

A Short Description of the Jos Museum Collection of Arabic Manuscripts in Northern Nigeria

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One of the most serious challenges facing historians of West Africa and Nigeria in particular concerns the preservation and utilization of Arabic and *Ajami* manuscripts. This vital source material is known to be available in large volumes in public and private repositories in northern Nigeria, but its state of preservation is very poor. The Jos Museum is one of the public repositories of the region where manuscripts are kept without proper care. Most of the Arabic manuscripts in these repositories are not well known or widely utilized because many of them are not even catalogued. They have certainly not been translated into other languages to help non Arabic speaking researchers to gain access to them.

The present condition of the Arabic manuscripts in the Jos museum is scandalous, to say the least. Even if the custodians are able to house the manuscripts at all, the buildings used for this purpose provide little or no protection.

The Jos Museum Arabic Manuscript Collection: Origins and Present Conditions

The Jos Museum was established in 1952, during the colonial era, in a wide expanse of land provided by the Federal Department of Antiquities. The museum includes different sections, such as pottery, the National Centre for Museum Studies, the Bight of Benin Restaurant (a model of a Benin noble-man's house) as well as a zoo.

The Arabic manuscript collection is the fruit of the work of Adrian H. Bivar and his assistant Mallam Muntaqa Coomasie. After 1958 these two

researchers travelled to almost all the cities of northern Nigeria in search of ancient and modern manuscripts produced by Islamic scholars and Sufi masters of the *Qadiriyya* and *Tijjaniyya* orders. The collection comprises of 1,500 manuscripts. The library contains manuscripts written by scholars

from Zaria, Kano, Sokoto, Katsina and Bauchi (all in northern Nigeria) between the sixteenth and the twentieth century, as well as works by scholars from North Africa copied by Nigerian scribes. It includes works in the Arabic language as well as in Nigerian languages (Hausa and Fulfulde) in *Ajami* script. The

manuscripts are kept in open shelves with some important ones tied with strings. Some manuscripts have multiple copies for example the *Mukhtasar* of Khalil b. Ishaq and the *Tazyin al-Waraqat* by Abdullahi Dan Fodio. However, only 700 out of the total number of manuscripts have been fully catalogued since 1962, although the collection was listed by Zakariyau Oseni of the University of Ibadan in Nigeria.

The manuscripts are kept on four shelves and 438 printed books occupy another two shelves. In 1987, the Director General of the National Commission for Museums and Monuments at that time, the late Ade Obayemi, requested Zakariyau Oseni of the Department of Arabic, University of Ibadan, to examine the manuscripts and to suggest a re-classification and possible ways and methods

of preserving those resources. The library area was then on the verge of collapse because of lack of proper handling. The re-classification of the manuscripts was done using the new code numbers of JM/A.Ms (i.e. Jos Museum/Arabic Manuscripts).

Apart from the poor condition of the building, all the office equipment is old, worn and in urgent need of replacement. The manuscript collection is stored in poor environmental conditions that do not allow long-term preservation.

The present condition of the Arabic manuscripts in the Jos museum is scandalous, to say the least. Even if the custodians are able to house the manuscripts at all, the buildings used for this purpose provide little or no protection. The library is built from cast concrete or cement block which under tropical conditions allows heat to enter the building and does not allow proper ventilation. Moreover, the roof is generally flat and many leakages occur during the rainy season; these directly affect the manuscripts. As Bunmi Alegbeleye commented to Michaelle Biddle when the latter visited the repository a year ago: "Today, most of our cherished documentary resources are either totally destroyed or in extreme jeopardy. Although there has been a measure of success in the preservation of the built and natural heritage, there has been no parallel development on a national scale for collections of art, history, literature, information and science housed in our museums, galleries, libraries, archives and associated organizations and private collections held by individuals and corporations."⁵

Apart from the poor condition of the building, all the office equipment is old, worn and in urgent need of replacement. The manuscript collection is stored in poor environmental conditions that do not allow long-term preservation. The temperature ranges between 10.5 and 33.4 degree Celsius. The excessive heat, the high level of humidity in the wet season, heavy dust in the dry season and the use by the original owners of the manuscripts of materials that are palatable to insects, contribute to molding and severe insect attacks.⁶

