BRIGAGLIA Andrea & NOBILI Mauro (EDS.). — The Arts and Crafts of Literacy: Islamic Manuscript Cultures in Sub-Saharan Africa ; KRÄTLI Graziano & LYDON Ghislaine (EDS.). — The Trans-Saharan Book Trade: Manuscript Culture, Arabic Literacy and Intellectual History in Muslim Africa

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Édition électronique

URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/etudesafriaines/28218>

DOI : 10.4000/etudesafriaines.28218

ISSN : 1777-5353

Éditeur

Éditions de l'EHESS

Édition imprimée

Date de publication : 5 décembre 2019

Pagination : 1167-1171

ISBN : 9782713227813

ISSN : 0008-0055

Référence électronique

Elke E. Stockreiter, « BRIGAGLIA Andrea & NOBILI Mauro (EDS.). — The Arts and Crafts of Literacy: Islamic Manuscript Cultures in Sub-Saharan Africa ; KRÄTLI Graziano & LYDON Ghislaine (EDS.). — The Trans-Saharan Book Trade: Manuscript Culture, Arabic Literacy and Intellectual History in Muslim Africa », *Cahiers d'études africaines* [En ligne], 236 | 2019, mis en ligne le 05 décembre 2019, consulté le 08 janvier 2022. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesafriaines/28218> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesafriaines.28218>

Ce document a été généré automatiquement le 8 janvier 2022.

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- 1 Focusing on Islamic manuscript cultures, *The Trans-Saharan Book Trade* and *The Arts and Crafts of Literacy* contribute considerably to our understanding not only of the provenance, use, and authority of book manuscripts, but also their materiality in trans-Saharan Africa and various regions in sub-Saharan Africa respectively. A major concern of the editors is to move toward a more integrative approach in collecting, preserving, and studying these cultures. This approach should meld the study of the (history of) ideas conveyed in the manuscripts and the study of the (history of the) manuscripts as artefacts, as objects worth studying in their own right.
- 2 Both volumes begin with conceived notions about the continent and its peoples. Krätli's and Lydon's seminal volume comprises ten chapters and a foreword, which also serves as an introduction. Houari Touati's foreword is beautifully crafted yet less than four pages long, which may leave readers feeling insufficiently prepared for the rich accounts that follow. Touati ponders whether the contributors provide support for Jack Goody's notion of "restrictive literacy" (p. x). The fact that book manuscripts and paper, which had to be imported for their local creation, were generally scarce and consumed by a limited number of people in scholarly circles since the 11th century (p. 18), would, at first glance, confirm limited literacy in trans-Saharan Africa. What follows are more complex explorations of this idea.
- 3 Especially for readers less familiar with the history of the region, Eric Ross offers insightful background, from the Neolithic to the 21st century, in his chapter on the historical geography of the trans-Saharan trade. Ghislaine Lydon shares an analysis of the interaction of literacy, erudition, and the paper economy in the southwestern Sahara. She concludes that manuscripts were not only priceless, but also "highly democratic channels" (p. 71). Terence Walz takes the reader to Egypt and Sudanic Africa, where he studies the paper trade in the 18th and 19th centuries. He argues in detail for the usefulness of a "paper chronology" (p. 75), available for Egypt, to date manuscripts from the eastern and western Sudan.
- 4 In a chapter spanning 66 pages (including appendices), Bruce Hall and Charles Stewart introduce the "core curriculum" in West Africa from approximately 1625 to 1925. The authors clearly describe the methodology and sources—drawn from more than 80 private libraries from Mauretania to Nigeria; amounting to "at least half [...] of the West African book market" (p. 111) as available on the Arabic Manuscript Management System (AMMS) database.¹ Surprising among their findings is the limited number of Sufi works (p. 139) and dearth of evidence of fierce Tijani-Qadiri debates (p. 141).
- 5 Murray Last's chapter "The Book and the Nature of Knowledge in Muslim Northern Nigeria, 1457-2007" reprises one of his previous arguments about book famine, which has characterized the region for more than 500 years. Here he specifically engages how a shortage of books affected forms of knowledge. Touching on the book trade, books as material objects, ownership and authorship, Last makes a case for how elitist bookish values, or core knowledge, interacted with counter-knowledge and how the scarcity of books demanded "extra-good memory" (p. 206). Nigeria is also the focus of the following chapter by Stefan Reichmuth, who explores Arabic manuscripts at the southern frontier of the Sokoto Caliphate, in the emirate of Ilorin. Based on six examples, he shows Ilorin's "early connections with the calligraphic tradition of Borno"; "its occasional contacts with the Middle East"; "its higher level of legal and philosophical literature"; and "a peculiar expression of Prophetic piety" (p. 222).

