Chapter 6

The West African Manuscript Heritage

Challenges of the Digital Revolution in a Research Economy

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Prelude

Manuscripts, like archives, have recently transformed from dormant and neutral documentary bequests to active and affective sites in a research economy where the digital revolution is impacting on how new and old resources are processed or utilised for scholarly and nuanced narratives on the various aspects of intellectual exertions, including African Studies. Archivists, librarians, conservators, researchers and antiquarians have come to assume new roles and face new challenges in the new dispensation. In this chapter, I shall examine how the history of the manuscript tradition in Sudanic Africa (that is, Africa south of the Sahara) has developed as a direct consequence both of the diffusion of literacy and of private and institutional efforts at preserving and utilising sources and resources for African Studies before the digital revolution. I shall go on to look at two major initiatives in the appropriation of the digital dispensation in Sudanic Africa, in the context of local challenges in the archival and intellectual cosmos. I will ask to what extent the new digital resources have created digital scholarship and indeed new forms of knowledge. The chapter will end with specific recommendations on how African i-interactors/cyber-actors in the Cyber Manuscript Environments (CMES) can best take full advantage of the new dispensation within a global framework.

The Background

The pre-colonial and colonial discourse on sub-Saharan Africa in particular and Africa in general portrayed the area as a ‘dark continent’, a ‘primitive’ society whose profiling derived from a Eurocentric stereotyping of its spiritual and material cultures, as long as animism and euhemerism constituted the general markers of its belief systems, and orality the basic mode of preservation and transmission of its cultural heritage. Historically, literacy has often been

associated with the presence of a religious tradition, and the advent of Islam in Sudanic Africa from the 10th century should be held accountable for the gradual diffusion of the Arabic language, and of its script, which would later be used to transcribe the different sound systems of many sub-Saharan African languages before European colonialism. The French author and statesman Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–59) confirmed this much in 1847 when he observed that the Muslim society in Africa was not an illiterate nor an uncivilised one before colonialism, which was ultimately responsible for the backwardness often associated with the continent: ‘...we had made Muslim society much more miserable, more disordered, more ignorant, and more barbarous than it had even been before knowing us’.

European colonialism found the Arabic script in use by literate ‘natives’ from the Sahel to the west and the east coast of Africa for writing local languages. But the tendency to portray the continent as backward in regard to the use of writing for documentation purposes is far from over, even after it has been convincingly established, through the historicity of the Egyptian hieroglyphics, that Africa was ‘the cradle of writing’. Western interaction with Arabic manuscripts also has deep roots in antiquity, going back to the late 14th century, through the pre-Enlightenment period. Ecclesiastical, commercial and royal establishments took an interest in ‘Oriental’ heritage for the elaboration of Biblical studies and as part of the historical fascination with the exotic. In this regard may be mentioned the efforts of the French King Francis I (r. 1515–47), Antoine Galland (1646–1715) and Barthélemi d'Herbelot de Molenville (1625–95) among others. The late 18th and 19th centuries, the ‘golden age’ of Orientalism, saw a greater development of philology at the expense of theology, and the many scholars with a theological background had to rely on manuscripts for their philological research.

The West African Arabic Manuscript Traditions

An exceedingly sanctimonious attachment to the Arabic manuscript and indeed anything written in Arabic is demonstrable in Muslim West Africa,

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