

Taking a Local Turn: The Tombouctou Manuscripts Project explores the Ajami Tradition at the Cape

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The Tombouctou Manuscripts Project, based in the UCT Historical Studies Department, began in 2003. The main objective of the project was to initiate research into the manuscript tradition of Timbuktu, Mali. More widely, it aimed at promoting awareness of a unique writing tradition emanating from within Africa. Over the past six years, the Tombouctou Mss Project team has been deeply involved in research regarding the manuscripts of Timbuktu, as evidenced in its substantial research output. This includes the digitisation and translation of selected manuscripts from two major Timbuktu collections; Project-run conferences and exhibitions; as well as published literature, such as the book, *The Meanings of Timbuktu*¹ and various articles.

While the project started out with a particular focus on Timbuktu, its scope is now broadening to look beyond Timbuktu, to writing cultures elsewhere in Africa. The most recent addition to the research profile is the *ajami*² writing tradition of the Cape. This article focuses on the research experience in the local context, in particular the importance of a community-based approach to researching the *ajami* tradition of Cape Town.

The research work in the Cape began in 2008,

with a pilot study on local *ajami*² writings. The main aim of the study was to gain a sense of the current situation regarding Cape *ajami* literature, including the kind of research already carried out, the nature of extant documents and the sorts of further research and preservation efforts still needed. Taking a dual primary-secondary research approach, the study involved both

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consulting existing literature on the topic and, on a more practical note, community consultation, interviews, text collection and cataloguing. Initial investigations showed the value of community consultation in dealing with the *ajami* literature at the Cape. At this point, it is necessary to provide a brief description of the *ajami* texts of the Cape.

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نوامی ان خلیفہ منس ایک ہت فرامی عبداللہ مسکر بیٹی نئی
 بیٹی اوجہ دہ سبغ فرامی ابوبکر ان فر عبدالرؤف لت ہیولی
 موت اودر دیہ مت مت میں فرو اف ان ایک ہت فرامی ابوبکر
 اک مسکر بیٹی ان ایک ہت لی ان فور حاکر بی بی دار اب فی نوامی
 ان خلیفہ منس حفی کرنا اللہ فر میں این ان فور اب میں پر ادی
 قت ریخ اس اف قت فر کیت اس ان اللہ اس دی فر پدی موت دیہ
 خنخ ہ قت دیہ خرغ دیہ خیت سبغ ان پچا دیہ بی بی
 کرنا اللہ فور دیہ جماعت لت ہیولی اک کت خیت قت خبیر
 اس ان دیہ کبے ان ایک فراخ ان دیہ ہوکی اللہ فر حفی نس
 اس ایک مستک حیاک ہت ان میں مسکر بیٹی ان
 والسلام

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Arabic-Afrikaans letter.

main language spoken in the community, the Arabic-Afrikaans script was developed and replaced *jawi*, as reflected in later *kietaabs*.

The majority of *kietaabs* deal with issues of Islamic doctrines and practices. From their content, the texts can be separated into three main categories: didactic religious texts, often pertaining to jurisprudence and principles of belief; talismanic texts, such as *azeemats* (talisman based on combination of prayers, Arabic letters and numbers) used for personal protection; and socio-historical texts, including personal correspondence, like letters. Most *kietaabs* are kept in private family collections, rather than in institutions such as libraries and state archives.

Several studies on the *ajami* tradition of the Cape have been carried out since the 1950s.³ Yet,

awareness of the *ajami* tradition is still limited and existing research undoubtedly needs to be extended at various levels, including the study of Cape *ajami* historical development, textual analysis and, at a more basic level, collation and cataloguing of previously undocumented texts.

It is this last aspect that has been prioritised in our work to date. The Project has been working with members of the Muslim community in Cape Town to locate undocumented *ajami* texts and to work towards cataloguing and developing ways of preserving the documents. This community-based approach was adopted to suit the local context, given that the majority of *ajami* documents are not held in public institutions such as libraries and archives, but rather in the private sphere of certain individuals and families. Through approaching our research at a grassroots level, our aim is to succeed

in documenting private collections for official records and future research, and also for the personal benefit of the families who possess the texts. It is also hoped that this community interaction will work to raise wider awareness of the value of Cape *ajami* literature.

This is an ongoing and somewhat challenging task. People are often wary of disclosing their *kietaabs*, which are often family heirlooms, to outsiders. There is also an amount of secrecy surrounding *ajami* text ownership, caused by both anxieties towards outsider contact, as well as beliefs about the mystical nature of some of the *kietaabs*. Consequently, building rapport with these individuals has been a slow process. However, we have managed to locate and build links with several individuals and families with *ajami* text collections and are working on ways in which to assist them in recording and preserving their collections.

An example of a breakthrough in this gradual process is the recent cataloguing project that was undertaken on the private library of the late Imam Abdurahman 'Manie' Bassier (1923-2004) of the Bo-Kaap. The Project was loaned a section of Imam Bassier's private book collection, for the purpose of locating the *ajami* texts that the Imam was reported to have had. We went through all 79 volumes in the collection, marking them with item numbers. We then created an inventory of the items, recording the title, author, date of publication, language, script and condition of each item. We also noted the peculiarities of each volume, including items found therein, such as letters and pamphlets, and significant readers' notes.