- 6 Abdel Kader Haïdara, whose Timbuktu manuscripts rescue mission has since brought him not only international fame but also scrutiny, offers an overview of the main libraries in the Timbuktu region. While informative, the descriptions are uneven (the most detailed account concerns, not surprisingly, his family library) and the criteria are unclear for including only some of the major manuscript libraries in the overview. Detailed analysis of knowledge economy is provided by Said Ennahid in his chapter on Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) for the preservation and valorization of manuscripts in Morocco. He concludes by affirming digitization as “the best solution today to preserve manuscripts collections and make them available to researchers and institutions” (p. 288). Judith Scheele situates her essay on manuscript conservation in contemporary Algeria firmly in historical analysis. She uses two case studies, one from Kabylia in the north and the other from Touat in the south, to show how the preservation of cultural heritage is steeped in contestations over political, social, and religious authority.
- 7 Absent an outline, the evocative title “Camel to Kilobytes: Preserving the Cultural Heritage of the Trans-Saharan Book Trade” serves to guide the reader through the volume’s substantial final chapter, which does double duty as conclusion to the collection. Graziano Krätli’s rich and exquisite chapter may try to do too much. It discusses the library of Mauretania’s eminent Sidiyya family, how it is tied to the scholar Charles Stewart and the creation of the AMMS database (explored in the chapter by Hall and Stewart); introduces other databases; and provides a history of preserving manuscripts in Timbuktu and Mauretania, leading to questions of cultural heritage and the potential of “desert libraries” to attract national and international funding. The core section of the chapter appears to be “Body and Soul,” which introduces the concepts of embodied and embedded knowledge. The former refers to the content of books, which has been the main focus of scholars; the latter evokes the book as a physical vessel of ideas and its various contexts. Among other things, Krätli importantly argues for a holistic approach to the study of Islamic manuscript cultures, thus, an approach that integrates the physical features of manuscripts and the ideas they convey. To fully appreciate Krätli’s insights, some of the content would be better placed in an introduction to the volume; some would merit being discussed separately in a conclusion to the volume.
- 8 Conceived as a history of Islamic literary tradition in sub-Saharan Africa, Mauro Nobili’s and Andrea Brigaglia’s collection embraces Krätli’s call for a “holistic approach” (p. 1) to Islamic manuscripts, here predominantly in West Africa, but also East, Central, and South Africa. Nobili’s introduction, followed by eleven chapters, presented in four parts, begins with a surprisingly generic and drawn out discussion of Africa’s denied (written) history. Without any significant conclusions about the volume as a whole, Nobili proceeds to summarize the four parts and their constituent chapters. At this point, readers will notice some disconnect between most of the summaries of the contributions that make up the volume and the preceding overview of Africa’s historiography, steeped in well-known stereotypes about race and Islam. Given the amount of research and depth of scholarship that inform the chapters, but also given their somewhat disparate nature, the introduction is wanting in its limited effort in drawing conclusions to indeed build a more holistic picture of sub-Saharan Africa’s manuscript cultures.