There are many problems facing the Jos collection of Arabic manuscripts. Only some are mentioned here. First, the quality and quantity of staff employed at the repository are very unsatisfactory. Most staff generally lack the necessary expertise and exposure and have very little knowledge of modern techniques for handling the manuscripts to ensure their preservation. Moreover, there is chronic shortage of staff because replacements are not found when staff

members die or retire. Another problem facing the Jos Arabic manuscript collection is a lack of a paper conservation laboratory. This poses a serious danger to the manuscripts, since most of the people handling the collections lack the necessary technical

knowledge. The author of this article recommends the following measures to improve the situation:

- (a) The Jos Museum Arabic manuscript collection is heavily infested with destructive insects and needs to be placed in an anoxic environment without delay. This step, according to Biddle, is the preferred means for eradicating non-toxic insects.
- (b) There is an urgent need for a paper conservation laboratory and up-to-date preservation facilities to be used for treating dilapidated manuscripts in the Arabic manuscript preservation unit. Staff would need training in the use of these facilities.
- (c) The Jos Arabic manuscript collection needs at least one trained paper conservator. That person, preferably, should be trained in both paper and book conservation, and he should also train others.
- (d) The remaining 800 unclassified manuscripts should be properly listed, catalogued and classified for easy access.
- (e) There is the need to organise a series of workshops for local *ulama* (scholars), *imams* and the people involved with manuscripts to sensitize them on the importance of preserving these rare, unique and fragile documents and promoting increased access and use.
- (f) Professional expertise on information technology is urgently needed in the Jos Arabic manuscript collection to raise the awareness of, and expertise in, digital preservation issues.
- (g) Repository equipment should include protective manuscript albums, fire-proof metal boxes for

the manuscript albums and any other tools needed for preservation.

A list of selected Arabic Manuscripts in the Jos Repository

In the following pages, the writer lists and briefly describes some manuscripts preserved in the Jos Museum repository. Far from being exhaustive, this selection focuses only on some of the writings that are rarely found in other Nigerian collections. It also lists some works whose titles do not appear on extant encyclopedic works of Arabic literature in West Africa.

1. **Title:** *Asl Kanu wa-ta'rikh salatiniha* (The origins of Kano and the history of its rulers)
Author: Anonymous
Copyist: Mallam Ibrahim na-Tsangaya
Call number: JM/A.MS.47
Acquisition date: 1964
Number of folios: 11
Ink colour(s): Brown
Number of lines per page: 14
Dimension: 14 x 13cm
Content: The work was copied from the original by Mallam Ibrahim *na-Tsangaya* during 1770 CE. The title is not included in John Hunwick's encyclopedic compilation on the Arabic Literature of Africa, and has never been the object of study by historians. The text records the history of the people of Kano from Barbushe to King Bagauda. It also gives some details about the history and the origins of some of the early rulers of Kano.
2. **Title:** *Kitab al-harth* (The book of agronomy)
Author: Anonymous
Copyist: Ali b. Ibrahim
Call number: JM/A.MS.108
Acquisition date: 6/3/1960
Ink colour(s): Black
Number of lines per page: 14
Number of Polios: 5
Dimension: 15 x 10 cm
Content: The name of the author does not appear in this work. It was written in 1812 CE. The book is about methods of farming and discusses how a farmer can get a better yield. It

The manuscript describes a war that took place between the well-known state of Borno and its bordering neighbour, as a result of a dispute about the illegal movement of some slaves into the area of Borno.

also discusses some important points relating to animal husbandry. All the paper folios have a watermark and parts of pages 2 and 3 are partially damaged.

3. **Title:** *Mas'ala fi'l-qissa allati waqa'at bayna amir Maradi al-musamma Dan Mari wa-amir Katsina Abubakar al-Siddiq* (An important point in the history of what occurred between the Emir of Maradi, known as Dan Mari, and the king of Katsina Abubakar Siddiq)
Author: Anonymous
Copyist: -
Call number: JM/A.
Acquisition date: 10/3/1960
Number of folios: 41
Ink colour(s): Black
Number of lines per page: 14
Dimension: 14 x 12cm
Content: The work is undated. The manuscript includes hagiographical material on the famous northern Nigerian pre-Jihad scholars such as Muhammad b. Masanih and Muhammad b. al-Sabbagh.
4. **Title:** *Ghazwat al-Kanim allati sara fihī sultanuna al-Hajj Idris b. 'Ali* (The Kanem wars in which our leader al-Hajj Idris b. Aliyu actively participated)
Author: Ahmad b. Furtuwa al-Barnawi
Copyist: -
Call number: JM/A.MS.121
Acquisition date: 4/2/1960
Number of folios: 39
Ink colour(s): Black
Number of lines per page: 17
Dimension: 12 x 13 cm
Content: The manuscript was written during the reign of al-Haji Idris b. Aliyu. Some scholars suggest 1770 CE as the exact date of writing. The manuscript describes a war that took place between the well-known state of Borno and its bordering neighbour, as a result of a dispute about the illegal movement of some slaves into the area of Borno.
5. **Title:** *Fath al-latif fi 'ilm al-tafsir* (The opening of the most Merciful, in the field of Qur'anic exegesis)

