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Introduction: African History and Islamic Manuscript Cultures

The study of Africa has suffered, and still suffers, from many stereotypes. One such stereotype was the assumption that there was no history in Africa before the arrival of the Europeans. After World War II, with the march towards independence of most African countries, a new generation of scholars, both from the continent and abroad, initiated a historiographical revolution that would eventually restore their past to the peoples of Africa. During this phase, scholars considered oral traditions as the authentic means of discovering the past and understanding the present in Africa. Although exceptionally useful, the problem with the drive to study orality as a source of history was that it overlooked a centuries-old tradition of Islamic literacy found in many areas of the continent after the conversion of Africans to the Muslim faith. However, this tradition of Islamic literacy has left a priceless heritage in manuscripts, both in Arabic and in various forms of *'ajamī* (i.e. African languages written in the Arabic alphabet), which have only recently attracted the attention of scholars.

The Arts and Crafts of Literacy: Islamic Manuscript Cultures in sub-Saharan Africa, focuses on this African Islamic literary heritage and offers a holistic approach to the study of manuscripts in Muslim Africa. Andrea Brigaglia and I have gathered twelve contributions presented at the international conference we organized and hosted at the University of Cape Town, 5–6 September, 2013, titled *The Arts and Crafts of Literacy: Manuscript Cultures in Muslim sub-Saharan Africa*.¹ These articles look at the different dimensions of the manuscripts, i.e. at the materials, the technologies and the practices, the communities involved in the production, commercialization, circulation, preservation and consumption, as well as at the texts themselves.

As the Congolese philosopher Valentin-Yves Mudimbe underlines, '[t]he reality of an African history, particularly for the sub-Saharan part of the continent, does not seem to exist, at least academically, before the 1940s.'² That Africa has no history was the argument of the famous eighteenth/nineteenth-century philosopher Georg W.F. Hegel. In his often-quoted lectures, published under the title *Philosophy of History*, he uttered the following, powerful statement:

1 Michaele Biddle and Alessandro Gori could not attend the conference; nevertheless, their articles are presented here. Halirou Mohamadou's paper was solicited by the editors.

2 Mudimbe 1994, 21.

At this point we leave Africa [...]. For it is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit. Historical movements in it - that is in its northern part - belong to the Asiatic or European World. Carthage displayed there an important transitional phase of civilization; but, as a Phoenician colony, it belongs to Asia. Egypt will be considered in reference to the passage of the human mind from its Eastern to its Western phase, but it does not belong to the African Spirit. What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which had to be presented here only as on the threshold of the World's History.³

Ideas such as those of Hegel went almost unquestioned in the colonial period. Indeed, they proved to be hard to dismiss and partially survived the end of colonialism. For example, the famous historian Hugh R. Trevor-Roper simply follows in Hegel's footsteps. In 1965, he argued that '[p]erhaps, in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none, or very little: there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is largely darkness, like the history of pre-European, pre-Columbian America. And darkness is not a subject for history.'⁴

Trevor-Roper accepts the Hegelian argument almost in its entirety. However, in the post-colonial context, he implicitly echoes a historiographical trend that, at the time, was finally fading away, i.e. that history is exclusively based on written sources. The origin of this assumption can be traced back to the nineteenth-century development of History as an academic discipline and is often associated with a statement in the famous manual of history *Introduction aux études historiques* by Charles-Victor Langlois and Charles Seignobos (first published Paris: Hachette et Cie 1899).⁵ According to the authors, '[f]or want of documents the history of immense periods in the past of humanity is destined to remain for ever unknown. For there is no substitute for documents: no documents, no history.'⁶

The idea that history could only be written through the study of written sources started to be questioned by the middle of the twentieth century. One of those who contributed the most to establish the legitimacy of oral sources as valid historical sources was Jan Vansina who, in 1961, published his milestone work *De la tradition orale*.⁷ In fact, oral sources had already been used from the moment men started

³ Hegel 2001, 117.

⁴ Trevor-Roper 1965, 9.

⁵ Novick 1988, 39.

⁶ Langlois/Seignobos 1904, 17. In fact, the two historians never understood 'document' exclusively as 'written document,' as underlined by John-Edward Philips, but as any vestige that the past has left behind, thus also oral sources and material artefacts (Philips 2005, 38).

⁷ Vansina 1961. The book was translated into several languages and eventually a substantially different version was published in the 1980s as Vansina 1985. On Vansina's role in the historiography of oral sources, see Newbury 2007.

preserving the memory of their past. In the case of Africa, Europeans started collecting oral traditions of sub-Saharan Africans from their first contact with local populations. However, these were the works of explorers and later of colonial administrators, not of professional academics.⁸ In the words of David Henige, it took Vansina's work to 'justify oral traditions as historical sources, [...] providing a methodological point of departure.'⁹ This recognition of oral sources took place in a propitious context, when proper African historiography was developing as an independent discipline, restoring African history to Africans, at the same time as African nations fought the colonial rulers for their independence.¹⁰ In fact, the emergence of an African historiography transcended the boundary of the traditional discipline of history to become a multidisciplinary approach to the study of the continent's past and present, a branch of learning which Mudimbe refers to as Africanism, meaning 'the [entire] body of discourses on and about Africa.'¹¹ In the context of this "nationalist" historiography, as Toyin Falola and Christian Jennings underline,

[o]ral tradition had the additional benefit of providing a counterpoint to written colonial documents, which were seen as "tainted" with their creators' racism and cultural bias. Newly independent states in Africa were more than welcoming to such pro-African projects, and history departments across the continent set to the task of compiling nationalist narratives of their countries' precolonial past, colonial experiences, and resistance struggles.¹²

From this climate emerged a picture, often accepted in both scholarly and non-scholarly circles, of 'Sub-Saharan Africa [...] as [the] quintessence of orality.'¹³ This approach is epitomized by Vansina's statement in his influential chapter of the *General History of Africa* by UNESCO:

The African civilization in the Sahara and south of the desert were to a great extent civilization of the spoken word, even where the written word existed, as it did in West Africa from the sixteenth century onward, because only very few people knew how to write and the role of the written word was often marginal to the essential preoccupations of a society.¹⁴

A veritable historiographical 'revolution' resulted from the work of scholars such as Vansina, and from the introduction of oral sources as a means of discovering

8 On the European 'discovery' of African oral traditions, see Masonen 2000, 436–451.

9 Henige 2005, 171.

10 Triulzi 1979, 5.

11 Mudimbe 1994, 39.

12 Falola/Jennings 2003, xiii.

13 Saul 2006, 14.

14 Vansina 1981, 142.

African history, thus tremendously improving our knowledge of African peoples' past. However, an unexpected side-effect of this climate was the spread of the idea that most African civilizations were "exclusively" oral. Therefore, an old and deep literate tradition in Arabic that followed the conversion to Islam of many Africans living in or south of the Sahara was overlooked in many parts of the continent.¹⁵

Prior to independence, this tradition, and the Islamic system of knowledge of which it was the product, had already been subjected to a process of disqualification, which was perpetuated by colonial authorities, and which has been highlighted in recent research by scholars interested in African Muslim societies, among them Rudolph T. Ware, Ousmane O. Kane, and Fallou Ngom.¹⁶ With the emergence of nationalist historiographies primarily based on oral history, the African Islamic literary heritage went through a different process of disqualification. Once oral sources established themselves as the authentic source of exploring the African past, then Islam and its manuscripts cannot be considered other than a 'foreign element, an intruder.'¹⁷ More broadly, an alleged natural resistance of African cultures to Islamization, a trope widely employed with a negative connotation in the colonial period, began to be seen as 'a testament to the strength and vitality of African social and cultural systems that resisted the imposition of presumed foreign belief structures like Islam.'¹⁸

Returning to Vansina's thought, the above quote leaves room for the existence of literacy in the mainly oral societies of Islamic Saharan and sub-Saharan Africa. Nonetheless, the role of literacy remained marginal in the eyes of scholars. Jack Goody expresses this marginality by introducing the paradigm of 'restricted literacy.' This paradigm was first used in a 1963 article with Ian Watt and then expanded in several other publications.¹⁹ Goody specifically applied it to Islamic West Africa

15 For example, in the introduction of the excellent collection of essays on literacy in Colonial Africa edited by Karin Barber and titled *Africa's Hidden Histories* there is no reference to the older Islamic literary tradition of the continent, Barber 2006, 1–24.

16 Ware 2014; Kane 2016; Ngom 2016.

17 Hamès 2002, 170.

18 Reese 2004, 2. The idea of the existence of a syncretistic and heterodox form of Islam practiced by Muslim Africans, often referred to as Islam Noir or African Islam, emerged as a colonial stereotype. French scholar-administrators theorized a natural resistance of the Black African to Islam that was based, in the words of Rudolph T. Ware, on the supposed 'religious deficiencies of African Muslims and [...] their biological (or perhaps) bodily predisposition to animism' (Ware 2014, 20). The literature on this topic is extensive and a recent overview of the emergence of this idea is Triaud 2014. For a more in-depth study of how French colonialism created the concept of Islam Noir, the classical study remains Harrison 1988.

19 Goody/Watt 1963.

in 1968 in his contribution to the edited collection *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, where he states:

Literacy [in Islamic Africa] was restricted in its diffusion, its content and its implications largely because it was a religious literacy, dominated by the study of the Holy Book. Indeed, learning to read at all meant learning a foreign language, Arabic, and the actual techniques of teaching were often more appropriate to oral than to written cultures. But the main factor in restricting the developments in the cognitive sphere was the association of the book with magic and religion, an exclusive, all-embracing cult that claimed it had the single road to the truth. It is above all the predominantly religious character of literacy that, here as elsewhere prevented the medium from fulfilling its promise.²⁰

According to these early works of Goody, very influential among scholars of Africa, it is possible to identify several factors that resulted in the restricted spread of literacy. I define these factors as social, functional, educational and technical. Literacy was restricted in its social diffusion because only a very small percentage of the population had access to writing techniques, with literacy becoming a specialized craft of literati who were interested in protecting their exclusive monopoly on it; therefore, Goody describes these societies as ‘oligoliterate.’²¹ Literacy was also restricted in its content because of its religious and magical functions, a case defined as ‘limited’ or ‘special’ literacy.²² Furthermore, the system of Islamic learning spread in West Africa, whose focus was the study of the Quran rather than the learning of writing and reading, would hamper the development of the full potentialities of writing itself.²³ Finally, in African societies with “restricted literacy,” the implications of literacy were also restricted, according to Goody, due to inherent structural deficiencies of the Arabic alphabet, with its consonantal structure characteristic of Semitic languages.²⁴

As a result of the widespread ideas of Africa as a continent of oral cultures or restricted literacy, scholars of Africa, with a few notable exceptions, have seldom used Arabic manuscripts, defined in the mid-1980s by Jean-Louis Triaud as a ‘scientific *no man’s land*.’²⁵ Overlooking the Islamic literary heritage of large parts of the continent has also been exacerbated by the classical divide in expertise between the training of the traditional ‘Africanist,’ at home with oral traditions,

²⁰ Goody 1968, 241.

²¹ The term ‘oligoliterate’ comes from Goody/Watt 1963, 313.

²² Goody/Watt 1963, 313, n. 22. For a detailed study on the ‘magical’ usage of writing in Islamic West Africa, see Hamès 2007.

²³ Goody/Watt 1963, 222.

²⁴ Goody/Watt 1963, 221.

