

**Andrea Brigaglia, Mauro Nobili, eds.** *The Arts and Crafts of Literacy: Islamic Manuscript Cultures in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017. 377 pp. \$137.99, cloth, ISBN 978-3-11-054140-3.

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A growing appreciation of the value of Africa's Islamic manuscript heritage by African cultural activists, African states, and international philanthropic and research organizations since the 1990s has favored the development of the field of knowledge dedicated to Muslim written culture on the continent—a somewhat daunting field requiring extensive language learning and technical training. Nonspecialist scholars of Africa and of Islam as well as graduate students will be interested in *The Arts and Crafts of Literacy: Islamic Manuscript Cultures in Sub-Saharan Africa*, which offers an effective introduction to the field while also presenting a number of original contributions that push the state of the art forward. Joining a group of edited volumes that focus on different aspects of the venerable textual tradition, *The Arts and Crafts of Literacy* marks a growing sophistication of the field.[1] Contributors, who participated in a conference under the same name in Cape Town in 2013, advocate a holistic approach to the study of manuscripts from Muslim Africa. This approach consists of focusing not simply on the content of a text but also the materiality of the texts themselves, their use in practice, and the social worlds for which they were produced.

The introduction, by Mauro Nobili, situates the academic study of Islamic manuscript culture in a Euro-American historiography that has

moved from a disqualification of the tradition in preference for African orality since the 1960s toward its endorsement in Africanist history, media, and philanthropy since the 1990s. The book is then divided into four parts covering distinct dimensions of manuscript culture: “writing supports,” on the materiality of manuscripts; “around the texts,” on the paratextual marginalia and format; and “writing practices and authorship around the continents,” offering textual histories. The fourth section, “notes” presents shorter contributions from the conference.

The first section features original research by Michaelle Biddle and Andrea Brigaglia. Biddle's essay on the transdisciplinary study of paper is the most detailed guide to “reading paper” specific to the West African context that I, also a scholar of the region, have encountered. Brigaglia offers a fresh phenomenological approach to the wooden tablet (Arabic, *lawḥ*) used in the elementary memorization of the Qur'an as a symbol encapsulating Islamic metaphysics, and provides a novel, provisional typology of wooden tablets from across Africa.

Dmitry Bondarev's contribution makes a unique substantive and methodological argument, which posits that teaching practices can be ascertained from the format of a text—specifically the ample space between and around lines of script—

suggesting that there were three levels of Islamic learning in West Africa as opposed to two as conventionally thought, according to the author. Similarly paying attention to the margins around a text, Susana Mollins Llitas introduces the study of marginalia in Islamic manuscripts generally and identifies marginalia that might be specific to West Africa, based on her extensive work in the famous Mamma Haidara collection from Timbuktu.

Adrien Delmas traces the complex history of the important *Kilwa Chronicle*, a vital source on the Swahili past. Rejecting the old philological model of an individual “original” manuscript that must be reconstructed through reproductions found in Spanish and later Arabic, he argues that the philological encounter itself produced a “co-written” text that existed only virtually before. Tal Tamari’s essay updates previous work she has done on a Malian Arabic-script writing system of Bamana by examining the effectiveness of the single-authored system in its faithful phonological representation. She also corrects subsequent work conducted on texts written in this script, while insisting on the importance of fieldwork in textual study. Looking at a body of documents and ephemera from the Congo Free State (1885-1908), Xavier Luffin describes a diverse corpus of Arabic and Swahili writing in Central Africa—an area of Africa seldom represented in the field—that is neither necessarily Islamic nor even written by Muslims. He also identifies the people likely responsible for writing many of these documents, including traders, chiefs, and secretaries.

The final section features shorter contributions by and about practitioners of the manuscript tradition, with the exception of the descriptive essay on Arabic-script epigraphy in the Muslim Tana Baru cemetery in Cape Town by Alessandro Gori. Notably, there is a “Timbuktu Manual of Style” by Mahmoud Mohamed Dédou and Shamil Jeppie. Dédou is a traditionally trained manuscript expert from Timbuktu and author of several works on

the specificity of Saharan-Sahelian written culture. This note explains specific editorial marks and symbols used in West African manuscripts. Mohamadou Halirou’s contribution celebrates Moodibbo Bello Aamadu Mohammadu, the inventor of a unique Fulfude script in Cameroon. Finally, the essay by Maimadu Barma Mutai and Andrea Brigaglia traces the making of a handwritten Qur’an from Bornu that was gifted to the Centre for Contemporary Islam at the University of Cape Town on the occasion of the conference from which this edited volume emerged.

As a well-formatted book with beautiful color images, *The Arts and Crafts of Literacy* is coherent and offers valuable original research, which are rare feats for edited volumes that result from conferences. The emphasis on the “holistic approach” allows the editors to bring together a multidisciplinary group of scholars from Africa, Europe, and the United States who differ in approach and bibliography. Such diversity works well in elaborating an autonomy for textual study free of narrowly defined disciplinary concerns, an effort to which this work contributes significantly. As such, this work deserves a place on the shelf of any library seriously committed to the study of Africa, Islam, or world philology.

One hopes that this edition marks the end of “literacy” as the dominant frame for thinking textuality in Africa, Islamic or otherwise. African literacies have been established beyond doubt and it should no longer surprise the generally educated lay person or the scholar that Africans can read and have been reading for a long time. The ideological reasons for which it may in fact still be a surprise should not serve as a foundation for research or teaching. The work of disproving the myth of African orality by presenting African literacy has had its place, but continuing to make it the frame of scholarly discussion limits the possibilities of research. Instead, we should follow Karin Barber and dissolve the foundational distinction made between the written and the oral at the

heart of disciplinary division and develop the field that takes Africa as a space for the robust interrogation of text, textuality, and textual practice.[2] This book pushes us in such a direction.

#### Notes

[1]. Shamil Jeppie and Souleymane Bachir Diagne, eds., *The Meanings of Timbuktu* (Cape Town: HSRC Press in association with CODESRIA, distrib. in North America by IPG, 2008); Graziano Krätli and Ghislaine Lydon, eds., *The Trans-Saharan Book Trade: Manuscript Culture, Arabic Literacy and Intellectual History in Muslim Africa* (Leiden: Boston: Brill, 2011); Ḥilmī Sha'rāwī, *Heritage of the African Languages Manuscripts: Ajami* (Bamako, Mali: Afro Arab Cultural Institute, 2005); Meikal Mumin and Kees Versteegh, eds., *The Arabic Script in Africa: Studies in the Use of a Writing System* (Leiden: Boston: Brill, 2014); Ousmane Oumar Kane, ed., *Islamic Scholarship in Africa: New Directions and Global Contexts* (Woodbridge, UK: James Currey, 2021).

[2]. Karin Barber, *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics: Oral and Written Culture in Africa and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

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