Author: 'Uthman b. Ishaq b. 'Umar al-Turudi al-Maliki al-Sakkwati

Copyist: -

Call number: JM/A.MS.121

Date: 28/12/1965

Number of folios: 172

Ink colour (s): Black

Number of lines per page: 23

Dimension: 11 x 13 cm

Content: The text was written in 1751 CE and purchased by Muntaka Coomasie in 1965 for the Jos National Museum. According to John O. Hunwick, *Arabic literature of Africa* (vol. 2, pp. 237-238), it is a commentary on and enlargement of *Murwi 'l-sadl* by Muhammad b. Sahih al-Fullati.

A work on astronomy, written in 1777 CE. It explains the different formulae for astronomical calculations.

6. **SS Title:** *Tahlil al-matalib fi 'ilm al-nujum wa'l-kawakib* (Scrutinizing the searchable knowledge in the field of astronomy).

Author: Ahmad b. 'Uthman b. al-Banna al-Jadali

Copyist: -

Call number: JM/A.MS.1353

Acquisition date: 28/12/1965

Number of folios: 21

Ink colour (s): Black

Number of lines per page: 12

Dimension: 11 x 13 cm

Content: The work was written in 1779 CE. It describes the different formulae relating to the calculation of time and the duration of rainfall. It gives the different names of stars. The paper has a crescent watermark at the middle.

7. **Title:** *al-Siraj fi 'ilm al-falak* (The glittering light in the discipline of astronomy)

Author: Abu Zayd 'Abd al-Rahman al-Akhdari

Copyist: -

Call number: JM/A.MS.1365

Date: 28/12/1965

Number of folios: 19

Ink colour(s): Black

Number of lines per page: 18

Dimension: 20 x 16 cm

Content: A work on astronomy, written in 1777 CE. It explains the different formulae for astronomical calculations. The last two pages

of the manuscript are badly damaged, but an effort is being made to repair them through the assistance of Arewa House, Centre for Historical Documentation, Kaduna.

8. **Title:** *Kitab al-durar al-maknun* (The book of hidden pearls)

Author: Anonymous

Copyist: -

Call number: JM/A.MS.434

Acquisition date: 21/6/1961

Number of folios: 5

Ink colour(s): Black and brown

Number of lines per page: 14

Dimension: 10 x 7 cm

Content: The work is about the creation of the universe and the different status of God's creatures. It was written on 22nd of March, 1709 CE and discusses the distance between the sun and other planetary bodies, as well as the size of the earth.

9. **Title:** *Kayfiyyat awrad al-Shaykh al-Tijani* (Methods for using the litanies of Shaykh Ahmad al-Tijjani)

Author: Muhammad b. al-Mukhtar al-Tijani

Copyist: -

Call number: JM/A.MS.1367

Acquisition date: 7/1/1965

Number of folios: 3

Ink colour(s): Black

Number of lines per page: 10

Dimension: 6 x 12 cm

Content: Sufi literature written around 1895, a date which coincides with the death of the famous Tijani propagandist al-Hajj 'Umar al-Futi. It was purchased by Muntaka Coomasie for the Jos Museum. The work is about the general background and litanies of the Tijaniyya brotherhood, as well as on the special status of the founder of the order (the 'seal of saints' according to Tijani doctrines), which differentiates him from other Muslim saints.

10. **Title:** *Kitab al-hisab* (The book of calculation)

Author: Yusuf al-Abhami

Copyist: -

Call number: JM/A.MS.868

Acquisition date: 13/9/1963

Number of folios: 5

Ink colour(s): Black
Number of lines per page: 20
Dimension: 14 x 13cm

Content: The work was written in 1809 CE, as recorded at the end of the paper. It describes the different forms of calculations to be used in determining the share of an inheritance due to each heir of a particular deceased.