From this exercise, we were able to produce a comprehensive catalogue of the Imam's belongings for his family. In addition, from this catalogue and from the exercise as a whole, we were able to gain an idea of both the man himself, and the academic and socio-religious context he was immersed in. That is to say, Imam Bassier's private library contained various insights into

his personal interests, his linguistic abilities and dominant religious issues and themes he was concerned with. These insights were drawn from the kinds of books he kept and the notes he made, as well as other items found inside these books. This exercise took our work beyond the singular focus on *ajami* texts, to the broader issue of literature and 20th century Cape Town imams – another aspect of local Islamic literature worth pursuing.

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With regards to *ajami* documents, however, this exercise proved to be extremely fruitful. In this section of the Imam's library we found copies of printed Arabic-Afrikaans literature, such as the *Habibiyah* Islamic school's publication *Kitab al-Mutala'ah li-Tadris talamidhat madrasah Habibiyah*.⁴ This text, as well as other printed Arabic-Afrikaans 'community reading' literature of its kind, are evidence of the popularity of the Arabic-Afrikaans script in Cape Town in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Besides printed literature, there was at least one example of a handwritten *jawi* book and two different kinds of socio-historically significant uses of the Arabic-Afrikaans script: a handwritten letter and various examples of Arabic-Afrikaans marginalia, or readers' notes. Neither of these instances have been recorded or mentioned in the literature on Cape *ajami* texts. The significance of these findings is further amplified, in that instances of the use of Arabic-Afrikaans for social, everyday purposes are indeed rare.

The letter, written in 1914, seemed to have been used as a bookmark in one of the volumes. It is entirely in Arabic-Afrikaans and pertains to an Islamic divorce issue. It is thus both an example of social issues affecting the Muslim community of Cape Town in the early 20th century and an instance of the use of Arabic-Afrikaans for social purposes and personal correspondence. Meanwhile, Arabic-Afrikaans marginalia were found in several volumes. These personal notes made by the reader ranged from emphasising certain sections of the original text to translating Arabic words and so on.

The example of the cataloguing exercise performed on Imam Bassier's private library shows the value of working with families and private literature collections on various levels. On one hand, it offers an opportunity for families to have a comprehensive record of their documents thus compiled, which in turn adds to their understanding of possessions often inherited from other family members and others. On the other hand, the information gained from surveying this kind of literature adds to a greater understanding, for researchers, of the sorts of books and written material available in local private libraries. It can also lead to the finding of rare, historically significant documents, otherwise inaccessible to researchers. This then helps to extend the literature on local written traditions and heritage.

While the community-based approach is a gradual, sometimes challenging method of research, it is proving to be the most suitable approach for researching the *ajami* tradition in the Cape Town context. Thus far, our immersion in the Muslim community has been fruitful and our database of private collections is growing. We are, of course, always keen to add more collections to our records and are willing to catalogue private *ajami* collections if owners are interested – the more documents we can record and research, the greater our collective understanding of the Cape's unique Islamic literary tradition will be.

Notes

1. Jeppie, S. and Bachir Diagne, S. (Eds.) 2008. *The Meanings of Timbuktu* (Cape Town, HSRC Press).
2. The term *ajami* refers to the use of the Arabic script to write non-Arabic languages.
3. The three principal scholars in this field are Adriaanus van Selms, Hans Kähler and Achmat Davids. See: Van Selms, A. 1951. *Arabies-Afrikaanse Studies: 'n Tweetalige (Arabiese en Afrikaanse) Kategismus* (Amsterdam, N.V. Noord-Hollandsche Uitgevers Maatschappij); Van Selms, A. 1953. 'Die Oudste Boek in Afrikaans: Isjmoeni se "Betroubare Woord" in *Hertzog-Annale van die Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap and Kuns* (Pretoria, Akademie en Kuns). pp. 61-103; Kähler, H. 1971. *Studien über die Kultur, die Sprache und die Arabisch-Afrikaansche Literatur der Kap-Malaien* (Berlin, Verlag von Dietrich Reimer); Davids, A. 1993. 'The Early Afrikaans Publications and Manuscripts in Arabic Script'. in Westra, P.E. & Warner, B. (eds.). *Festschrift in Honour of Frank R. Bradlow* (Cape Town, The South African Library). pp. 67-82. More recent work by other scholars include: Zakariyyah, M. 1996. 'Pengesanan Manuskrip Melayu di Afrika Selatan: Satu Catatan Ringkas'. *Jurnal Filologi Melayu*. Vol. 5 pp. 111-118; Haron, M. 2001. 'The making, preservation and study of South African *ajami* and MSS texts'. *Sudanic Africa*. Vol. 12 pp.1-14; Dangor, S.E. 2008. 'Arabic-Afrikaans Literature at the Cape'. *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde*. Vol. 45 (1) pp. 123- 132 and PaEni, M. (ed). 2008. *Katalog Naskah: Koleksi Masyarakat Keturunan Indonesia di Afrika Selatan* (Jakarta, Departemen Kebudayaan dan Pariwisata Republik Indonesia).
4. Roughly translated as 'The book of comprehension for the teaching of habibiyah school students'.