- 9 In Part 1, “Writing Supports,” Michael Briddle’s chapter on watermarks as a means to date African Islamic manuscripts takes us through changes in the process of paper production from hand-made to machine-made. It is followed by Andrea Brigaglia’s essay on Quranic tablets in Sudanic Africa, with the author’s fieldwork conducted in Nigeria’s Hausaland. The chapter provides a rich and intriguing analysis of how pedagogy, supported by the use of Quranic tablets, initiates students into Islamic beliefs.
- 10 Part 2, “Around the Text, offers chapters, preliminary in nature,” by Dmitry Bondarev and Susana Molins Lliteras. Surveying manuscripts from Borno and Senegambia, Bondarev observes a correlation between space layout and the content of the manuscripts, allowing him to deduce various practices or levels of education. Yet in the works of these two manuscript cultures, there are also contradictions, which may indicate “different channels and changing currents in the history of knowledge transmission” (p. 139) in each center. Focusing on manuscripts from the Mamma Haïdara Library (originally in Timbuktu, now in Bamako), Molins Lliteras explores long neglected marginalia, also known as annotations or paratext, as a source for the history of ideas, the transmission of knowledge, and the use of texts. Despite illustrations, not all explanations seem immediately clear, as some excerpts are quite small, making it difficult to decipher the marginalia under discussion. As the author situates her study within manuscript traditions of the region and the Muslim world generally, the chapter does succeed in highlighting the importance of marginalia to historicize and contextualize texts.
- 11 Section 3, “Writing Practices and Authorship around the Continents,” comprises three chapters. Adrien Delmas evokes an example of a “scriptural paradigm of encounters” (p. 187) in form of the Swahili and the Portuguese on the 16th century-East African coast. The product of this encounter was the Kilwa Chronicle. In a study of the Portuguese and Arabic versions of the Chronicle, Delmas discards the idea of an original text and suggests that its two versions responded to each other. In other words, they were “co-written” when the Portuguese presence created a need for authoritative written records. Disproving the notion that Africans have not devised their own alphabets, Tal Tamari explores “one of the fullest and most successful” (p. 256) writing systems devised for Bambara, or Bamana. The “first Manding-language documents from Mali, and also the first in Bamana” (p. 210) were texts authored in the early 20th century (probably 1911) by Amadou Jomworo Bary, whose primary language was Fulfulde. He was also fluent in Bambara and further knew French, which proved important for the development of his writing system. Tamari surmises that the invention of his writing system was likely inspired by Fulfulde ‘*ajami*’ (Arabic script used for non-Arabic languages). Her substantial chapter offers an analysis of five of his texts, whose transcription, translation, and interpretation she achieves thanks not only to impressive linguistic skills but also thorough cultural knowledge. She dedicates an appendix to explain misinterpretations of the same set of sources by distinguished scholars Gérard Dumestre and Valentin Vydrin, stressing the importance of fieldwork, understanding of local contexts, and interdisciplinarity. Xavier Luffin’s chapter describes authors of Arabic and Swahili ‘*ajami*’ documents from the Eastern Congo (circa 1860-1908). He identifies the authors as Arab and Swahili traders and their secretaries, Arabic-speakers from outside the region, and Muslim scholars and teachers. He also provides examples of their services to African rulers as well as Europeans. His

conclusion notes that, unlike later generations, the first Europeans in the area did acknowledge the extent of literacy.

- 12 Section 4 comprises four so-called notes, or contributions that are more fragmentary than the preceding ones. Mohamadou Halirou sketches out the intriguing Fulfulde script of 20th century northern Cameroonian scholar Moodibbo Bello Aamadu Mohammadu, whose alphabet is one of three alphabets original to Fulfulde. It is still acquired today by a small circle of scholars via his handbooks, like *Daada Maaje*, meaning “mother of them [books]” (p. 305).
- 13 Mahmoud Mohamed Dédéou and Shamil Jeppie offer a very short note on elements of a “Timbuktu Manual of Style.” Readers will have to judge whether it does “clarify the role of additional markings in manuscripts from Timbuktu” (p. 309), as the authors promise. Alessandro Gori used a visit to Cape Town’s historical Muslim cemetery, Tana Baru, to capture and translate seven funerary epigraphs, the photos of which are included (although not all inscriptions are discernible). The challenges of working with epigraphs as potential sources for social history are evident in Gori’s commentaries on the inscriptions. Additional research would be needed to use these fragments for reconstructing the lives and worlds of the deceased and their communities. Maimadu Barma Mutai and Andrea Brigaglia introduce contemporary Bornuan calligrapher Ka’ana Umar of Maiduguri and his challenges, most prominently displacement by Boko Haram. The copy of the Qur’an manuscript discussed, now preserved at the University of Cape Town, serves as an example of understanding the craft of Borno’s Qur’anic calligraphers, as “the most ancient and prestigious one in sub-Saharan Africa” (p. 331). In sharing this example, the authors seek to shift the reader’s focus from the Qur’an as an object to a representation of a living tradition and result of a complex production process.
- 14 Like Krätli and Lydon, Brigaglia and Nobili did not opt for a concluding chapter. Consequently, the reader is left with the impression that overall, the contributions are less holistic than suggested in Nobili’s introduction. Rather, most of them do the important work of exploring embedded knowledge by bringing to light physical characteristics of the manuscripts and attending to their production. Both volumes take us further into local and transregional histories and the complex intellectual, economic, and social networks that enabled and sustained manuscript production, consumption, and trade. As for accessibility, *The Trans-Saharan Book Trade* features two maps at the beginning and a glossary at the end, and is edited more carefully than *The Arts and Crafts of Literacy*. Yet readers will appreciate the latter’s trove of color images included in most chapters; additionally, maps would have been helpful (e.g., for Luffin’s chapter). While the editors would have further enhanced the significance of each volume by reflecting explicitly on the contributions as a whole, they have offered us important material for a more comprehensive understanding of African Islamic manuscripts as powerful objects and vessels of ideas.

NOTES

1. The database has been renamed West African Arabic Manuscript Database (WAAMD), <<https://waamd.lib.berkeley.edu/home>>.