11. **Title:** *Kitab al-mawarith* (The Book of inheritance)

Author: Anonymous

Copyist: -

Call number: JM/A.MS.526

Acquisition date:

21/3/1962

Number of folios: 17

Ink colour(s): Black

Number of lines per page: 12

Dimension: 11 x 9 cm

Content: The work deals with issues relating to jurisprudence, especially questions of inheritance. It was written in 1926 to serve as a guide to *ulama* for the distribution of wealth among the heirs of a particular family. It is an important source material for the jurists in the field of inheritance.

A work on mysticism written by the emir of Zazzau in the post-Jihad period. It examines the various forms of social vices associated with the human heart. It also describes how people can rescue themselves from moral degeneration.

12. **Title:** -

Author: Ibn al-Sabbagh Wali Dan Marina Muhammad b. al-Hajj b. Baraka b. Ibrahim

Copyist: -

Call number: JM/A.MS.593

Acquisition date: 17/7/1967

Number of folios: 3

Ink colour(s): Black

Number of lines per page: 15

Dimension: 13 x 9 cm

Content: The work is untitled and undated and describes how knowledge can be acquired. The full name of the author is Ibn al-Sabbagh Wali Dan Marina Muhammad b. al-Hajj b. Baraka b. Ibrahim (d. 1640 CE). He was famously described by Shaykh Muhammad Bello as a teacher and mystic and an "ante-chamber of knowledge." He was highly respected by reputable scholars from different parts of Hausaland, and he is considered to be one of the most important scholars of the region in the pre-Jihad period.

13. **Title:** *Qissat al-Nabi* (History of the Prophet)

Author: al-Hafiz al-Muqlabi

Copyist: -

Call number: JM/A.MS.466

Acquisition date: 1970

Number of folios: 9

Ink colour(s): Black and brown

Number of lines per page: 19

Dimension: 15 x 11 cm

Content: The work is a summary of the biography of Prophet Muhammad. It discusses concisely certain landmarks in the life of the Prophet of Islam, from his birth to the period of *Hijra* and up to the battle of *Badr*. The text was written in 1924.

14. **Title:** *Sawt al-qulub* (The voice of the hearts)

Author: Ali b. Amir Zazzau b. Musa

Copyist: -

Call number: JM/A.MS.104

Acquisition date: 1967

Number of folios: 22

Ink colour(s): Black and brown

Number of lines per page: 13

Dimension: 8 x 9 cm

Content: A work on mysticism written by the emir of Zazzau in the post-Jihad period. It examines the various forms of social vices associated with the human heart. It also describes how people can rescue themselves from moral degeneration.

15. **Title:** *Markab al-'awamm ila dar al-Salam* (The steps for the ordinary believer, towards the abode of Peace)

Author: Sa'id ibn Muhammad Bello ibn Uthman b. Fudi

Copyist: -

Call number: JM/A.MS.1230

Acquisition date: 1968

Number of folios: 5

Ink colour(s): Brown

Number of lines per page: 20

Dimension: 15 x 10 cm

Content: The manuscript was written by the son of Shaykh Muhammad Bello after the death of his father in 1837. It details how a believer can struggle to perfect himself and prepare for the

afterlife. It explains how people tend to forget the reason for their existence and what they need to do to get eternal rest.

16. **Title:** *Minhaj al-fara'id fi ma'rifat 'ilm al-tawhid* (The compulsory syllabus in the field of the Oneness of God)

Author: Sheikh Muhammad ibn Aliyu al-Alawi al-Shinqiti

Copyist: -

Call number: JM/A.MS.1259

Acquisition date: 14/11/1964

Number of folios: 22

Ink colour(s): Black

Number of lines per page: 18

Dimension: 10 x 9 cm

Content: This is a work on Islamic theology according to the Ash'ari school. It was written around 1870 CE by Muhammad al-'Alawi. The author was a prolific Sufi scholar of the Tijaniyya order. He contributed to Sufism, poetry, grammar, philosophy and etymology.

17. **Title:** *Shurb al-zulal* (Sipping from the best source)

Name of Author: Muhammad b. al-Hajj 'Abd al-Rahman al-Barnawi

Copyist: -

Call number: JM/A.MS.81

Acquisition date: 26/2/1960

Number of folios: 5

Ink colour(s): Black

Number of lines per page: 13

Dimension: 8 x 9 cm

Content: The book was written in 1810 CE, a few years after the *Jihad* of Usman Dan Fodio. It describes the conditions that apply to somebody wishing to be a qualified preacher, and gives guidelines about how preaching should be conducted. It also highlights how Muslims must behave while they are with their teachers, with Muslim friends and with unbelievers.

