

# “Rediscovering” the de Gironcourt Manuscript Collection

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“The Niger Bend is to West Africa what the Nile Valley is to Egypt: an ecological treasure and a civilization magnet ... The intensive and extensive human activity that has taken place along the banks of the river Niger in this region for thousands of years has left behind its traces in a large number of archaeological sites ... Over the past 600-700 years another legacy has been gradually accumulating: that of the literate culture of Islam symbolized by the extraordinary richness of private collections of Arabic manuscripts that still survive”.<sup>1</sup>

The above statement by John O. Hunwick, a well-known scholar who has dedicated his life to studying African manuscripts, underlines the pivotal role of the Niger Bend in West African manuscript production. It is from the *Boucle du Niger* that the French *ingénieur-agronome* Georges de Gironcourt (1878-1960) gathered a collection of manuscripts, the so-called “de Gironcourt papers”,<sup>2</sup> hosted today at the *Bibliothèque de l’Institut de France* (Paris).<sup>3</sup> This paper focuses on this collection as part of a cataloguing effort on the de Gironcourt manuscripts that will be published within the *Series Catalogorum* of the *Istituto per l’Oriente C.A. Nallino* (Roma) and *CNRS* (Paris).<sup>4</sup>

In the course of an archeological mission financed by the *Ministère des Colonies*, the *Ministère de l’Instruction Publique* and the *Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*, Georges de Gironcourt collected 812 inscriptions in both Arabic and Tifinagh (Tuareg) alphabet and 154

Arabic and French manuscripts.<sup>5</sup> The manuscripts come from a region extending from the Masina region in central Mali to the border of the modern states of Niger and Nigeria, as well as from the Saharan mountains of the Adrar-des-Ifoghas.

All but a few manuscripts are copies realized at the request of de Gironcourt during his mission. Some other manuscripts are notes dictated from memory by local marabouts<sup>6</sup> to local scribes or written by the marabouts themselves. Four manuscripts, that de Gironcourt marks as “originals” are clearly older than the other ones and demand a thorough examination.

The ms. 2414/200 is a composite<sup>7</sup> manuscript, comprising five large fragments of the *Ta’rikh al-sudan* by Abd al-Rahman al-Sa’di (d. after 1655-6) (*ALA* IV, p.40-1),<sup>8</sup> each occupying a separate codicological unit. One of them is dated 20 *safar* 1183/25 June 1769. Three other codicological units seem to date back to an even earlier epoch, while the last one is a copy of one of these fragments and dates 1912. Therefore, this manuscript is the oldest extant copy of the chronicle of al-Sa’di.

The ms. 2416/211 is also a composite manuscript, including two copies of the *Nasiha ahl al-zaman* by the Nigerian *mujahid* ‘Uthman b. Fudi (d. 1817) (*ALA* II, p.67).<sup>9</sup> The manuscript contains two different codicological units: one dates 1912, and the other is a copy realized by Ibrahim Khalil bin ‘Abd Allah (d. 1860). A letter by the copyist to Abu Bakr bin Muhammad Jobbo can be found on the *verso* of the last *folio* of the oldest

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codicological unit. Both elements suggest that the oldest copy was realized at about 1850, because Ibrahim Khalil bin ‘Abd Allah reigned in Gwandu between 1835 and 1860, while Abu Bakr bin Muhammad Jobbo was *amir* of Say in around 1854.

The ms. 2416/221 is the only existing copy of an autograph letter, dated 27 *dhu’-l-Qa’ada* 1272/30 July 1856, signed by G. F. Herman, the British consul in Tripoli, to the Kunta spiritual leader of Timbuktu Ahmad al-Bakka’i (d. 1865) who gave hospitality to the German traveller Heinrich Barth.



*De Gironcourt during his mission in the Western Sudan.*

The ms. 2407/121 is the *al-Tara’if wa-l-tala’id* by Muhammad b. al-Mukhtar al-Kunti (d. 1825-6) (ALA IV, p.113). It is certainly an old manuscript, but the lack of internal evidence makes it impossible to date. However, de Gironcourt states in his “*feuilleton signaletique*”<sup>10</sup> that the manuscript was owned by the author himself. This statement implies that the manuscript was likely completed between 1806, when evidence shows that the *al-Tara’if* had not yet been completed,<sup>11</sup> and 1825-6, the year of Muhammad b. al-Mukhtar’s death.

Besides the four “original” manuscripts, the collection includes other remarkable items. Among these, there are numerous documents regarding the Masina caliphate, such as a copy of the *Kitab al-Idtirar* (ms. 2406/64) (ALA IV, p.209), which appears to be the only work written by the leader Ahmad bin Muhammad Lobbo (d. 1845), and the propaganda leaflet containing a forged prophecy about him which eventually was included in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century *vulgata* of the *Ta’rikh al-fattash* (ms. 2405/2; ms. 2406/73; ms. 2410/174) (ALA IV, p.38-9).<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, there are some letters regarding the internal administration of the state, as well as its relations with the Kunta and the *tijani* leader *al-hajj* ‘Umar bin Futi (d. 1864) who figures in the collection

with his *Suyuf al-sa’id* (ms.2416/214) (ALA IV, p.220).

