

Article

Manuscript Culture of West Africa*

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1. Preliminary remarks

In 1997, the well-known Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. visited the Mamma Haïdara library, one of the most important private collections of manuscripts of the ‘fabled’ city of Timbuktu. Seeing the manuscripts held there, immediately ‘[h]e wept like a child, and when I [the curator of the library, Abdel Kader Haïdara] asked him why, he said he had been taught at school that Africa had only oral culture and that he had been teaching the same thing at Harvard for years and now he knew all that was wrong’.¹

For a long time, it had been assumed that a civilisation existed in the sub-Saharan region which was exclusively characterised by an oral tradition.² However, the number of manuscripts that have come to light over the past decades calls this assumption into question. At present, the only comprehensive estimate that one may make regarding the number of manuscripts (i.e. books, letters, documents, etc.) existing in West Africa is based on the *World Survey of Islamic Manuscripts* realised by the Al-Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation.³ Based on an analysis of this source, it is possible to roughly assess the number of manuscripts listed in West African collections. This estimate ignores the manuscripts hosted in Western – i.e. European and North American – and North African collections.

Benin, 2 collections, 30 manuscripts (vol. 1, 83–86).

Burkina Faso, 14 collections, 2,342 manuscripts (One collection has no indication of the number of manuscripts included) (vol. 4, 43–54).

Cameroon, 2 collections, 104 manuscripts (vol. 1, 145–146).

Gambia, 18 libraries, 1494 mss (v. 4, 135–146).

Ghana, 8 collections, 375 manuscripts (vol. 1, 367–373).

Guinea, 17 collections, 2797 manuscripts (vol. 4, 153–164).

Guinea Bissau, 11 collections, 703 manuscripts (vol. 4, 167–173).

Ivory Coast, 19 collections, 5,171 manuscripts (vol. 2, 117–132).

Liberia, no collection surveyed.

Mali, 17 collections, more than 5,500 mss (the number of manuscripts in one collection is missing) (vol. 2, 273–288).

Mauritania, 42 collections, more than 27,000 mss (many collections give only approximate numbers) (vol. 4, 282–307).

Niger, 70 collections, 3,537 manuscripts (vol. 2, 389–405).

Nigeria, 127 collections, more than 24,000 manuscripts (lower estimate: not including some collections described as having ‘hundreds’ or ‘thousands’ of manuscripts and other collections that show no indication of the number of manuscripts) (vol. 3, 237–245 and vol. 4, 311–349).

Senegal, 14 collections, 1,333 manuscripts (the estimate does not include five of these collections that are described as having from ‘hundreds’ to ‘thousands’ of manuscripts) (vol. 3, 51–63).

Sierra Leone, 13 collections, 754 manuscripts (in 12 collections; the number of manuscripts in one collection is missing) (vol. 3, 65–75).

Togo, 9 collections, 1,114 manuscripts (vol. 3, 237–245).

Unfortunately, the *World Survey of Islamic Manuscripts* dates to the early 1990s. Indeed, it was in the middle of that decade that most West African manuscripts came to light after a long period where they had literally ‘disappeared’.⁴ An example from Mali may help us understand how that number is to be revised. The Centre des Hautes Études et de Recherches Islamiques Ahmed Baba – IHERI-AB (formerly Centre de

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¹ Baxter 2005.

² This assumption is epitomised by Jan Vansina’s statement that Africa is a civilization of the ‘spoken word’, see Vansina 1987, 165.

³ *World Survey of Islamic Manuscripts* 1992–94.

⁴ On the phenomenon of the ‘disappearance’ of West African manuscripts, mainly due to the fear of manuscript expropriations on the eve of the colonial period, see Haïdara 2008, 266–267.

Documentation et de Recherches Ahmed Baba – CEDRAB) is described in the *World Survey of Islamic Manuscripts* as hosting 2,174 manuscripts (vol 2, 287), while in 2008 the registered number totalled 20,000.⁵

More recent estimates are quite speculative. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, UNESCO suggested that the number of manuscripts originating from the mere region of Timbuktu could amount to 60,000⁶. Even more recently, the aforesaid Haïdara increased this estimate to 101,820 manuscripts, stored in at least 408 private and public collections, and suggested that similar estimates would probably also apply to other regions of the ancient Islamic tradition, such as Ségou, Gao, Kayes, Mopti and Kidal.⁷

Notwithstanding the above numbers, scholars have neglected this cultural heritage and only a few local works have been studied, published and translated. Such is the case with the two well-known chronicles of Timbuktu, the *Ta'rikh al-sūdān* by al-Sa'dī⁸ and the *Ta'rikh al-fattāsh* of contested authorship⁹, with some of the works of the triumvirate of the Sokoto jihad, 'Uthmān bin Fūdī, 'Abd Allāh bin Fūdī and Muḥammad Bello,¹⁰ and, more recently, with the *Faṭḥ al-shakūr* by Muḥammad al-Bartilī¹¹ and with the *Faṭḥ al-ṣamad* by Muḥammad b. 'Alī Perejo¹². But why did these manuscripts not attract scholarly interest as one can observe in other cultural contexts?

