

Arabic Medicinal Manuscripts of Pre-Colonial Northern Nigeria: A Descriptive List

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Introduction

Traditional Muslim scholarship in West Africa, as elsewhere, used to involve fields of knowledge outside the scope of narrowly defined Islamic studies. For example, West African Muslim scholars produced a number of Arabic works relating to medicine, philosophy, economic studies, political thought, geography, architecture, town planning and public administration. Some of these manuscripts are housed in the personal collections of the families of the authors. In addition, some organizations have taken custody of these manuscripts, from time to

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time, and have preserved them in different forms for public use. These organizations include some research and documentation centers in Nigeria, such as the Waziri Junaidu Personal Library (WJPL, *Darul Buhuth*), Sokoto; The Center for Islamic Studies (CIS), Specialist Library, Sokoto; the Sokoto State History Bureau (SSHB), Sokoto; National Archives Kaduna (NAK); the Arewa House Archives, Kaduna, and the Graduate Documents Center, Bayero University, Kano.

This paper presents a brief overview of some

northern Nigerian manuscripts, focusing on those that deal with different aspects of medical sciences such as pharmacology, ophthalmology, hygiene and general medicine. The aim of this paper is to show the continuing relevance of such manuscripts for African scholarship in the twenty-first century.¹

An outline of some medicinal manuscripts

1. **Title:** *Masalih al-insan al-muta'alliq bi-l-adyan wa-l-abdan*.

Author: 'Abd Allah b. Fudi (1768-1827).

Location: Manuscript obtained from Bashir Osman personal library, Sokoto.

Content: The book is in two parts. The first part discusses spiritual aspects of Muslim life. The main emphasis of the second part is on medicine. 'Abd Allah recognises the influence of environmental factors on health and well-being and so he dedicates the first portion of the second part of the book to a discussion of those factors and the role they play in causing illness or, conversely, promoting health. Following the Galenic medical philosophy inherited by Arab, Indian and African medieval thinkers, he identifies the principal cause of sickness as an imbalance between heat, cold, dryness and moisture in the body. Any such imbalance results in bodily malfunction, which in turn leads to illness. The manuscript also discusses the ethics of medical practice. In this respect

it touches on issues such as respecting patient confidentiality, treating patients with kindness and hospitality, and not practicing medicine only for the sake of profit, but rather because of a genuine concern to assist the helpless and sick.

2. **Title:** *Diya' al-umma fi adillat al-a'imma*.

Author: 'Abd Allah b. Fudi (1768-1827).

Location: Printed (no date) by Alhaji Dan Ige Sokoto.

Content: The book specifically discusses *ibadat* (acts of worship). However, 'Abd Allah also provides a chapter on medicine. Here, he explains the fundamental causes of sickness. According to him, one of the root causes of all sicknesses is excessive and frequent eating, especially eating solid food before an earlier meal has been digested. He further recommends light eating habits and maintaining a balanced diet; in other words, avoid eating only one type of food. Similarly, he strongly recommends fruit and milk as being part of the diet for everyone wishing to preserve their health. For the treatment of poisons such as scorpion stings and snakebite, he recommends the use of salt and water. He also provides a verdict (*fatwa*) prohibiting the use of wine and other unlawful substances in medication. Finally, he explains that one must not enter a town or place where there is a plague or similar disease, and he prohibits the use of black magic, divination and charms.

3. **Title:** *Kitab al-rahma fi-l-tibb wa-l-hikma*.

Author: Muhammad Bello.

Location: CIS, ACC. NO. 315/63.

Content: The manuscript is specifically on *materia medica*, with more than one hundred medical cases reviewed. It is a compilation of Bello's personal experimentation and observations on

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disease causation, symptoms and cure. He tested the materials he recommends, and established their medicinal efficacy. For this reason, at the end of every entry, prescription or treatment he concludes with: *mujarrab al-sahih*; in other words 'tested and found effective'. In the book, as with 'Abd Allah's *Masalih al-insan*, Bello provides a chapter on natural sciences, that is *'ilm al-tabi'a*. In the text and especially in chapter three, he also recommends some precautions that help to maintain one's health; these include regular cleaning of the body, clothes and environment, sexual satisfaction and protection from excessive heat and cold. There are different manuscripts or books with the same title in several collections in Nigeria. Some are written by the Yandoto *'ulama* of Zamfara and are in *ajami* (Hausa in Arabic script). Others are famous compilations on medicine by non-Nigerian authors, such as the one written by Abu Zayd 'Abd al-Rahman b. Nadr al-Shirazi and the one by Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti (d. 1505).

4. **Title:** *Al-mawarid al-nabawiyya fi al-masa'il al-tibbiyya*.

