Working with African Arabic Script Manuscripts: A Workshop Report

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The workshop, Working with African Arabic Script Manuscripts, gathered 45 researchers, curators, librarians, calligraphers, and linguists together in Evanston, Illinois (USA) for a three-day workshop organized by the Institute for the Study of Islamic Thought in Africa at Northwestern University, the Center for African Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and the Center for the Study of Manuscript Cultures at the University of Hamburg, Germany. The coordinating committee was made up of organizers from the U of I (Mauro Nobili, Laila Hussein Moustafa, and Maimouna Barro), Northwestern (Rebecca Shereikis and Charles Stewart), and the CSMS (Dmitry Bondarev). The core meetings took place over August 13–16, 2017 with participants splitting their days between topical morning lectures, presentations of curator collections mid-day, and hands-on sessions in the late afternoon. Select participants elected to practice their Arabic calligraphy in the evenings, with a final public lecture on calligraphy coordinated with the American Islamic College of Chicago, IL on August 16. Curators then engaged in post-workshop field curators seminar on August 17–18.

The morning sessions engaged broad questions of context, categorization, script, and materiality through lectures by experts on these topics. Graziano Kräti (Yale) asked participants to consider “What makes a manu scriptus a manuscript?” by posing questions about whether the category “manuscript” itself is really only defined by having been written by hand. This first lecture reflected openly on whether the content of the manuscript defines its status or if it is rather the importance of context that defines how researchers classify
a document as a manuscript. Similarly, Susana Molins-Lliteras (University of Cape Town), a specialist of the Fondo Ka’ti private family manuscript collection in Timbuktu, asked participants to consider what constitutes a “family collection” of manuscripts at a moment when researchers increasingly turn to such collections as important sources for reconstructing the history of Africa. The efforts of the current director of the Fondo Ka’ti collection to preserve his family’s manuscript collection, especially since the 2012 Malian crisis, served as a case study of how researchers can understand collecting, preservation, and fundraising practices of these private libraries. Dmitry Bondarev and Darya Ogorodnikova (CSMS), both scholars of Ajami writing in West Africa, provided a contextualization of Arabic script used to write non-Arabic African languages in West Africa. This use of Arabic script to write Soninké, Kanuri, or Fulani spoken languages can be traced to the late 17th-century in the form of poems, pedagogical commentary, and instructions for herbal medicine or Islamic esoteric healing. Ajami script in these early contexts reveals not only how Arabic texts were studied through local vernacular languages but also how and when Islam spread through various linguistic communities.

Michaelle Biddle (Wesleyan University) and Mauro Nobili (U of I) both presented on codicological aspects of Arabic script manuscripts from West Africa and the Maghrib. Biddle showed how scholars can analyze types of paper, their watermarks, and ink characteristics for purposes of dating the materiality of a document and determining trade links in time and space. Watermarks, with their symbols and shapes specifying origin (e.g. Italy or a specific family paper mill) time (e.g. a cross becomes a crescent), and paper types (parchment vs. handmade vs. machine made) provide important indicators for researchers wanting to date texts and trace the history of trade and paper in the region. Nobili challenged the ways scholars have identified Arabic script in West Africa under the broad category of sudani, arguing that doing so reveals misconceptions about Islamic practice in West Africa being somehow less intellectually rigorous than that found in an imagined central Arab Islamic heartland with codified calligraphic and, thus, intellectual traditions. Classifying all West Africa scripts under this one script type, sudani, also blurs the significant differences between regional scripts and blinds scholars to the important historical and social information scholars can glean from the variations in writing styles. Nobili proposed that researchers expand the range of Arabic scripts used in West Arica to include three more – the Sahrawi, Suqi, and Central Sudanic – so that the four calligraphic styles better reflect differences in letter height and thickness. Doing so, he argued, can lead to a better understanding of the trajectory of Islamic literacy and learning in Africa since the individual scripts are linked to various West African learning centers. Paul