

Sub-projekt A05

Writing and Reading Paratexts in West African Islamic Manuscripts: A Comparative Study of Commentaries on Arabic Texts in Old Kanembu and Old Mande

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Description of the project

The scribes of the Qur'anic manuscripts written in the West African Borno Sultanate (modern-day northeast Nigeria) in the 17th to 19th centuries developed a complex paratextual system of annotating the main Qur'an text in vernacular Old Kanembu in Arabic/Ajami script. Codicological, palaeographic and linguistic features of the glosses show that glossing in Old Kanembu was part of advanced learning of the Qur'an, especially at the stage of grammatical study of Arabic. Until recently, glosses in other West African languages such as Songhai, Hausa, Fulfulde and Bamana were hardly found in the manuscripts written before the 19th. However, early in 2012, a major pre-nineteenth century collection of manuscripts in the Old Mande language was identified in Trinity College, Dublin. The language of the glosses in these manuscripts is closely related to Soninke whose speakers were among the earliest propagators of Islamic knowledge in ancient Ghana and Mali (11th to 15th centuries). This collection has opened new horizons for the study of glosses in West African manuscripts owing to abundance of named and dated colophons which testifies for intensive manuscript production in Senegambia/Mali region before the 19th century.



The late Imam Ibrahim Ahmad, former Chief Imam of Borno (right), and Shettima Komi (left) recite Kitāb al-Shifā' (a biography of the Prophet Muhammad) in Arabic and Old Kanembu. Maiduguri, Nigeria. 2005.

Objectives

The aim of this project is a comparative analysis of the annotated manuscripts produced at the western (Senegambia) and eastern (Borno) extremes of West African Islam which were among the earliest centres of Islamic tradition in West Africa. The analysis will assess the role of the manuscripts in two different traditions of Islamic learning and identify scribal practices associated with writing and reading paratexts. The research will advance our knowledge of a) the development of manuscript traditions related to paratexts, b) the history of Islamic education in West Africa, c) the socio-linguistic aspects of manuscript cultures, and d) the Mande and Saharan languages in written form.

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'. With the role of Classical Arabic as the language of Islam, sub-Saharan Muslim societies became essentially multilingual: both Arabic and local languages were resources for considerable literary activity in the composition of versified and prose treatises on jurisprudence and theology, historical and genealogical accounts, talismanic, medical, and mathematical texts. In many sub-Saharan societies such as the Kanuri, the Fulfulde, the Bambara and the Soninke, learned circles used codified sociolects for oral and written interpretation of the Qur'an and other Arabic texts. Strong interaction between the oral and the written is especially visible in the production of calligraphic copies of the Qur'an from memory, rather than copied from books. The typical writing surface in primary Islamic education has been the wooden slate. It is not only cheap but also reusable, thanks to a special charcoal ink which can be easily washed off. Advanced students and their teachers used paper. In contrast with slates, paper was never produced locally and as such was an expensive commodity imported via the trans-Saharan trade routes from the Middle East and Europe. Very rarely, if paper was in short supply, finely tanned gazelle leather was used to make parchment, for example in Bilad Shinqit, modern Mauritania. Leather was a popular material for production of satchels and flap envelopes used in loose-leaf bookbinding. Books very often formed 'moving libraries' transported by camelback because of the nomadic lives of their owners, who were frequently scholars and merchants at the same time. 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 across the Sahelian countries, with manuscript texts being written or further dissemination by means of photocopying or cheap offset print.



Borno Qur'an. The beginning of the eighth chapter Surāt al-Anfāl. Annotations in Old Kanembu are written between the lines of the main Qur'anic text. London, SOAS, Photographic and digital collection MS. 380808, MS.1YM. 17th-18th century.



A creed by al-Sanūsī (d.1486). Annotations in Old Mande and Arabic. Trinity College Dublin, MS.3499. 18th century.