2. The disqualification of a heritage

The neglect of such a heritage originates from what John O. Hunwick and Alida Boye describe as the 'unfortunate divide between Middle Eastern Studies and African Studies' that is 'a legacy of orientalism and colonialism'.¹³ In Islamic studies, one of the focuses of Middle Eastern Studies, an ideological framework advocating a hierarchised vision of the Muslim world still dominates. According to the Italian scholar Alessandro Bausani who criticises this approach,

in Western scholarly production there has been a tendency to organize hierarchically the Muslim world, dividing it in a supposed 'heartland' and some 'peripheral areas' such as Central and Southeast Asia as well as Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa. In such 'marginal areas', Islam would bear so-called 'pagan traces', i.e. local beliefs that survived Islamisation and entered Islam, changing it into something quite different to its supposed 'authentic' nature.¹⁴ This is the theoretical paradigm invoked by Jean Schmitz based on the 'separation of the African Muslims from the wider Islamic world and on the ethnicisation of Islam'.¹⁵ During the colonial period, Western – especially French – specialists of West African colonies devised a theory that excluded Africa from the wider Islamic world. Paul Marty epitomised the theory suggesting the existence of 'a religion which was distinguished by its wholesale adoption of pre-Islamic customs'.¹⁶ As a result, scholars of Islam treated Africa as an 'insignificant backwater isolated from the so-called Islamic heartland'.¹⁷

In turn, African historiography was born as an independent discipline along with the fight of the African nations against the colonial rule.¹⁸ African historiography opposes itself to colonial historiography, written to support colonial powers and deny African people a past prior to the arrival of the colonists. African historians of the post-colonial period based their methodology on the oral tradition, perceived as the unique autochthonous method for transmitting knowledge, the only source that can be invoked to discover the 'real' history of Africa. The oral tradition was opposed to written sources, which were believed to be alien to West African culture. Within this romantic search for 'African authenticity', Africanists found in the supposed resistance of the 'Africans' to Islamisation,¹⁹ in the words of Scott S. Reese, 'a testament to the strength and vitality of African social and cultural systems that resisted the imposition of [presumed] foreign belief structures [like Islam]'.²⁰

As a consequence, both 'scholars of Islam' and 'Africanists', who could have been attracted by the manuscript tradition of West Africa, perceived this cultural heritage as 'alien'. The former did so because it pertained to a region

⁵ Ould Youbba 2008, 289. Today's estimate amounts to more than 40,000 manuscripts.

⁶ Gaudio 2002, 280.

⁷ Haïdara 2008, 265-266.

⁸ Edition and French translation Houdas 1898–1900; English translation Hunwick 1999.

⁹ Edition and French translation Houdas and Delafosse 1913.

¹⁰ See, e.g., 'Uthmān b. Fūdī, *Kitāb al-farq*, edition and English translation Hiskett 1960; 'Abd Allāh b. Fūdī, *Tazyīn al-waraqāt*, edition and English translation Hiskett 1963; Muḥammad Bello, *Ḥashiya 'alā muqaddimat 'Idā' al-nusūkh*, partial French translation Delafosse 1912.

¹¹ French translation El Hamel 2002.

¹² Edition and French translation Bohas et al. 2011.

¹³ Hunwick, and Boye 2008, 11.

¹⁴ Bausani 1984.

¹⁵ Quoted in Hamès 2002, 170. (transl. from French).

¹⁶ Quoted in Harrison 1988, 203.

¹⁷ Reese 2004, 2.

¹⁸ Triulzi 1979, 5.

¹⁹ Maurice Delafosse stated that the 'Negros' were 'inherently' hostile to Islam (quoted in Harrison 1988, 146).

²⁰ Reese 2004, 2.

perceived as being situated outside the ‘real’ Islamic world. The latter, because ‘Islam and its manuscripts cannot be considered other than a foreign element, an intruder’.²¹

3. A survey of catalogues and handlists of local manuscript collections²²

Two essential research tools to explore West African manuscript and literary production have been developed: the West African Arabic Manuscript Database (WAAMD) by Charles C. Stewart and the Arabic Literature of Africa project (ALA), which was edited by the above-mentioned Hunwick.

The WAAMD was launched in the 1980s.²³ It is a bilingual (Arabic and English) database including a search engine. In its 3.0 version (<http://www.westafricanmanuscripts.org>), the database contains descriptions of more than 20,000 manuscripts included in eleven different collections. New manuscript descriptions are being added thanks to the collaboration with the London-based Al-Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation. Given the fact that the manuscripts are not described *ex novo*, but the entries are compiled using some of the available catalogues of the collections, the degree of detail of the WAAMD entries depends on the information found in the original catalogue. As a result, there is a certain degree of heterogeneity, and of the thirty-one data fields less than ten are fully filled out. As for the texts, only the main topical indications are reported (Sufism, Theology, Jurisprudence, etc.).

