A THIRST FOR KNOWLEDGE: ARABIC LITERACY, WRITING PAPER AND SAHARAN BIBLIOPHILES IN THE SOUTHWESTERN SAHARA*

Ghislaine Lydon

Praise God for the one who brought us the pens that spared us from having to use our feet and replaced the need for speech with words (al-ḥamdullīlah al-lathīna jaʿa al-aqlām rāḥatan al-āqdām wa nāʾibatan ʿan al-mushāfahati bil-kalām)

What left the head does not leave the paper (illī marrga ar-raʿs mā yumarrg ak-kurrās)

A Saharan saying nineteenth-century writers commonly used to introduce their letters gives praise to the one who invented pens and allowed people to dispense with the need to rely on their feet to exchange words. It implicitly conveys the immeasurable advantages of literacy, and the use of both paper and messengers that rendered possible communications across long distances.¹ In the region of western Africa, where once flourished the Empire of Ghana, literacy in Arabic would have extended beyond the individual Muslim traveler and local scholars sometime before the Almoravid reform movement of the eleventh century.² Among the legacies of the Almoravids, aside from

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¹ The French colonial officer Louis-Gustave Binger (Niger au Golfe de Guinée par le pays de Kong et le Mossi, vol. I, Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1892, 331–2) obtained a letter of introduction produced by a Muslim scholar for safe passage to the Mossi capital of Ouagadougou in the 1880s which begins with a variant of the same saying in Arabic (“Praise God for the one who gave us the paper (al-qirtās) as a messenger and the pen as a tongue”). See below for a discussion of the variety of Arabic terms used for paper in western Africa.

² It is worth pointing out that linguistic evidence in the form of Znāga (the ancient “Berber” spoken in Southwestern Mauritania) indicates that Islamic institutions, including names for prayers and holidays (e.g. tabaski [for ʿid al-adḥā] were expressed in this language before the spread of the Arabic-based Ḥasaniya).
the development of a distinct educational tradition, was the increased study and application of Mālikī law, the Islamic legal doctrine practiced in several parts of the Muslim world, especially Muslim Africa and Spain. In time, this sparsely populated region would become home to groups of highly literate individuals, organized in institutions shaped by Islamic legal codes and guided by the activities of nomadic and sedentary learned scholars. There is little doubt that western Africa once was a fountain of literacy and learning in the Muslim world. These Saharan communities quenched their thirst for knowledge by acquiring literature by way of caravan merchants and pilgrims. At the same time, they expended sizeable sums for precious writing paper to run their affairs as much as to pen their own works of scholarship.

This chapter highlights the development of literate societies in the southwestern Sahara, a region encompassing most of present-day Mauritania, northern Mali and northern Senegal. It describes the development of a distinct schooling system and the impact of Arabic literacy, considering, on the one hand, the intellectual and practical motivations for acquiring literacy, and the multiple domains of its usage on the other. I examine how writing paper, the indispensable complement to the writing implement, was first imported into the region, underlining the importance of writing to both the production of literature and the organization of the economy. Finally, I discuss the activities of Saharan bibliophiles and book merchants focusing on the remarkable case of Aḥmad Būlārāf of the Wād Nūn, in what is today southern Morocco, who settled in Timbuktu in the late nineteenth century.

**Saharan Schooling and the Impact of Arabic Literacy**

From the very birth of the religion of Islam in the first half of the seventh century, literacy became an integral trait of the new faith. Indeed, the first words of the first divine message passed on by Angel Gabriel to the Prophet of Islam, known to have been illiterate, as stated in the Qur’ān’s sūrat entitled ‘The Pen’ (al-qalam), were the following:

Read! In the name of thy Lord and Cherisher who created; He created the human being (al-insān) out of a mere clot of congealed blood; Read! And thy Lord is most bountiful; He who taught (the use of) the pen