²⁵ Mahibou/Triaud 1983, 7, italics in text.

sources in European languages, and archaeological evidence, but usually lacking in the required philological skills, peculiar to the ‘Islamicist,’ who, on the other hand, rarely pays attention to Africa.²⁶

The 1990s witnessed the opening-up of African libraries filled with thousands of Arabic manuscripts, and forced scholars to rethink their approach to the study of the continent. The emergence of local Islamic libraries began in the modern Republic of Mali, particularly in the city of Timbuktu. According to Abdul Kader Haïdara, one of the major actors in the promotion of the manuscript heritage in Islamic Africa, this phenomenon was a consequence of the restoration, after the 1991 election, of civil rights in Mali ‘among which [was] the right to establish foundations, companies and private societies.’²⁷ As underlined by Graziano Krätli, the pattern of ‘disappearance’ and ‘reappearance’ of manuscripts is much more complicated than the one described by A.K. Haïdara, with manuscripts that have been well-known since the colonial period, and others that have only recently disappeared, both in West Africa and in Europe.²⁸ Charles S. Stewart remarks that the latest wave of interest in the heritage of the region’s Arabic manuscripts is only the most recent in a long line.²⁹ Stewart adds that, this time, ‘the entrepreneurial activities of an enterprising few African custodians of local literary capital’ attracted the interest of international powerful donors such as UNESCO, the Ford Foundation, the Andrew Mellon Foundation and the London based al-Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation.³⁰

These activities also attracted a non-specialized audience, as proven by innumerable newspaper articles and a few documentaries on the topic, such as the episode ‘Road to Timbuktu’ of the PBS series *Wonders of the African World* featuring the Harvard scholar Henry L. Gates Junior (1999); the Spanish *Fondo Kati, testigo del exilio ibérico en Tombuctú* (2003); the BBC’s *The Lost Libraries of Timbuktu* with writer

26 Salvaing 2015. On the subject of Islamicists’ overlooking African Muslim societies, Scott S. Reese underlines that ‘[t]he traditional study of Islam in the Western academy has emphasized the dominance of the so-called Arabo-Persian “Islamicate” center. Under this model, cultural and spiritual ideals spread outward to the large communities of Muslims in Africa and Asia who inhabited the margins. As mere “receptors” of Arabo-Persian learning, Muslim societies in this supposed periphery were regarded as either stagnant – if not decadent – copies of the “pure” faith or wholly localized phenomena whose evolution owed more to local historical, environmental, and cultural factors in the form of pre-Islamic “custom” than their Arabian roots,’ Reese 2014, 18.

27 Haïdara 2008, 268.

28 Krätli 2015, 44.

29 Stewart 2003, 2.

30 Stewart 2003, 2.

Aminatta Forna (2009); the South African-produced *The Ancient Astronomers of Timbuktu* (2009); or the recent *Sur la piste des manuscrits de Tombouctou* (2015) co-produced by the Bibliothèque nationale de France.³¹ In this way, Timbuktu pioneered the awareness of the manuscripts heritage of the whole of Islamic Africa and many new collections of manuscripts have emerged so far throughout the continent. Clear evidence of this new awareness of the written Islamic heritage in Africa are the catalogues of manuscripts from Saharan and sub-Saharan Africa published by the London based Al-Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation;³² several projects sponsored by the Endangered Archives Program of the British Library focusing on Chad, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Mali, Nigeria, and Senegal;³³ and the work coordinated by the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures (CSMC, University of Hamburg) on safeguarding collections of manuscripts that have been relocated from Timbuktu to Bamako during the 2012 crisis in northern Mali.³⁴

The availability of these manuscripts caused a substantial change in scholars' approach to the African past that has challenged the traditional paradigm applied to sub-Saharan Africa as a continent of "oral societies." On the basis of an extensive reading of these newly available sources, new frontiers of Africa's past have been opened by scholars such as (amongst others) Ghislaine Lydon, who has worked on the trans-Saharan trade;³⁵ Bruce Hall, who has explored indigenous ideas of race in West Africa;³⁶ Anne Bang, who has studied Sufi networks in East Africa;³⁷ and

31 For a thorough analysis of the interest around the so-called 'Timbuktu manuscripts', see Triaud 2012. Triaud's article was published before the 2012 crisis in northern Mali that led to the move of several thousands of manuscripts from Timbuktu to Bamako. These events peaked international interest towards the manuscript heritage of the region as testified by several newspapers and magazines articles, as well as popular books, such as Hammer 2016, and the more accurate and scholarly English 2017.

32 See the section on published catalogues on the website of the al-Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation: <http://www.al-furqan.com/publications/manuscript-centre/catalogues/>. On the basis of weeks of fieldwork, the Malian scholar Mohamed Diagayeté and I have recently cast doubts on the reliability of the catalogues from Ivory Coast, Ghana, and Burkina Faso (see Nobili/Diagayeté 2017).

33 For a comprehensive list of projects funded by the Endangered Archives Program, see the grant section on the website <http://eap.bl.uk/pages/grants.html>.

34 See https://www.manuscript-cultures.uni-hamburg.de/timbuktu/index_e.html. On the CSMC's website are also available handlists of several of these libraries (https://www.manuscript-cultures.uni-hamburg.de/timbuktu/handlists_e.html).