Other interesting pieces are three manuscripts (ms. 2406/70, ms. 2406/71, ms. 2406/72) (ALA IV, p. 51-2) regarding the history of the Middle Niger from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which de Gironcourt ascribed to Muhammad bin Muhammad bin ‘Uthman al-Kabari, known as San Shirfi (d. 1863). The name of the author appears on one of them as San Shirfi’s son, Muhammad bin Muhammad bin ‘Uthman al-Kabari, known as *Alfa* ‘Uthman, *qadi* of Timbuktu before the French conquest. The other two manuscripts

are anonymous and, even if they share the same dry narrative style of traditional historical annals, no continuity can be detected between them and the preceding one. The history of the Middle Niger during the 19<sup>th</sup> century is the topic of another manuscript, the *Dhikr ma waqa’a fi l-qarn al-thalith ‘ashara* (ms. 2406/75) (ALA IV, p. 51) begun by al-Mustafa bin ‘Abd Allah (d. 1279/1862-3) and completed by Ibrahim al-Ra’is bin Isma’il. This work records the period from 1785-6 to 1880 and reports many of the events, sometimes word-for-word, of the better-known *Chronique du Fittougha* by al-Mukhtar bin Isma’il bin Wadi’at Allah, better known as Yirkoi Talfi (d. about 1862).

The collection also includes a number of notes and copies obtained by de Gironcourt in the northern and eastern part of the Middle Niger from Tuareg chiefs. Furthermore, in the Adrar-n-Ifoghas mountains de Gironcourt had an amazing encounter with the ascetic, the Kunta spiritual leader, Muhammad *al-saghir* bin ‘Umar (‘Amar) bin Muhammad bin al-Mukhtar al-Kunti (m. 1348/1929), known as *Shaykh* Bay, who had never been met by another European. This set of documents reports unique information on the Tuareg, the Kunta and the Arma. Another

manuscript (ms. 2405/1; ALA IV, p.649-50) chronicles the history of the Tuareg Iwillimidan during the XVI-XIX centuries. Unfortunately the first page, containing the author's name, is missing.

In the collection we also encounter a number of works by the Fodiawa family.<sup>13</sup> Besides some letters and copies of well-known works, such as the *Wathiqa* (ms. 2415/204, ms. 2416/215) (ALA II, p.79), the *Siraj al-ikhwan* (2410/179) (ALA II, p.71), the *Tanbih al-ikhwan* (ms. 2415/208) (ALA

II, p.74) or the *Kitab al-Farq* (ms. 2411/186) (ALA II, p. 61) by 'Uthman bin Fudi or the *Tazyin al-waraqat* (ms. 2410/175) by his brother 'Abd Allah bin Fudi (ALA II, p.109-10), there are some lesser-known works. Among them, two by Muhammad Bello, the second caliph of Sokoto, are known only through the de Gironcourt copies and lack any formal title. The first begins with *Aqwa asbab al-nasr li'l-mujahidin* (ms. 2416/220) (ALA II, p. 115) whereas the other is the so-called *Kitab al-raghba* (ms. 2411/187) (ALA II, p. 123). Moreover, the collection contains the only known copy of the *Madarij al-salama* (ms. 2416/217) (ALA II, p.123) by Muhammad Bello and a very interesting pseudo-'Uthman bin Fudi (ms. 2406/216) (ALA II, p. 85).

Besides these documents, the collection also includes obituaries (from cities like Djenné, Timbuktu or Walata) and king lists (such as those of the Masina, as well as of Zinder in Niger), poems, apocalyptic religious literature and an astrological piece, talismans, genealogies and traditions concerning local populations (especially the Peul, the Tuareg and the Songhay), and various historical fragments.

Aside from manuscripts by local scholars, the collection includes also fragments of "external" works, such as a long fragment from the *Maqamat* of al-Hariri, the *al-Hasan al-mahadara* (ms. 2405/16-17) and the *al-Kashf 'an mujawazat* (ms. 2413/197) by al-Suyuti as well as the *Ta'rikh al-rusul* (ms. 2408/127) by al-Tabari.

To sum up, these manuscripts have not attracted adequate scholarly interest. To date, only one article has been published, based on the ms. 2416/222-223 and regarding traditions of origin of Borgu ruling lineages.<sup>14</sup> The lack of interest in the collection is due to a number of factors.

