From Texts to Meanings: Close Reading of the Textual Cultures of Islamic Africa

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The previous volume of *Islamic Africa* (vol. 8, 2017), guest-edited by Fallou Ngom and Mustapha H. Kurfi, was devoted to seven essays addressing ‘ajami texts in Africa. Like the four articles that follow, they were presented at the 2016 Symposium held in the memory of Professor John O. Hunwick (1936–2015) at Northwestern University, “Sacred Word: Changing Meanings in Textual Cultures of Islamic Africa.” The four essays here feature a close analysis of the internal meanings of texts from Islamic Africa.

The symposium’s emphasis was on research that is now re-shaping our use of Arabic and Arabic-script manuscripts in Africa. Participants were asked to reflect on both Arabic and ‘ajami writing (African languages written in the Arabic alphabet), as well as textual analyses. Within those foci, the symposium call-for-papers specified an interest in the meaning and the sanctity of the Word in the lives of African Muslim authors and their communities, and it asked how these may have changed across time. This set of papers highlights some of the most significant contributions that can be obtained from a close-reading

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1 The symposium was co-sponsored by Northwestern’s Title VI partner, The Center for African Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

2 Two additional essays that were presented at the symposium would have been included here but for their prior commitment to other publication: Amir Syed’s “Poetics of Praise: Love and Authority in al-Ḥājj ‘Umar Tāl’s *Safīnat al-sa‘āda li-ahl ḍu‘uf wa-l-najāda*” appeared in an earlier issue of this journal, *IA* vol. 7, 2016, pp. 210–238 and Noah Salomon, “Rethinking Scripturalism: Ethics, Knowledge and Textual Practice in Contemporary Sudanese Salafism,” in *The Transformation of Islamic Knowledge in Africa: Media, Agents and Institutions*, edited by Rüdiger Seesemann, Britta Frede and Noah Salomon (forthcoming).
of texts, demonstrating the intricacies and implications of language used as well as the ways in which this literature reveals the world-views of its authors. Collectively, these articles and those in the previous issue guest-edited by Ngom and Kurfi, mark a dramatic methodological advance over the work of the first generation of scholars of Africa’s Arabic-script manuscripts.

The first meeting to explore the recovery and preservation of manuscripts in West Africa was held at the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana 52 years ago. It was convened by Thomas Hodgkin (then director of the IAS, Legon) and attended by, among others, the director of IFAN (Dakar), Vincent Monteil, Ivor Wilks, and Brad Martin. Also in attendance was a recently-appointed lecturer in Arabic at Ibadan, John Hunwick. Looking back today on the state of our knowledge then, it was striking for its naivety and single-minded focus on historical texts. It will be remembered that this was at the time the Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford, Hugh Trever-Roper, had issued his infamous declaration about the absence of a written record in Africa.

But no one then imagined that our obsession for historical texts would yield such a rich and full tapestry of Islamic culture consisting of tens of thousands of Arabic and Arabic-script manuscripts. This was before Timbuktu was ‘discovered’ as the center-piece for the story of this manuscript heritage, much less marketed as the symbol of centuries of Islamic learning in the Sahel. The basic guide to the world’s Arabic literature, Brockelman, made little reference to any writing in Africa south of the Sahara. The vast corpus of Arabic documentation on the formation of Sokoto and the emirates in Northern Nigeria was only vaguely understood. (John Hunwick’s Center of Arabic Documentation at Ibadan—and in some ways his career – was to be launched on his return home from that meeting). The substantial contributions of the literary legacy of Shinqit (present-day Mauritania) across the Islamic world from Morocco to Delhi were unknown to non-Africans.

Fast-forward to 2016 and the Northwestern symposium that gave birth to these papers. We can now focus on the critical reading of spiritual missives in

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3 This account comes from the memory of two aspiring M.A. students at Legon, also present: Paulo Farias and Charles Stewart.