Author: Muhammad Bello.

Location: Graduate Documents Center, BUK, Doc no. 566.

Content: This is a general treatise on Prophetic medicine and accounts for the properties of a variety of minerals and materials, and describes special supplications recommended by the Prophet for the treatment of illnesses.

5. **Title:** *Ujlat al-rakib fi al-tibb al-sa'ib*.

Author: Muhammad Bello.

Location: CIS, 3/8/107.

Content: The book also examines Prophetic medicine. The first part of the book presents the position of the study of medical sciences in Islam. According to Bello, it is compulsory for the Muslim community to train experts in medical sciences who will take charge of health at the individual and communal level. This, according to Bello, will make Muslims independent of the non-Muslim practitioners among whom they live. In the book, Bello also laments the neglect of this science by Muslims; this neglect led them to follow superstitions and sorcery. He also discusses preventive

medicine as well as public health. He strongly recommends the medicinal use of honey, milk and garlic to treat a variety of medical issues.

6. **Title:** *Kitab al-tibb al-nabawi*.
Author: Muhammad Bello.
Location: SSHB 3/30/109.
Content: The author, Sultan Muhammad Bello, follows the example of other reputed scholars such as the Syrian Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350) and the Egyptian Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti (d. 1505), who also wrote on prophetic medicine. Bello was familiar with these works. As the title indicates, this text is another general treatise on prophetic medicine. As with Bello's other texts, the introductory part is dedicated to examining the position and significance of medicine in human society and it appeals to Muslims to study that science. He mentions that the study of medicine is a specific obligation, in certain cases falling upon the individual (*fard 'ayn*) and in other cases upon the community (*fard kifaya*).
7. **Title:** *Kitab al-tibb al-mu'in al-musamma bi-tibb al-'ayn*.
Author: Muhammad Bello.
Location: NAK, SOKPROF, item no.12/ref. no. A/AR9.
Content: The main subject of this manuscript is the treatment of eye diseases. Bello starts by identifying eye problems including diseases that cause dryness, redness, and discharge from the eye as well as some causes of blindness, short-sightedness and night blindness. This is followed by prescriptions for drugs and descriptions of how to prepare eye lotions and eye drops for treatment. It is interesting to note that some of the prescriptions in this text are mentioned in local languages such as Hausa, Fulfulde and Tamashek.
8. **Title:** *Kitab al-adwiyat lil-'uyun*.
Author: Muhammad Bello.
Location: NAK, SOKPROF. item no. 2. Ref. no. A/AR2.
Content: This manuscript is another treatise on eye diseases. Bello places emphasis on the diet to be followed by patients suffering from those diseases. He recommends milk and eggs in addition to some prescribed drugs for medication.
9. **Title:** *Musuj al-Ijayn al-musamma bi-tibb al-'ayn*.
Author: Muhammad Bello.
Location: SSHB. ACC NO.150.
Content: This manuscript also reviews eye diseases and mentions several ways of treating eye problems. It focuses on the preparation of antimony and its application to the eye for treatment. In the case of a person undergoing serious eye treatment, Bello recommends avoidance of hard labour and strong body movement including sexual intercourse.
10. **Title:** *Risalat al-amrad al-kilyah wa 'ilajiha*.
Author: Muhammad Bello.
Location: WJPL, in a collection of correspondence by Gidado bin Laima.
Content: This is an epistle contained in Wazir Gidado b. Laima's compilation of the correspondence of Muhammad Bello. This epistle was an answer to a letter sent to Muhammad Bello by the then Emir of Zazzau (Zaria). In his letter, the Emir complained of suffering from an illness and outlined the symptoms. Muhammad Bello replied: "From the description and symptoms of your ailment as contained in the letter, I think you suffer from a kidney problem." Bello identified three main problems associated with the kidney: wind in the kidney, swelling of the kidney, and blockage

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(lit.: stones) in the kidney. For each of these, Bello prescribed the drugs to be taken and the methods of administration. The Emir followed the prescription that Bello sent him and duly responded to indicate that he was cured of the ailment.

11. **Title:** *Al-qawl al-manthur fi adwiyat illat al-bathur*.

Author: Muhammad Bello.

Location: CIS, 3/9/122.

Content: This subject of this book is the causes and treatment of piles. It details different aspects of treatment such as fumigation, and the diets that the patient should maintain in order to recover. In the last part of the book, Bello identifies some causes of liver problems and prescribes medication with a mixture of garlic, honey and other ingredients. The treatise is one of Muhammad Bello's more scientifically-detailed analyses of a specific illness.

12. **Title:** *Kitab al-qawl al-sinna* [i.e.: cassia senna].

Author: Muhammad Bello.