First of all, the analyses by Smith, Hunwick and Gwarzo, based on research conducted for short periods of time, offer only a partial overview. Thus, it is necessary to elaborate a full-scale catalogue of the de Gironcourt collection, as Paul Oskar Kristeller states: "if a collection of manuscripts

doesn't have any printed catalogue, it's impossible to know and study its contents, if not at the place where it is sheltered".<sup>15</sup>

Even a keen and well-disposed scholar visiting the *Bibliothèque de l'Institut de France* would have problems approaching the collection. The collection includes numerous miscellanies whose texts are not easy to locate. The indications by de Gironcourt regarding the contents of such miscellanies are often misleading. Moreover, the quality of the manuscripts is poor, because they are not luxury items, such as richly illuminated manuscripts or precious bound ones. Some have copyist errors and are written by authors who do not seem to be deeply versed in Arabic. It must be kept in mind that de Gironcourt did not know Arabic and was unable to verify the quality of the language used in the manuscripts as well as their historical value, as correctly underlined by Smith.<sup>16</sup>

The catalogue under preparation aims at aiding the scholar carrying out research on the de Gironcourt archive, offering a thorough analysis of the collection whose documents are analyzed in depth in their codicological and textual aspects. It is necessary to "rediscover" the de Gironcourt collection, in order to unearth the wealth of information that has been hidden until now. This collection is remarkable not only for its narrative, legal, religious and political texts, but also for the amount of historical notes that often do not cover a *folio's* entire length. Often

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the manuscripts, both literary texts and the notes, are single copies whose unique status demands analysis. The study of these items, their editing, publication, and translation in European languages, will bring to light important aspects of the history of different populations encountered by de Gironcourt during his West African journey, from Peul to Songhay, from Tuareg to Berbers, from Saharan Arabs to Hausa, whose history is still poorly documented

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## Notes

- Hunwick 2002: 123.
- This denomination recalls that of a 1967 work by John O. Hunwick and Hasan I. Gwarzo which is the best description of the de Gironcourt manuscripts available to this day (Hunwick & Gwarzo 1967). That essay was updating a previous work on the subject by H. F. C. Smith (Smith 1958). See also de Gironcourt 1920: 358-367; de Pedrals 1950: 69-74; Conseil International des Archives 1976: 899-931; Hunwick 2002: 187-203.
- The manuscripts are stored at the *Bibliothèque de l'Institut de France* under the numbers 2405-2416. Reproductions in microfilm are also available at the *Bibliothèque Nationale* in Paris (R.12960-R12971) and at the library of the DSRAPA (*Dipartimento di Studi e Ricerche su Africa e Paesi Arabi*) of the University of Naples « L'Orientale » (Inv. 28710 -28721).
- So far, the *Series Catalogorum* has published what follows: Szuppe, Marie & Muminov, Ashirbek. 2004. *Catalogue des Manuscrits Orientaux du Musée Régional de Qarshi (Ouzbékistan)*. *Series Catalogorum* I. Roma: Istituto per l'Oriente C. A. Nallino; Muminov, Ashirbek, Szuppe, Marie & Idrisov, Abdusalam (avec la collaboration de Shovosil Ziyodov). 2007. *Manuscrits en écriture arabe du Musée régional de Nukus (République autonome du Karakalpakstan, Ouzbékistan): Fonds arabe, persan, turki et karakalpak*. *Series Catalogorum* II. Roma: Istituto per l'Oriente C.A.Nallino; Kenderova, Stoyanka. 2009. *Catalogue des Manuscrits Orientaux du Département d'Études Turques de l'Université de Strasbourg*. *Series Catalogorum* III. Roma: Istituto per l'Oriente C. A. Nallino. After the publication, data from the collection will be added to the AMMS-West African Arabic Manuscript Project online database. See <http://www.westafricanmanuscripts.org>.
- Even though de Gironcourt counts 223 manuscripts, a codicological analysis of the fond suggests a number of 142 manuscripts; see forthcoming catalogue. All the manuscripts include some notes in French, while only four are written totally in French. In spite of the West African common practice of writing local "Islamic" languages in Arabic alphabet, especially the Fulfulde, Songhay and Hausa, in the de Gironcourt manuscripts there is no trace of the use of *'ajami*.
- My use of the outdated term "marabout" for "Muslim clerics" recalls de Gironcourt own colonial French terminology. The term "includes not only those most general referred to as *'ulama'* – the *qadis* and other respected jurists and teachers – but *imams*, *khatibs*, *sufis*, *ascetics*, *pietists (sulaha)* and in general all those who may be described as 'holymen'" (Hunwick 1996: 176).
- A composite is a "manuscript which contains two or more codicological units" (Gumbert 2004: 29). A codicological unit is "a discrete number of quires, worked in a single operation, containing a complete text or a set of texts" (Gumbert 2004: 25).
- The abbreviation ALA IV refers to Hunwick 2003.

9. The abbreviation *ALA II* refers to Hunwick 1995.
10. To each manuscript in this collection is added a *folio*, called “fiche signalétique”, containing notes by de Gironcourt regarding the manuscript itself.
11. Hamet 1919: 197.
12. See Levzion 1971.
13. The Fodiawa, whose name comes from the Fulfulde term “fodiye”, scholar, was the family of the leaders of the Nigerian *jihad* which founded the Sokoto caliphate.
14. de Moraes Farias 1992.
15. Quoted in Petrucci 2001: 13.
16. Smith 1958: 241.