35 Lydon 2009.

36 Hall 2011.

37 Bang 2014.

Fallou Ngom, who has broadened our understanding of the Senegalese Muridiyya brotherhood on the basis of the study of ‘*ajami* sources.’³⁸

Testimony to the vibrancy of the Islamic intellectual tradition of Muslims Africans is the series *The Arabic Literature of Africa*, inaugurated by the late John O. Hunwick (Northwestern University) and R. Sean O’Fahey (University of Bergen). The series contains references to works of Muslim scholars active from the early spread of Islam in various regions of Saharan and sub-Saharan Africa. *The Arabic Literature of Africa* has today reached five volumes, the latest compiled by Stewart in 2015, covering roughly the area of contemporary Mauritania, and including references to almost 2,000 authors and their works, both printed and in manuscript format.³⁹

Yet, in the words of Shamil Jeppie, manuscripts produced south of the Sahara have been studied almost exclusively by scholars of Africa ‘as sources without exploring the history of the text as an object, born of and part of a network around it.’⁴⁰ However, specialists interested in European history have already conceptualized, as Roger Chartier underlines, that every ‘text is always inscribed in something material;’⁴¹ or that ‘reading is always reading something.’⁴² This means that every text exists in its ‘dual nature’ as ‘container and content, medium and message, at one and the same time.’⁴³ A manuscript is both a container of one or more texts, complete or incomplete, as well as a physical object, made up of several components (paper, inks, strings, leather, etc.), assembled with a certain set of skills (calligraphy, illuminations, illustrations, bookbinding, etc.) by specific craftsmen (papermakers, scribes or calligraphers, illuminators, binders, etc.), read, studied, lent, sold, donated, collected, stored and sometimes destroyed or re-used. Each manuscript contains two different types of knowledge, which Krätli has defined as ‘embodied’ and ‘embedded’: one is explicit: the texts, the intellectual dimension of the manuscript, are “embodied” in a specific object; the other is implicit, “embedded” in the physical dimension of the manuscript, i.e. the materials, the tools, the tech-

38 Ngom 2016.

39 O’Fahey et al. 1994; Hunwick et al. 1995; O’Fahey et al. 2003; Hunwick 2003; Stewart et al. 2016. On the Arabic Literature of Africa project, see Hunwick 2008, 303–320. Unfortunately, very few of these works have been edited and translated into English or French; an overview of such editions and translations is available in Salvaing 2015.

40 Jeppie 2014, 94.

41 Chartier 1997, 82.

42 Chartier 1994, 5.

43 Krätli 2011, 344.

nologies, the practices and the communities involved in the production, commercialization, circulation, preservation and consumption of these documents.⁴⁴ In other words, Krätli continues, ‘embodied knowledge is knowledge expressed by and in a particular medium and format, while embedded knowledge refers to the material, technological, economic and cultural conditions involved in the making of a particular object and its component parts.’⁴⁵

Several manuscript cultures have been at the centre of codicological studies for decades. However, Adam Gacek underlines that ‘Arabic manuscripts in the form of handwritten books have hitherto been studied first and foremost as vehicles of thought and not as objects in themselves.’⁴⁶ This imbalance between the study of the manuscripts as mere texts and as material objects is slowly being balanced out in the broader context of Arabic manuscripts.⁴⁷ Specialized journals like *Manuscripts of the Middle East*, *Manuscripta Orientalia*, and the recent *Journal of Islamic Manuscripts*, emerged from the 1980s. More recently, François Déroche published the first manual of Islamic Codicology in four languages (in chronological order French, Arabic, English, and Italian) as well as his ‘prelude’ to a history of Arabic manuscripts.⁴⁸ During the same years, Gacek also published the very useful *The Arabic Manuscript Tradition: A Glossary of Technical Terms and Bibliography* plus its supplement;⁴⁹ and *Arabic Manuscripts: A Vademecum for Readers*.⁵⁰

These works on Arabic codicology have dramatically improved the scope of the academic study of Arabic manuscripts. Unfortunately, however, Arabic manuscripts from Africa are barely taken into account in these studies of the Arabic handwritten book. Even those Africanist scholars who actually use these manuscripts rarely pay attention to their physical dimension, focusing only on the text as a source of information. In this regard, Shamil Jeppie remarks that,

[t]he material process of making texts and how these objects were handled – read and reread, often revered, sometimes archived – have been very far from the concerns of historians of Africa. Thus, paper and writing instruments, how texts circulated, how books were held together, and the chain of people involved in the production of texts – from merchants trading

44 Krätli 2011, 342–343.

45 Krätli 2011, 343.

46 Gacek 2009, x.

47 Gacek 2009, x.

48 Originally published in French as Déroche 2000; Déroche 2004.

49 Gacek 2001; 2008

50 Gacek 2009.

in papers, to writers and copyists, through communities of readers – are not found in even modest terms in general or specialist works about Africa.⁵¹

As a challenge to this narrow focus on the textual dimension of manuscripts, Krätli and Lydon's 2011 collection of essays, *The Trans-Saharan Book Trade*, is the first attempt to study West African manuscripts as both containers and physical objects.⁵² In Krätli's words,

[a]ny full understanding and appreciation of this unique cultural heritage, let alone any serious attempt at studying or preserving it, should roughly consider all the material, technological, economic, cultural and intellectual aspects of book production, circulation, consumption and preservation in the area.⁵³

The Arts and Crafts of Literacy: Islamic Manuscript Cultures in sub-Saharan Africa accepts the challenge launched by Krätli for a holistic approach to the study of manuscripts. The articles in the book are grouped into four sections. Section 1 focuses on the writing support. Section 2 comprises contributions on the layout and the margins of Islamic manuscripts from Sub-Saharan Africa. Section 3 bring together essays on different practices of writing and issues of authorship, respectively in Kilwa, Tanzania, Mali, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The last section (Section 4), gathers shorter contributions on different topics related to Muslim written cultures from the continent, namely Cameroon, Mali, South Africa, and Nigeria.

1 Writing supports

Regardless of the growing attention paid to Arabic manuscripts from sub-Saharan Africa, there is still very little research on the material supports employed to inscribe these documents.⁵⁴ Scholars have pointed to the absence of parchment manuscripts in Islamic sub-Saharan Africa.⁵⁵ This contrasts strongly with the extensive use of such writing support in both North Africa and in the highly literate culture of Christian Ethiopia.⁵⁶ Sub-Saharan African Muslims normally wrote their manuscripts on paper. Ironically, while parchment would have been easy to produce for

⁵¹ Jeppie 2014, 94.

⁵² Krätli/Lydon 2011.

⁵³ Krätli 2011, 340.