Location: SSHB ACC. N. 263.

Content: Bello's text covers treatment involving the use of a single plant: *cassia senna*. He provides the plant's names in Fulfulde, Hausa and Tamashek. He then traces the origin of the plant from the Arabian Peninsula and discusses its medicinal uses and efficacy, identifying six different ways of administering it. The leaves of the plant, according to Bello, can be used in different ways; these include drying and grinding them to make a powder, boiling the fresh leaves and grinding them to be administered with honey, tamarind or milk, or adding the leaves to natron or salt. Various methods of administration are described by Bello for the treatment of ailments including excessive phlegm, bile disease, diabetes, constipation and stomach problems. The scientific nature of this work is further strengthened by Bello's description of doses, especially in the case of mothers who are breastfeeding. This text also describes how the quantity of the dosage changes depending on when the leaves were plucked.²

13. **Title:** *Nubdha fi adwiyat al-didan*.

Author: Muhammad Bello.

Location: WJPL 31/13.

Content: This treatise by Bello basically addresses a single problem: the diseases associated

with worms in human beings. Bello identifies the types of worms prevalent in humans and describes the symptoms associated with their presence, stressing that these diseases are more common among children than adults. Bello estimates the length of a tape worm at maturity to be approximately 35 cm. His work adopts a scientific approach in its investigation and prescription of treatments.³

14. **Title:** *Qira' at al-ahibba' fi 'ilm al-atibba'*. An alternative title for the same book (*Qira'at al-ahibba' fi bayan sirr al-asma'*) is used in Jean Boyd and Beverly Mack, *The Collected works of Nana Asma'u*, Michigan State University Press, 1997.

Author: Muhammad Tukur.

Location: CIS.

Content: Muhammad Tukur explains that he was requested by Muhammad Bello to compile the work, which is a general compilation concerning the medicine of the Prophet.

Conclusion

A turning point in the intellectual history of West Africa was reached when Arabic manuscripts became widely used in documentation, such as recordings of courts proceedings, and correspondence generally. Indigenous Muslim scholars emerged as result of the intellectual activities that gained ground in that region, from the fifteenth century.⁴ The nineteenth century, with the establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate, was the golden period for Islamic scholarship in what is today northern Nigeria.⁵ John

The level of scientific experimentation and discovery evident in these manuscripts attests beyond any doubt to the level of intellectual development in that part of Africa, and discredits the popular notion that Africa did not contribute to the field of science and technology, as with other parts of the world in the pre-colonial period.

O. Hunwick has described the role of the Arabic Language as a language of scholarship in the region as the "Latin of West Africa".⁶ Just as European people wrote in Latin or borrowed the Latin scripts to write in their own languages, West African people for centuries produced scholarship in the Arabic Language and wrote in Arabic script in preference to writing in their own languages. The level of scientific experimentation and discovery evident in these manuscripts attests beyond any doubt to the level of intellectual development in that part

of Africa, and discredits the popular notion that Africa did not contribute to the field of science and technology, as with other parts of the world in the pre-colonial period. The study of this legacy of preserved medicinal manuscripts could help to rejuvenate medical scholarship in the region. Thus, people would come to recognise the achievements of earlier generations, rekindling the spirit of scientific curiosity and medical experimentation. Similarly, and perhaps more importantly, these documents are based on herbal knowledge and on a holistic approach towards illness and well-being: as such, their teachings can contribute towards a medical system which would be a viable alternative to contemporary 'Western' commercial medicine with its symptom-centered and reductionist approach towards illness and well-being.

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Notes

- 1 For a collection of papers on African indigenous science, see Akinwumi et al. 2007. See also Bello 2000. Some case-studies on the extent of medicinal knowledge held by the authors of the Sokoto Caliphate include: Bunza 1995; Bunza 1999; Bunza & Muhammad 2003. On the case-study of eighteenth century Dagomba (northern Ghana), see Kea 2003.
- 2 The manuscript has been reviewed in detail in Bunza & Muhammad 2003.
- 3 The treatise has been reviewed in Bunza 1999.
- 4 See Blyden 1974. On the Nigerian case study on the development of Arabic manuscripts potentials, see El-Miskin 2009; Galadanchi 2008.
- 5 The most prolific writers of the Sokoto leadership were the leader of the Caliphate Shehu Usmanu Danfodio, his brother Abdullahi, his daughter Asma'u, and his son and successor Muhammad Bello. On Shehu Usmanu, see Hiskett 1973. On Abdullahi, Gwandu 1977. On Asma'u, Boyd & Mack 1999. On Bello, Minna 1983. For some reflections on the contribution of the Sokoto scholars to material and scientific development, see Augi 1993.
- 6 Hunwik 2008.