Chapter 7

Recovering the African Printed Past
Virtually Re-membering a Dispersed Collection in Eritrea

Massimo Zaccaria

The Written Word in Africa

Recent scholarship has transformed our understanding of the extent of the written word in Africa. It was long believed that the spoken word characterised African culture and that the written word was exceptional. Today a new scenario is beginning to unfold. Rather than polarising orality and literacy, much of the research that has been carried out over the last twenty years has focused instead on how forms of interaction between these two means of communication have prevailed over any form of conflict between them. Literacy is not the unavoidable destiny of every society and printing and writing do not inevitably erase all oral cultures along their path.1 Rather than vying to exclude each other, orality and literacy seem to live side-by-side in relative harmony.2

In the past, the written word in Africa was thought to be confined to two clearly identifiable areas: Timbuktu and the Ethiopian uplands. These areas were isolated enclaves, perceived and described as being basically incapable of spreading their influence beyond the cramped spaces of the Sahelian city and the convent walls of the Ethiopian plateau. More accurate studies have helped to define a more complex, animated scenario. New locations that produced and propagated the written word were identified, such as the ‘desert libraries’ of Mauritania where, around the four main centres of Chinguetti, Ouadane, Oulatane and Tichitt, a vibrant written culture rose and thrived.3 An important development then made it possible to turn the spotlight on connections

between these centres and the surrounding areas. A network of small production centres was defined, threatening the image of Timbuktu and Ethiopia as the only African players in this field. Studies based on the circulation of the works produced enlivened Africa’s cultural history, disclosing a scenario where many states in the sub-Saharan area developed and made extensive use of the written word. Rex O’Fahe was a pioneer in identifying and cataloguing the Arabic literature in north-eastern and eastern Africa, exposing the rich manuscript tradition of this area, which is still largely unexplored.4

Despite this recent work, some perspectives are still lacking. There is no overall conceptual framework for written documents from Africa. It is still impossible to relate the documents from western and Sahelian Africa to those from Ethiopia and from the coastal area of the Indian Ocean. It is difficult to consider Ethiopian manuscripts alongside Islamic writings and study the interplay of Christian and Muslim traditions and genres.5 This happened in Ethiopia and in cities such as Mombasa, Zanzibar and Durban, where Muslim printing networks reacted to Christian evangelical print culture. Isolating Muslim and Christian readers and print cultures from each other prevents a comprehensive understanding of the situation on the ground.

Manuscripts, precious because of their rarity, immediately attract the attention of the scholar and the curator, and also capture the imagination of the general public. There is no doubt of the need for policies to conserve and promote these sources. Well-structured projects with this aim can count on a series of donors ready to finance ambitious manuscript salvage and preservation projects. The bibliographic treasures of Timbuktu attracted most of the ‘usual suspects’: UNESCO, the Library of Congress, the Ford Foundation, the al-Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation and so on, and many partnerships were forged with various universities, including the University of Cape Town,

---

5 Apart from this criticism, the Arabic Literature of Africa Project, led by J. Hunwick and R. O’Fahey, represents a major breakthrough in the advancement of knowledge about the history of the written word in Africa. Equally important is the attention paid to the Christian written tradition in the Ethiopian highlands: A. Bausi, ‘La tradizione scrittoria etiopica’, Segno e Testo, 6 (2008), pp. 507–557. More recently there are encouraging signals that Christian and Arabic written traditions are being treated in closer relation to each other. During the 18th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies (2012), Panel 2.01 was dedicated to Ethiopian Manuscript Studies, Christian as well as Islamic, with an exhortation to treat both in the same conceptual framework.