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Elements of a ‘Timbuktu Manual of Style’

Abstract: This is a translation of a short text that clarifies the role of additional markings in manuscripts from Timbuktu. It is the work of an experienced reader and author of manuscripts in Timbuktu, Mahmoud Mohamed Dédéou, known as Cheikh Hamou. It is therefore a very useful introduction to an often overlooked practice in the art of scholarship in that part of the world.

1 *Addendum on the techniques of the copyists:* introduction to the text

The single-page text described here was written by Mahmoud Mohamed Dédéou, known as Cheikh Hamou (b.1955). It originates from a lecture that he gave in Cape Town in 2008. He always speaks from well prepared notes, often, it appears, fully written up. Thus, this text is typical of his thorough preparation for a lecture, which he has always been happy to pre-circulate on request or distribute afterwards. Cheikh Hamou is a senior scholar from Timbuktu who was educated in the local traditional schools of the town and has run early morning classes for children at his home for many years. He also works as an inspector in the state school system with the responsibility for supervising Arabic language education. He was involved in collecting manuscripts for the Ahmad Baba Centre (officially known as the *Institut des Hautes Etudes et de Recherches Islamiques Ahmed-Baba*, IHERI-AB) when it was developing its collections. The first and only list of his written work is by the late John O. Hunwick in *Arabic Literature of Africa vol. IV* which counts 19 works.¹ However, the number of Cheikh Hamou’s works has increased since then. In a recent listing he provided, he gave the titles of 35 works (which includes, what we would call essays, as well as larger manuscript works classifiable as books). Indeed, his largest and probably most important work is *Kashf al-hā’il fi al-ta’rīf bi-kutub al-fatāwā wa-l-nawāzil* – a biographical dictionary of the scholars of Timbuktu up until his own time, which runs to 335 folios, and was completed in the year 2000. The original manuscript in Cheikh Hamou’s hand remains in his possession, but he has circulated a digitized copy; a typescript of the handwritten text is in preparation under his supervision. It is a manuscript in

1 Hunwick et al. 2003, 64–66.

his own hand with a number of digital copies circulating. This work was completed after the *Arabic Literature of Africa* was published and therefore is not in Hunwick's list. Virtually all Cheikh Hamou's works are in manuscript form and in his own hand, such as the text translated and introduced here.

Cheikh Hamou has an intimate knowledge of the manuscript and scholarly world of Timbuktu since he is a product of it and has remained there as a teacher and writer through thick and thin; through the good times as well as through the drought, the civil wars and the recent rebel occupation. Cheikh Hamou has been an informant and consultant for many researchers working on the collections and manuscript traditions of Timbuktu. Thus, the brief text presented here is relevant because it explicates for the uninitiated some of the elements occasionally encountered in the manuscripts that can confuse a reader or researcher. The eight points he makes in it are an explanation of just a handful of the markings that are sometimes present in Timbuktu manuscripts. They inform us of how to fill spaces at the end of a line of writing, of how to make insertions when a line is full, of various ways in which stops can be indicated or attention can be drawn to an important topic, and of how to make abbreviations of authors' names and titles and so on.

This text is not an extensive, and certainly by no means a complete, guide to the markings of the writers and copyists of Timbuktu, but it is a most fascinating one. It points to a 'language' of signs that were shared by the scholarly community. It is, however, unclear how far back these signs go. Cheikh Hammou has written a more extensive work called *Dawr al-rumūz wa-l-jadāwil fī taṭbīq al-masā'il 'ind al-awā'il: taqḍīm*, 35 folios, completed in Timbuktu in 2005. This work deals in some detail with various types of acronyms and abbreviations used by writers from the region. There has, as yet, been no research dedicated to this genre of writing, i.e. to texts which tell scholars in Timbuktu or in the wider West African scholarly world how to 'design' a text (although Hunwick mentions a guide on how to compose letters, by 'Umar b. Abī Bakr al-Ṣalghawī al-Kabawī al-Kanawī, known as Umaru Karki (d. 1934), titled *al-Sarḥa al-wariqa fī 'ilm al-wathīqah*).²

These are some texts guiding readers through 'editing' marks and there may be more such works in the libraries of Timbuktu. What they point to is a writing culture that was developing a set of shared practices and symbols. Texts did not only have content, but also signs that revealed skill and authority. Writing had become an inherent part of Timbuktu and of similar locations, and the writing of texts developed a whole set of secondary elements pertaining to 'editing'. Further

² Hunwick et al. 2003, 590.

2 *Addendum on the techniques of the copyists: translation of the text*

When the specific space for writing is full and there remains a word, or two or three letters, the scribe may continue to connect the excluded word in the specific place of writing at the end of the lines as usual (two set of symbols approximating the shape of five circles and 5 Arabic letters *ṭā'* connected to a slash). Scribes use these forms to fill some of the empty spaces if it disturbs the order of the writing or also use them to erase a whole line or lines. Stop here – Note here – Stop – Note here. This is for alerting the reader to the importance of this place or its uniqueness and they may embellish it like this: (Drawing of possible decoration patterns around the words note and stop). These embellishments are also used for page numbers at the bottom. Within this decoration, scribes may also write a special title to show its importance or a sentence that summarizes the main concept.

And in the introduction to the works of *nawāzil* and *fatāwā*, the sources may be indicated by symbols that may be of different types, like *'ayn qāf* for 'Abd al-Bāqī and others that are found in the commentary on the *al-Ṣaḥīḥ* by Abū al-Ḥasan; for example, *kāf* for al-Karmā'i; *zā'* for al-Zarkashī; and *sīn* for al-Suyūṭī; *dāl* for al-Damāmanī; or they can indicate the title of the books, etc. with symbols. There may also be found on manuscripts verses in praise of the scribe, or prayers to those who are interested in the book, and also prayers to those who changed it or had no interest in it. In the commentaries, to distinguish between the text and the commentary, scribes use the letter *ṣād* to refer to the text (from Arabic *al-naṣṣ*, the text) and *shīn* to the commentary (from the Arabic *al-sharḥ*, the commentary).

Scribes also use the word *ilhāq* or *mulḥaq* (addendum). This indicates that what was written previously is supplemented by what follows. 'Test the ink' or 'test the pen' signals the writing of a poem on the cover of the book or on the top page.

Reference

Hunwick, John O., et al. (2003), *Arabic Literature of Africa*, vol. 4: *Writings of Western Sudanic Africa*, Leiden – Boston: Brill.