⁵⁴ See Abbott 1938; Brockett 1987; Bondarev 2014b.

⁵⁵ See, for example, some remarks on this topic, Last 1967, 137.

⁵⁶ Bloom 2008, 48–49; Bausi 2008.

local Muslims due to the large amount of animal skin available, paper has always been a foreign technology, not having developed in sub-Saharan Africa until the colonial period. A very basic introduction, based on secondary sources, is given by Johnathan M. Bloom, but several articles by Terence Walz comprise the lion's share on the topic.⁵⁷ Walz focuses on types of paper, mainly of Italian origins, which dominated the market in North Africa and made their way to sub-Saharan Africa, namely to northern Nigeria, through the various trans-Saharan routes. Anne Regourd's study of a number of Islamic manuscripts from the Institute for Ethiopian Studies in Addis Ababa confirms the extensive use of Italian paper also in the Horn of Africa, along with other types, most probably produced in Ottoman Turkey.⁵⁸ However, generalizing too much on these findings can lead to imprecisions. For example, Nehemia Levtzion has highlighted the presence of northern European papers in Ghana coming most likely from the Gulf of Guinea;⁵⁹ and Ghislayne Lydon makes reference to paper from other European countries traded on the Atlantic coast of the continent.⁶⁰

Chapter 1, 'New Strategies in Using Watermarks to Date Sub-Saharan Islamic Manuscripts' by Michaelle Biddle, is a groundbreaking contribution to the study of paper in Islamic sub-Saharan Africa and focuses on the Western part of the continent. As a specialist of paper making, among other skills, Biddle takes the reader into 'an exploration of the hidden,' (p. 30) by which she means the study of the techniques of productions that are crucial for paper analysis. Biddle's article is both a methodological and an analytical study. From the methodological point of view, she advocates a study of paper that combines 'sheet analysis with information to be found in watermark directories, regional, town, family, mill or paper sector economic history and archaeology' (p. 45). However, at the same time, Biddle also provides a comprehensive history of the Galvani Italian paper mills, whose various qualities of paper circulated widely in West Africa from the 1730s well into the twentieth century.

However, paper has never been the only writing support for African Muslims. In fact, most of the process of education to literacy in Muslim cultures has generally taken place using wooden tablets, in Arabic *lawḥ*. Although the ubiquity of the *lawḥ* in sub-Saharan African and, until fairly recent times, in North African Quranic schools is mentioned in virtually all anthropological studies on traditional Quranic

⁵⁷ Bloom 2008; see also Walz 2011 for a synthesis of the author previous studies on the paper in West Africa.

⁵⁸ Regourd 2014, xlvi.

⁵⁹ Levtzion 1965, 118.

⁶⁰ Lydon 2009, 103.

education in the region, a rich chapter in a monograph by Salah M. Hassan represents the only serious study devoted on the *lawḥ* as a tool of literacy and as a cultural object.⁶¹ In Chapter 2, ‘*Fi Lawḥin Mahfūz: Towards a Phenomenological Analysis of the Quranic Tablet*’, Andrea Brigaglia situates the use of the *lawḥ* in traditional Quranic education in its Islamic religious context. The *lawḥ*, argues Brigaglia, ‘was not only an indispensable practical tool for the transmission of Quranic knowledge, but also the central piece of a complex set of symbols that used to support an educational and initiatory process based on the ritual re-enactment of the myth of the Quranic revelation’ (p.71). Against the argument advanced by other scholars, Brigaglia observes that these initiatory practices are not to be understood as evidence of the supposedly ‘syncretic’ nature of African Islam, but that, on the contrary, they make sense only in reference to the classical theological doctrines about the Quran that they are meant to ritually ‘embody’ or ‘re-enact’ (p.87). Although the article is mainly based on a description of northern Nigerian Quranic schools, the central argument of this paper – which also contains the first attempt to establish a typology of the shapes of the *lawḥ* in various regions of Africa – could be extended to Muslim traditional educational practices as a whole.

2 Around the text

The margins of manuscripts have always served as a precious space ‘for different people, readers, authors or copyists, to utilize’, as authors such as Heather J. Jackson have shown.⁶² More recently, attention to the margin as an important space of the manuscript, both as text and as object, has also been given to Arabic manuscripts, as seen in the 2011 collection *Manuscript Notes as Documentary Sources*.⁶³ This trend is confirmed by the 2016 volume *Tracing Manuscripts in Time and Space through Paratexts* edited by Giovanni Ciotti and Hang Lin that is the first comprehensive and global study of paratexts in several manuscript cultures, also including one contribution, by Darya Ogorodnikova, on ‘*ajamī* manuscripts from West Africa’.⁶⁴ However, it was the decade-long research of one of our contributors on the

⁶¹ Hassan 1992, 148–169.

⁶² Jackson 2001.

⁶³ Görke/Hirschler 2011.

⁶⁴ See Ciotti/Lin 2016, esp. Ogorodnikova 2016.

manuscript tradition of Borno (northeast Nigeria), Dmitry Bondarev, which revolutionized our understanding of the margin and interlinear space in West African manuscripts as a locus for recording practices of Islamic learning.⁶⁵

Similar to Brigaglia's article on the *lawh*, in Chapter 3, 'Islamic Education and Ample Space Layout in West African Islamic Manuscripts', Bondarev also points to the link between writing practices and Islamic educational practices in the West African context. His contribution is a significant piece of scholarship which increases our understanding of the history and anthropology of Islamic education in West Africa.⁶⁶ Bondarev's article explores the correlation between a specific, ample-spaced layout found in many West African manuscripts, and the content of the manuscripts, 'thus demonstrating that practices of Islamic education can be deducted from the analysis of manuscript production' (p. 106). Looking at Quranic and non-Quranic manuscripts from three distinct geographical and cultural areas (Kanuri-speaking Borno; Soninke-speaking Senegambia; Hausa and Fulfulde-speaking northern Nigeria), Bondarev establishes a distinction between interlinear annotations ('glosses'; often in vernacular languages) and marginal annotations ('commentaries'; usually in Arabic). These two types of annotation 'did not result from random opportunistic exploitation of the available space but rather were part of the planned process of manuscript production and use – from the design of the layout to the paratextual exploration of the main text' (p. 137) Challenging an established trend in the anthropology of Islamic education in West Africa, Bondarev argues that a study of the material evidence of the manuscripts suggests that there are three, not two levels of education: not only a first, elementary one where the Quran is memorized on a wooden board and a second, higher one where Arabic texts are studied on paper, but also an intermediate one, where texts are studied in the form of ample-spaced layout manuscripts, often annotated in vernacular languages.

