. The following excerpt describes how Mansa Musa, the king of Mali, prepared for a pilgrimage to Mecca in the 1320's. Kati refers to Mansa Musa as Kankan (“Lord”) Musa.

4. When did Mahmud began to write The Chronicle of the Seeker? What does the excerpt describe?

"Kankan Musa made up his mind that very day and began to collect the money and equipment needed for the journey. He sent proclamations to all parts of his realm asking for supplies and support and went to one of his shaykhs (elders or senior advisors) and asked him to choose the day of his departure. “You should wait,” said the shaykh, “for the Saturday which falls on the twelfth day of the month. Set forth on that day, and you will not die before you return safe and sound to your residence, please God.” He therefore delayed and waited until these two coincided [matched], and it was not until nine months later that the twelfth of the month fell on a Saturday. He set forth when the head of his caravan had already reached Timbuktu, while he himself was still in his residence in Mali. Since that time travelers of that people believe it is lucky to set out on a journey on a Saturday which falls on the twelfth of a month."

5. How did Mansa Musa prepare for his pilgrimage to Mecca?

6. Why did Mansa Musa wait to start his pilgrimage on a Saturday?

7. How did Mansa Musa's decision to delay his pilgrimage effect the travel plans of his own people?