COMING TO TERMS WITH TRADITION: MANUSCRIPT CONSERVATION IN CONTEMPORARY ALGERIA

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Many historic trade routes along which scholars, students and manuscripts circulated, crossed what is now Algerian territory, integrating it firmly into the intellectual world of Western Islam. As well as being a centre of scholarship in its own right, Algeria thereby acted as a relay between Morocco and the Eastern Maghrib, and the Mediterranean and the countries of the Sahel.¹ This accounts for the importance and variety of manuscripts to be found throughout Algeria. Yet these funds are but little known, and only rarely attract the attention of researchers,² to the point where Algeria has gained the reputation of lacking its own independent written tradition and historical and religious sources, especially when compared to neighbouring countries


such as Morocco, Tunisia and Mauritania. Similarly, government interest in the conservation of manuscripts is of recent date, and has so far been crowned with relatively little success. Alongside deeply-rooted (and mistaken) notions that Algeria was historically lacking in urban culture and therefore in independent scholarship, there seems to be a general unspoken consensus that French colonial rule destroyed most local manuscript collections, and irredeemably severed any intellectual tradition that Algeria might have possessed.

This destruction was indeed considerable; however, it cannot account solely for the relative neglect of the religious heritage in Algeria, nor for the particular difficulties encountered by present day attempts to redress this knowledge gap. This chapter aims to describe and explain these difficulties, linking them to the problematic relationship that many contemporary Algerians maintain with their history and with local traditions of knowledge and scholarship. It argues that what is at stake in current debates about manuscript conservation are not merely technical matters, but fundamental questions of intellectual and social legitimacy. This will be illustrated through the analysis of two initiatives for the conservation of manuscripts in Algeria. The first of these recounts the “discovery” of a manuscript library in a small village in Kabylia, a Berber-speaking area in north-eastern Algeria, and the difficult insertion of this collection of Arabic manuscripts into local narratives of Berber particularity. The second example deals with various attempts that have been made to catalogue and preserve the numerous manuscripts held in the Touat (Twât), a group of oases in south-western Algeria. Both examples are based on more

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3 To cite but one example, the collection of essays about Saharan libraries edited by Attilio Gaudio, Les bibliothèques du désert. Recherches et études sur un millénaire d’écrits (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2002) only mentions one library in the whole of the Algerian South, as compared to six in Morocco and Mauritania and nine in Mali. Not one of the forty articles makes specific mention of Algeria.

4 The foundation of the Centre national des manuscrits, located in the southern city of Adrar, dates from January 2007 (see below).

5 Such notions point both to the long-standing assimilation of scholarship with cities and “mysticism” with the countryside, shown to be erroneous by, among others, Vincent Cornell, Realm of the Saint: Power and Authority in Moroccan Sufism (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), and to the belief that Algeria was somehow deficient in urbanisation, an idea that runs through French colonial pamphlets, finds its most ample expression in Emile Gautier, L’islamisation de l’Afrique du Nord: les siècles obscurs du Maghreb (Paris: Payot, 1927) and in a more subtle way in Augustin Berque, Ecrits sur l’Algérie (Aix-en-Provence: Edisud, 1986), and has often unthinkingly been adopted into more recent scholarship.