18. **Title:** *Taqyidat 'Umar al-Wali* (The writings of Umar al-Wali)

Author: 'Umar al-Wali b. Ahmad

Copyist: Shehun Kasuwa

Call number: JM/A.MS.874

Acquisition date: 13/9/1963

Number of folios: 2

Ink colour(s): Black

Number of lines per page: 16

Dimension: 7 x 8 cm

Content: The book provides a list of works written by the famous scholar and Tijani mystic 'Umar al-Wali b. Ahmad al-Fullani al-Zakzaki (1835-1897). The work seems to be part of a *wasiyya* (counsel) written by the author for the benefit of his closest disciples and relations. It seems that most of the manuscript was lost. The author was of Borno Fulani ancestry. His great-great grandfather Ahmad came to Zaria during the reign of Muhammad Sani (1847-54), and was appointed *Galadima* . Umar studied in Zaria with Salatki Sada, an advisor to the emir of Zaria's judicial council, in Gwandu with Ahmad Sa'ad, and with the Sufi teacher al-Hajj Nuh. He was initiated into the Tijaniyya order by Muhammad al-Hashimi al-Wadawi whose *silsila* (chain of initiation) was through Umar al-Futi.

19. **Title:** *Ma'rifat Allah* (Knowing God)

Author: Muhammad b. Sulayman

Copyist: 'Ali Ibrahim

Call number: JM/A.MS.849

Acquisition date: 22/8/1963

Number of folios: 12

Ink colour(s): Black

Number of lines per page: 14

Dimension: 9 x 8 cm

Content: The work was written in 1810 when the Tijaniyya Sufi order began to penetrate Nigeria from North Africa. It discusses how the knowledge of God can be understood by his creatures.

20. **Title:** *Kitab shi'r Imru'l-Qays* (The book of the poetry of Imr al-Qays)

Author: Imr al-Qaysb. Hujr al-Kindi

Copyist: -

The work was written in 1810 when the Tijaniyya Sufi order began to penetrate Nigeria from North Africa. It discusses how the knowledge of God can be understood by his creatures It also describes how people can rescue themselves from moral degeneration.

Call number: JM/A.MS.428
Acquisition date: 20/6/1961
Number of folios: 10
Ink colour(s): Black
Number of lines per page: 10
Dimension: 12 x 10 cm

Content: This collection preserves one of most famous legacies of the Arab pre-Islamic period. The poems in this collection were written by Imr al-Qays (sixth century), who is considered to be the leading poet of pre-Islamic Arabia. These poems also provide important information on the socio-political and economic life of the people of the Arabian Peninsula before the coming of Islam to the region.

21. Title: *Tabsirat al-nuzzar* (The sighting of those who carefully observe)

Author: Idris b. Khalid, first Qadi of Gwandu (flourished ca. 1830)

Copyist: Awwal Halilu

Call number: JM/A.MS.417

Acquisition date: 19/4/1961

Number of folios: 38

Ink colour (s): Black and brown

Number of lines per page: 9

Dimension: 6 x 7 cm

Content: According to John O. Hunwick's *Arabic literature of Africa* (vol. 2, p. 219), this work was written around 1822. It is a poem on the subject of inheritance according to Islamic law. The manuscript is available in different repositories of Nigeria. It can be found in Ibadan, Sokoto, Jos, Kaduna, Kano and Zaria, bearing different codes or reference numbers. The copy of the manuscript in Jos shows some degree of decay, with the last three pages of the

work being partially damaged by termites, but this manuscript is still repairable using modern techniques of mending and preservation.

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Notes

- 1 Ajamiis is a term used to describe non-Arabic languages written in Arabic script. Examples of West African languages that have a written tradition in Arabic script include Kanuri, Fulfulde, Hausa, Mande, Nupe, Songhai, Wolof and Yoruba, as well as many others.
- 2 Bodam 2009.
- 3 Oseni 2009.
- 4 Muhammad 1976.
- 5 Biddle 2008: 10-12.
- 6 Plenderleith 1971: 312.
- 7 Hunwick 1996.