Chapter 4, 'A Preliminary Appraisal of Marginalia in West African Manuscripts from the Mamma Haïdara Memorial Library Collection (Timbuktu),' by Susana Molins Lliteras also approaches the topic of notes on West African manuscripts from a typological point of view. Based on selected manuscripts of the Mamma Haïdara Memorial Library, relocated from northern Mali to Bamako in 2012, the article is the first study of marginalia in manuscripts from Timbuktu. Molins Lliteras provides a comprehensive typology of the marginal notes of these manuscripts, classifying them as addenda, corrections, clarifications, comments and highlights from the

⁶⁵ See, among others Bondarev 2006; Bondarev 2014a.

⁶⁶ See especially Brenner 2001; Tamari 2002; Hall/Stewart 2011; Ware 2014; Brigaglia below.

text; ownership marks; as well as separate independent texts.⁶⁷ By drawing attention to these paratextual elements of Islamic manuscripts from Timbuktu, Molins Lliteras brings to light ‘the nature of manuscripts as objects of production, circulation and consumption’ (p. 152) and not simply as repositories of texts.

3 Writing practices and authorship around the continent

The next three articles are devoted to different African Islamic written traditions, serving different purposes, and written in different Islamic languages.⁶⁸ These articles approach texts or corpuses of texts from very diverse angles. Chapter 5, ‘Writing in Africa: The *Kilwa Chronicle* and other Sixteenth-century Portuguese Testimonies,’ by Adrien Delmas focuses on an example of what we may call, borrowing from another of Delmas’ contributions, ‘philological encounters.’ By this term, Delmas means the contact between European imperial powers and newly discovered written traditions.⁶⁹ The encounter in question is between the Portuguese and the Swahili-speaking elites of Kilwa, which resulted in the production of the famous *Kilwa Chronicle*. The article contributes to the long academic debate on this chronicle, existing in different versions, in Portuguese as part of the 1550s *Décadas da Ásia* by João de Barros, and in Arabic in a nineteenth-century manuscript preserved at the British Museum. Challenging the traditional approach to the study of this chronicle, which was based on the question of whether the Arabic version was written before the Portuguese one or vice versa, Delmas advances a different interpretation, referring to a ‘co-writing’ of the text (p. 196).

Using this term, the author refers to a process of composition that involves writing down existing materials in one version, the one recorded by João Barros in Portuguese, which then provoked a local response, written in Arabic. Approached in

⁶⁷ The latter types of marginal notes are the topic of another of Molins Lliteras’ contributions, i.e. her unpublished Ph.D. dissertation that focuses on another private library of Timbuktu, the Fondo Kati (Molins Lliteras 2015).

⁶⁸ Here I employ the definition of the Italian Islamic studies scholar Alessandro Bausani, according to whom an Islamic language is ‘a language that, at a specific moment in its history, has been deeply influenced, lexically, graphically, and to a certain degree also morphologically, syntactically, and even phonologically by the two main cultural languages of Islam: Arabic and Persian’ (Bausani 1981, 4, translation from Italian by author).

⁶⁹ See Delmas 2016, 163–198.

such a way, the *Kilwa Chronicle* is the perfect embodiment of the Swahili-Portuguese encounter that, paraphrasing Delmas, generated writing practices of their own. In this way, Delmas, draws the attention of the reader to the ‘social conditions’ (p. 202) in which the chronicle was written, seeing his own work on the *Kilwa chronicle* in terms of what D.F. McKenzie has defined as ‘Sociology of the Texts,’ or a ‘history of the social, economic, and political motivations of publishing, the reasons why texts were written and read as they were, why they were rewritten and redesigned, or allowed to die.’⁷⁰ The context of a conflict of authority between the traditional elite of Kilwa and the newly arrived Portuguese, argues Delmas, generated a highly political practice of history writing that must be taken into account in order to understand the chronicle. In this sense, Delmas’ article can be considered as a parallel to the studies of Paulo F. de Moraes Farias, establishing the political connotations of the famous Timbuktu chronicles.⁷¹

In Chapter 6, ‘Bamana Texts in Arabic Characters: Some Leaves from Mali,’ the anthropologist and specialist of Bamana oral literature Tal Tamari offers a new, interdisciplinary study of five short texts in Bamana ‘*ajamī*’ that she had originally transcribed and translated in a 1994 publication.⁷² In this new contribution, the transcriptions, transliterations and translations of the texts are preceded by a rich biography of Amadou Jomworo Bary, a scholar from San, Mali, whom Tamari identifies as the author of the texts. Moreover, the texts are followed by a cultural interpretation of their content, as well as by a detailed analysis of the writing system used by Bary in the Arabic transliteration of Bamana. These leads the author to a rigorous critique of a recent work on the same texts published by Valentin Vydrin and Gérard Dumestre.⁷³ Not only were Vydrin and Dumestre unable to identify Bary as the author of the texts, but — Tamari argues — they committed a number of mistakes in their transliteration which led them to consider Bary’s writing system to be ‘far less coherent than it actually is’ (p. 265). On the contrary, the ‘*ajamī*’ system used by Bary for these Bamana texts is, for Tamari, not only the best one ever attested for a Manding language; it is ‘phonologically more perfect than that of most or all other West African ‘*ajamīs*’ currently identified,’ and ‘in terms of vocalic representation, it may also be superior to Persian, Ottoman Turkish and Swahili’ (p. 208). The fact that the author of these texts, who was a Fulbe, was familiar with the long-standing

⁷⁰ McKenzie 2004, 13.

