

Wissenschaftliches Teilprojekt A05

Islamic manuscripts with wide spaced layout as mediators of teaching practices in West Africa

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Description of the project

The project deals with the manuscripts produced in the different West African regions of Senegambia and Lake Chad which were among the earliest centres of Islamic tradition in West Africa. Our corpus consists of more than 12,000 digital images of manuscripts in Arabic with annotations in Soninke and Mandinka spoken the Senegambia, and Kanembu and Kanuri spoken around Lake Chad. The manuscripts represent various religious genres and cover a span of four hundred years from the 17th to the 20th centuries. The previous project has discovered that (1) interlinear glosses in vernacular reflect practices at the intermediate phase of learning, whereas marginal commentaries in Arabic point to advanced scholarship; (2) language use depends on the type of manuscripts, e.g. Soninke is found in law manuals used in learning domain while Mandinka in amulets – outside the learning domain. On the basis of these tendencies the manuscripts can be grouped into those related to the intermediate learning domain, which are often represented by wide interlinear space, and those outside that domain.

Objectives

We will work with the hypothesis that the texts used in intermediate learning were mediated by the wide spaced layout, whereas advanced scholarship was not. In West Africa, there is an overwhelming variety of works used in Islamic education over the last few centuries. It is unclear if some of these works were conceived as compulsory while others were optional and whether the compulsory works formed a core curriculum that was stabilised in manuscript form to sustain through many generations or a considerable span of time. Studying the correlation between the wide spaced layout and particular works has a potential for answering this question. If particular works were predominantly rendered in wide spaced layout, then they should have formed such stable curriculum. Once the correlations are established and the manuscripts are identified according to three-way parameters (layout, content and place in scholarly/teaching curricula), the project will investigate the questions of how teaching defined this specific layout and how these manuscripts mediated teaching practices. The research will advance our understanding of transmission of Islamic learning through the manuscript medium.



Short creed based on *Umm al-Barāhīn* by Muhammad ibn Yūsuf al-Sanūsī (1437-1480). Glosses in Old Kanembu between the lines of the main Arabic text. London, SOAS/CSMC, OKIM digital archive. MS.380808D-22ImY. Early 20th century.

Manuscript Cultures in Sub-Saharan West Africa

The languages of sub-Saharan Africa have a long history of writing in Arabic script, also known as 'Ajami'. In the Islamic context, both Arabic and local languages were resources for considerable literary activity in the composition of versified and prose treatises on law and theology, historical and genealogical accounts, talismanic, medical, and mathematical texts. In many sub-Saharan languages such as Kanuri, Fulfulde, Soninke and Bambara learned circles used codified sociolects for oral and written interpretation of the Qur'an and other Arabic texts. The typical writing surface in primary



A treatise on Arabic grammar *al-Muqaddima al-ājurrūmiyya* by Ibn Ājurūm (d.1223). Annotations in Old Mande. Private collection of al-Hajj Lamine Cissé, Ziguinchor, Senegal. Early 20th century

Islamic education has been the wooden slate. Advanced students and their teachers used both slates and paper, but the latter was never produced locally and was imported from the Middle East and Europe. Leather and cloth were popular materials for production of satchels and flap envelopes used to keep together loose-leaf manuscripts. The introduction of printing in modern day Africa did not eliminate the manuscript tradition. Wooden slates remain the primary medium of writing in Qur'anic schools, with manuscript texts being written for further dissemination by means of cheap offset print.



Pupils of an elementary Qur'anic class supervised by intermediate class students. Maiduguri, Nigeria. 2007.