

Notes and News

A Study of Old Kanembu in Early West African Qur'anic Manuscripts and Islamic Recitations (Tarjumo) in the Light of Kanuri-Kanembu Dialects spoken around Lake Chad

In early 2009, an international team of specialists were awarded funding to carry out a 36-month project as part of a joint framework of agreement between the German Research Foundation (DFG) and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) to support collaboration between German and UK-based humanities researchers. The project is headed by Professor Roland Kießling, Professor Michael Friedrich (Asien-Afrika-Institut, Universität Hamburg) and Professor Philip J. Jaggar (SOAS, University of London).

Despite the fact that a number of major languages of sub-Saharan Africa have a long and rich history of writing in Arabic script (Ajami), ancient manuscripts written in local languages are extremely rare. However, in the late 1950s, some copies of the Qur'an were discovered in northern Nigeria, written in Arabic, with commentaries in an archaic variety of Kanuri-Kanembu, an important West African language spoken around Lake Chad, dating back to the 16th century and representing one of the earliest written examples of a sub-Saharan language. Apart from

this variety of Old Kanembu, now represented in a corpus of 3,200 digital pages, there is another variety known as Tarjumo, which is regarded as sacred and survives in local (i.e. North-East Nigerian) Islamic recitations.

The aim of the project is to document and analyse this virtually unknown African manuscript culture in its linguistic and social setting, and explore previously unresearched phenomena, i.e. how Old Kanembu and Tarjumo relate historically to linguistically distinct modern Kanuri-Kanembu, and what they can tell us about the migrations and linguistic-cultural assimilation and integration in the Lake Chad basin. The project is drawing on preliminary results from an earlier AHRC-funded project 'Early Nigerian Qur'anic manuscripts' (<http://kanurimanuscripts.soas.ac.uk/>), and cooperates with the research group 'Manuscript cultures in Asia and Africa' in Hamburg.

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Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies (COMSt)

In June 2009, the European Science Foundation launched a five-year Research Networking Programme in Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies. The idea is to bring together European scholars working on manuscripts from different branches of Oriental studies (with the focus on the Mediterranean and North African cultural areas of the 'codex' manuscript culture) in order to compare experiences and research results in the history of written civilization, manuscript cataloguing, textual and material analysis as well as issues of manuscript preservation, conservation and restoration. The ensuing cross-cultural academic dialogue will increase awareness of what is being done in the field and make it possible to elaborate unified methodologies in Oriental manuscript studies.

The COMSt Network is guided by a Steering Committee formed by the representatives of all ten funding countries and chaired by Professor Dr Alessandro Bausi of the University

of Hamburg. It is coordinated by Evgenia Sokolinskaia of the Hiob Ludolf Centre for Ethiopian Studies at the University of Hamburg.

More than sixty scholars from fifteen countries currently involved in the network work in five teams. (1) Material aspects: codicology and palaeography. (2) Manuscripts as text witnesses: philology as textual criticism. (3) Digital approaches to manuscript studies. (4) Manuscript cataloguing. (5) Manuscript preservation. The teams meet in regular workshops, and there is also an ongoing cross-team discussion. Two larger conferences are also part of the programme: the Launching Conference which took place in Hamburg on 1–3 December 2009, and the Closing Conference that will be held towards the end of the project in May 2014.

For more information, please see:

<http://www1.uni-hamburg.de/COMSt/>

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