⁷¹ See the synthetic contribution de Moraes Farias 2008. In this chapter, de Moraes Farias expands on his theory of the nature and properties of the Timbuktu chronicles originally formulated in his masterpiece de Moraes Farias 2003.

⁷² Tamari 1994.

⁷³ Vydrin/Dumestre 2014.

tradition of Fulfulde *'ajamī(s)*, and that he was also literate in French, are for Tamar the main reasons for his ability to develop such a sophisticated and coherent system. Thus, the texts studied in this article bear powerful witness not only to the depth of the phonological knowledge involved in the processes of *'ajamī* innovation by African scholars, but also to the multidimensional nature of the linguistic encounter (in this case, not only of Bamana with Arabic, but also, though indirectly, with Fulbe and possibly French), an encounter that takes place whenever a new version of *'ajamī* is created.

Issues of authorship also lie at the centre of Chapter 7, Xavier Luffin's article 'Arabic and Swahili Documents from the Pre-Colonial Congo and the EIC (Congo Free State, 1885–1908): Who were the Scribes?'. The Congolese tradition of Arabic literacy is one of the least studied in Africa. Apart from scattered references in the colonial literature, some of Luffin's earlier works constitute the only serious studies of the topic.⁷⁴ These documents, as emphatically stated by the author, 'should change the way we perceive the history of precolonial and colonial Congo' (p. 280). In fact, they demonstrate that literacy in the area predates the arrival of the Europeans, they contribute to our knowledge of practices of diplomacy, and 'they are [also] precious documents for the linguists, since many Arabic documents make use of dialectal Arabic' (p. 281). The known Congolese documents in Arabic script, available in various museums and archives in Belgium, all date from the late nineteenth century and consist, among others, of Swahili treatises, Arabic and Swahili letters, Arabic prayer books, two wooden boards, flags with Arabic inscriptions, and amulets. In this new contribution, the author interrogates the identity of the authors of these, mainly anonymous, writings. Drawing on indirect evidence from a wealth of secondary historical sources, as well as on a careful analysis of these documents, Luffin identifies a variety of possible authors active in late nineteenth-century Congo, who were responsible for the authorship of different categories of Arabic documents: Arab and Swahili traders; the secretaries of Arab and Swahili traders; Arab secretaries at the service of African chiefs; Arab traders at the service of the Europeans; foreign (Arab) secretaries and interpreters at the service of the colonial officers; locals who had learnt the skills of literacy; occasional scribes; and local Islamic clerics active in the Quranic schools documented in Kasongo and Kisangani in the colonial literature. Literacy, concludes the author, was not unusual in parts of Congo in the late nineteenth century. A variety of literate actors from other regions of Africa (the Swahili coast, Egypt, Waday, Darfur, etc.) were active in the area, but 'knowledge of Arabic had started to circulate, though limitedly, in the local population' (p. 294).

⁷⁴ Luffin 2004a, 2004b, 2007.

4 Notes

The last section of the book comprises shorter contributions, or notes. The section opens with a note by Halirou Mohamadou, ‘Moodibbo Bello Aamadu Mohammadu and the *Daada Maaje*, a Handbook in an Indigenous Fulfulde Script’ (Chapter 8), which represents a unique contribution to the book. All the other articles, in fact, address cases of literacy in Arabic script. However, several cases of indigenous African alphabets, besides the most well-known cases of Egyptian hieroglyphics, Tifinagh, Ge’ez and its derivatives (Amharic, Tigrinya etc.), are documented in the literature. In 1969, David Dalby assessed the number of indigenous African scripts at fourteen, the best studied being the N’ko writing system for Mande and the Bamun (Cameroon) script.⁷⁵ In his highly original note, Halirou Mohamadou introduces, for the first time in the literature, a writing system for the Fulfulde language devised by Moodibbo Bello Aamadou, a twentieth-century traditionally-trained Muslim scholar residing in Maroua (Cameroon). Interestingly enough, as the author points out, ‘with the addition of the alphabet devised by Moodibbo Bello Aamadu Mohammadu here described to those of Oumar Dembélé and Adama Ba already identified by Dalby, Fulfulde holds the curious record of featuring three distinct alphabets’ (p. 300). The rich legacy of literacy in Arabic among Fulfulde-speaking Muslim scholars might be one of the reasons that explain the frequency of their efforts to devise indigenous scripts for their language. After providing a biography of Moodibbo Bello, the author’s contribution focuses in particular on one text, the *Daada Maaje*, a handbook written by Moodibbo Bello, in the form of a syllabary, to teach “his” Fulfulde script. Although this script is not practiced outside of a restricted circle of Moodibbo Bello’s students, this note draws attention to ‘the genius of this local scholar and his tireless dedication and passion’ (p. 307) to promote indigenous literacy in an African language.

‘Elements of a “Timbuktu Manual of Style”’ (Chapter 9) is the combined effort of Shamil Jeppie and Mahamoud Mohamed, a Timbuktu-based scholar and calligrapher better-known as Cheikh Hamou. This note brings attention to the paratextual elements in Islamic manuscripts from Timbuktu, thus creating a meaningful continuity with Chapters 3 and 4. In this contribution, Jeppie introduces and contextualizes a presentation originally given by Cheikh Hamou at *The Arts and Crafts of Literacy* conference. The paper, originally titled *Ilḥāq ḥawla tiqniyyāt al-nussākh* (‘Addendum on the techniques of the copyists’), was itself handwritten in the beau-

⁷⁵ Dalby 1969.

tiful and polished calligraphy of Cheikh Hamou. It explains some of the abbreviations used by copyists in the region of Timbuktu and is based on Hamou's long-time experience with local manuscripts, clarifying 'for the uninitiated some of the elements occasionally encountered in the manuscripts that can confuse a reader or researcher' (p. 310). As Jeppie shows, the paper on the techniques of the copyists is part of the large production of Cheikh Hamou, who might be considered as the last 'traditional scholar' of Timbuktu, 'since he is a product of it and has remained stationed there as a teacher and writer through thick and thin; through the good times and the drought and civil wars and recent rebel occupation' (p. 310).

