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Andrea Brigaglia and Mauro Nobili, eds. *The Arts and the Crafts of Literacy. Islamic Manuscript Cultures in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Berlin and Boston. Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2017. ISBN 978-3-11-054140-3. 363 pp.

Reviewed by Paul E. Lovejoy, Canada Research Chair, York University.

The contributions to this eclectic volume were originally presented at the conference *The Arts and Crafts of Literacy: Manuscript Cultures in Muslim Sub-Saharan Africa*. Held at the University of Cape Town in 2013, this event was associated with a project to preserve Arabic manuscripts in Timbuktu. Therefore, the resulting volume is important not only on the international level but also in the South African context as it marks a recognition of Islamic scholarship within South Africa. The essays are generally excellent and highlight relevant scholarship in the study of literacy in Africa. On the one hand there are contributions that examine Arabic literary scholarship in South Africa and Congo, not usually thought of when examining Muslim influence in Africa, and on the other hand, the essays on West Africa are truly outstanding. Nobili's introduction is less than satisfactory, providing an outdated overview of the relative importance of literary and oral traditions. Additionally, Nobili claims that the essays in the volume are "new" and "revolutionary" which in general they are not, as important as they are.

In the first chapter, "New Strategies in Using Watermarks to Date Sub-Saharan Islamic Manuscripts," Michaëlle Biddle provides a superb methodological discussion of assessing manuscripts. In the second chapter, Andrea Brigaglia situates the use of the *lawh* (*allo* in Hausa), the wooden writing board, in traditional Qur'anic education in its Islamic religious context. He also notes that the use of *lawh* related to the belief that the words written on these tablets could be consumed by drinking water used to clean them, clearly a dimension of the orality of culture that had little to do with literacy except in a mystical sense. She examines the educational system of the *makarantar allo* as a complex initiation process that involves various rituals and symbols. Another valuable contribution is Bondarev's examination of the use of marginal commentary and interlinear space in West African manuscripts. His analysis is insightful but hardly revolutionary as Nobili claims in his introduction, since the practice clearly prevailed because of the lack of paper and the technique of providing commentary on texts through use of marginal space. In "A Preliminary Appraisal of Marginalia in West African Manuscripts from the Mamma Haydara Memorial Library Collection (Timbuktu)," by Susana Molins Lliteras also surveys the topic of notes on West African manuscripts from a typological point of view.

The next three articles are devoted to different African Islamic written traditions, serving different purposes and written in different Islamic languages. Adrien Delmas interprets the *Kilwa Chronicle* as the perfect embodiment of the Swahili-Portuguese encounter that, paraphrasing Delmas, generated writing practices of their own. In this way, Delmas draws the

attention of the reader to the “social conditions” (p. 202) in which the chronicle was written. A study of the context in which texts were written is a long-standing focus of scholarship in West Africa, as reflected in the work of Paulo Farias. The anthropologist and specialist of Bamana oral literature, Tal Tamari, also shows how texts are embedded in context in his chapter “Bamana Texts in Arabic Chara Dcters: Some Leaves from Mali,” which has to be seen in the well-established study of the Sunjata Epic, not only in the work of David Conrad but many others as well. Issues of authorship also lie at the center of Chapter 7, Xavier Luffin’s chapter, “Arabic and Swahili Documents from the Pre-Colonial Congo and the EIC (Congo Free State, 1885–1908): Who were the Scribes?”

The last section of the book comprises shorter contributions. The section opens with a note by Halirou Mohamadou, “Moodibbo Bello Aamadu Mohammadu and the *Daada Maaje*, a Handbook in an Indigenous Fulfulde Script,” which represents a unique contribution to the book. All of the other articles, in fact, address cases of literacy in Arabic script. “Elements of a ‘Timbuktu Manual of Style’” (Chapter 9) is the combined effort of Shamil Jeppie and Mahamoud Mohamed, a Timbuktu-based scholar and calligrapher better-known as Cheikh Hamou. This section brings attention to the paratextual elements in Islamic manuscripts from Timbuktu. In “Seven Gravestones at the Muslim Tana Baru Cemetery in Cape Town: A Descriptive Note,” Alessandro Gori explores Arabic literacy in South Africa. From the end of the eighteenth century, literacy in Arabic script in Melayu and Afrikaans was known in the region of the Cape of Good Hope, which has previously been documented but is not well known. This note focuses on seven grave stones inscribed in Arabic. The last article of the book, Maimadu Barma Mutai and Andrea Brigaglia study a Qur’anic manuscript in the Centre for Contemporary Islam (CCI), University of Cape Town: “Ka’ana Umar’s ‘CCI Quran’: The Making of a Bornuan Manuscript in the Twenty-First Century.” A Borno calligrapher, Ka’ana Umar, prepared the manuscript, at Mutai’s request, and was displayed during the conference along with traditional tools for manuscript production in Northern Nigeria.

Despite this praise, Nobili’s introduction is less than satisfactory in attempting an overview of the Islamic literary cultures of African history. Despite a perhaps unnecessary excursion into the outdated and long discredited views that Africa has not had much of a history, Nobili does highlight some of the contributions made to the study of Arabic and Ajami sources for the reconstruction of the African past. However, he does not provide an overview of the scholarship of Arabic and Ajami literacy, which would be far more appropriate for this volume.

In an edited collection that is clearly targeting specialists in the field, Nobili’s discussion of the orality of African sources seems a bit simplistic. Moreover, Arabic documentation has been used by historians with greater frequency throughout history than Nobili seems to be aware. The virtual absence of references to the extensive literature on Arabic literature in West Africa, not only in Nobili’s introduction but also in virtually all the essays, is surprising. There is no recognition of the overwhelming majority of books, articles, M.A. and Ph.D. theses produced in Nigeria and in francophone West Africa. There are some exceptions in the specialized chapters but even in these chapters the references are few. In fact, in some cases, West African Islamic scholarship is portrayed as sources to be studied rather than well qualified scholarship in their own right. For the non-specialist, one could be left with the conclusion, which Nobili claims in his introduction, that not much has been done. A whole generation of scholarship is virtually ignored. The essential work of Abdullahi (H.F.C.) Smith and his students and colleagues is not even mentioned in the book. The weakness here is that there is virtually no recognition of the

extensive contributions to the study of Arabic and Ajami texts in much of West Africa, particularly by Muslim, Arabic-speaking scholars located at universities in Africa.

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