In Chapter 10, 'Seven Gravestones at the Muslim Tana Baru Cemetery in Cape Town: A Descriptive Note,' Alessandro Gori brings the reader to the southernmost tip of Africa. Starting from the late 1700s, literacy in Arabic script in the region of the Cape of Good Hope, both in Melayu and Afrikaans, has a long history that has been widely documented in the literature.⁷⁶ In his note, Gori introduces, transcribes, transliterates and translates, for the first time, seven gravestones in Arabic scripts preserved at the cemetery of Tana Baru in Cape Town, famous especially for hosting the *kramat* (mausoleum) of Tuan Guru, which is still the object of pious visits (*ziyāra*) by the Muslim community of the Western Cape. While the production of manuscripts and printed books in Arabic script in the Cape has received a fair amount of attention, these epigraphs, the author points out, are remarkable examples of a particular form of literacy (the inscriptional form) by the Cape Muslim community that has not so far been studied.⁷⁷ These epigraphs are interesting for a number of reasons. From the linguistic point of view, they 'represent an interesting mixture of Arabic and Malay and can shed new light on the relationships between

76 The documented journey of Arabic literacy in the Cape started in the eighteenth century with the activities of Tuan Guru (Imam 'Abdallāh b. Qāḍī 'Abd al-Salām; d. 1807), the prince and scholar from Tidore (Trinate, Moluku islands) who famously penned a copy of the Quran from memory while in exile in the Cape, as well as a handbook of Shāfi'ī jurisprudence and Ash'arī theology in Arabic and Melayu, known as *Ma'rifat al-Islām wa'l-Imān wa'l-iḥsān* ('Abdullah ibn Qadi 'Abd al-Salam, *The 'Aqidah of Tuan Guru*, English translation by Rafudeen 2004; see also Rafudeen 2006). After roughly a century of documented literacy in Melayu in Arabic script (see Haron 1997, Haron 2003), this journey leads, in the nineteenth century, to a fascinating case of 'philological encounter' (to borrow once again from Adrien Delmas) with a wave of Afrikaans publications in the Arabic script. The literature on Arabic-Afrikaans is quite vast now. In English, the reader may consult, amongst others, Davids 1987; Stell/Luffin/Rakiep 2007; Dangor 2008; Haron 2014; Versteegh 2015.

77 An exception is the survey of sixty-five gravestones in the South African province of the Eastern Cape, published by Sugie Harijadi in 2014 for the Consulate General of the Republic of Indonesia in Cape Town (Harijadi 2014).

these two languages among the Western Cape Muslims' (p. 318). Likewise, the epigraphs prove to be of value for the historian as well, as they 'yield information which can contribute to the enhancement of our knowledge of the prosopography of the Muslims of the city, especially of the local intellectual elite' (p. 318).

The last article of the book, Chapter 11 'Ka'ana Umar's 'CCI Quran': The Making of a Bornuan Manuscript in the Twenty-First Century' by Maimadu Barma Mutai and Andrea Brigaglia, provides the biography of a particular Quranic manuscript, donated by Mutai to the Centre for Contemporary Islam (CCI), Department of Religious Studies, University of Cape Town, on the occasion of the conference *The Arts and Crafts of Literacy*. The manuscript, written by a traditional calligrapher of Borno, Ka'ana Umar, at Mutai's request, was displayed during the conference along with traditional tools for manuscript production in Northern Nigeria. Mutai and Brigaglia's biography of the 'CCI Quran' parallels the works of Ismaheel A. Jeemoh on south-western Nigerian manuscripts, and that, more extensive, of Salah Hassan on the central and western part of Northern Nigeria.⁷⁸ This contribution, by following the different stages, the people involved, and the tools employed in manufacture of the CCI copy of the Quran, sheds light on the traditional craftsmanship of Borno manuscript culture, similar to what Dmitry Bondarev did in the documentary 'Borno Calligraphy: Creating hand-written Qur'an in northeast Nigeria' (2015).⁷⁹ After providing a biography of Ka'ana Umar, the calligrapher, Mutai and Brigaglia give a description of the pens, the inks, and paper utilized in producing the manuscript, as well as other tools of the calligrapher, such as the board, the page layout marker, the compass, and the inkpot. The authors also outline the role of professional leather workers who manufacture the *baktar*, the term used in Kanuri to refer to the leather bag used to protect and carry Quranic manuscripts.⁸⁰

As Mutai and Brigaglia note in the article, the craftsmanship they describe has been, in recent time, threatened by the circulation of cheap printed copies of the Quran, and, more recently, by the Boko Haram crisis in north-eastern Nigeria. Yet, 'the ancient Quranic manuscript culture of Borno is still alive today' (p. 350). This study of the 'CCI Quran' closes *The Arts and Crafts of Literacy* with a strong testimony of the multiple ways in which the traditional manuscript cultures of sub-Saharan Africa are surviving the challenges of the twenty-first century and remain living traditions until the present day.

⁷⁸ Jeemoh 2007; Hassan 1992.

⁷⁹ Available online on the CSMC website at: https://www.manuscript-cultures.uni-hamburg.de/Publi_e.html.

⁸⁰ For a preliminary study of leather covers and bags used to carry Islamic manuscripts from sub-Saharan Africa, see Viola 2009.

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