Hunwick’s ALA²⁴ was largely inspired by the work of the well-known Arabist Carl Brockelmann, i.e. *Geschichte der Arabischen Litteratur*.²⁵ The second and fourth volumes of the ALA are dedicated to West Africa and include detailed information about the writings of the authors from this region, as well as notes on works that are known only through quotations or fragments. To this end, the authors analysed all available sources such as indices, monographic studies and catalogues, including catalogues of collections that are available only *in situ* at the local libraries. The aim of this project is to produce a general outline of the literature from West Africa rather than a catalogue of catalogues. Therefore, it stands to reason that the ALA provides no codicological details or information about the manuscripts’ preservation conditions, numbers of folia/pages, etc.

²¹ Hamès 2002, 170 (transl. from French).

²² The Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures (CSMC) at the University of Hamburg hosts a complete collection of these materials, either in hard or digital copy.

²³ For an analysis of the WAAMD, see Stewart 2008.

²⁴ Hunwick et al. 1995 and Hunwick et al. 2003. For a presentation of the project see Hunwick 2008.

²⁵ Brockelmann 1898–1902 and 1937–42.

Starting with the manuscript collections referred to in ALA and WAAMD, I provide a survey of published handlists, inventories and catalogues of these materials. The overview omits any reference to unpublished materials, such as accession lists or indices of manuscripts that are available *in situ*, or to collections that are not specifically devoted to West Africa and only include a few occasional manuscripts from the region.

3.1 Chronological overview: 1950s–1970s

The first pioneering works on West African collections date back to the early 20th century when Louis Massignon presented an index of selected manuscripts from the inventory compiled by the French colonial administrator Henry Gaden of Sīdiyya Bābā (1862–1924) family library, one of the most important in Mauritania.²⁶ In the 1950s, Georges Vajda and H. F. C. (Abdullahi) Smith briefly described some manuscripts included in the two main West African collections kept in France, the Bibliothèque ‘Umarienne (also called Fonds Archinard) at the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris (BnF)²⁷ and the Fonds de Gironcourt at the Institut de France.²⁸ The latter collection was re-analysed in the following decade by Hunwick and Hassan I. Gwarzo.²⁹

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the first analyses of manuscript collections housed in West African countries came to light in the former British colonies. W. E. N. Kensdale published a handlist of the Arabic Manuscripts of the University Library of Ibadan, Nigeria.³⁰ Since then, the collection has expanded to up to more than 600 items.³¹ In the same Nigerian city, the Centre of Arabic Documentation of Ibadan started a project of collecting manuscripts in 1964. The policy of the project was to borrow manuscripts, copy them and return them to their owners, thus the collection exclusively contains microfilms. A list of its items regularly appeared on the centre’s *Research Bulletin* until the 1980–1982 issue, describing 438 manuscripts,³² but the number of manuscripts that Hunwick recorded at the end of the 1980s is

²⁶ Massignon 1909.

²⁷ Vajda 1950; Smith 1959. The publications have been implemented by Ghali et al. and the online catalogue of the Bibliothèque nationale de France.

²⁸ Smith 1958.

²⁹ Hunwick, and Gwarzo 1967. This contribution, as well as Smith 1958, are superseded by my catalogue of the de Gironcourt collection, see Nobili 2013.

³⁰ Kensdale 1955–58; superseded by Hunwick and Muhammad 2001.

³¹ Hunwick 1988, 377–78. Hunwick and Muhammad 2001, however, only list 422 manuscripts.

³² Arabic Manuscripts at the Center of Arabic Documentation, University of Ibadan (Nigeria). Accession list.

522.³³ Hunwick also noted that the microfilms were in a very bad condition.³⁴ In the same *Research Bulletin*, in 1966–67, Murray Last published a short list of the manuscripts included in the National Archives of Kaduna.³⁵ In Zaria, the Northern History Research Scheme of the Ahmadu Bello University established a manuscript collection whose belongings were listed and briefly described in successive reports of the project³⁶ and in a handlist prepared in 1979, which was only published in 1984.³⁷ However, the collection has grown ever since.³⁸ To complete the picture of the research initiatives dedicated to Nigerian collections in the 1960s, I would like to mention Aida S. Arif and Ahmed M. Abu Hakima's inventory of manuscripts kept in the Jos Museum and in the Lugard Hall Library, Kaduna.³⁹

As for Ghana, Osman Eshaka Boyo, Thomas Hodgkin and Ivor Wilks published a list of the manuscripts kept at the University of Ghana.⁴⁰ In 1965, thanks mainly to the efforts of K. O. Odoom and J. J. Holden, short descriptions of selected parts from the collection started appearing in a series of instalments in the consecutive issues of the *Research Review* published by the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana.⁴¹ As with the Centre of Arabic Documentation of Ibadan, the University of Ghana also pursued a strategy of leaving the originals with the owners; the collection is composed of copies or photographs of actual manuscripts, totalling approximately 500.

The first attempts to describe collections of manuscripts housed in what was formerly known as French West Africa date back to the mid-1960s. The first to be described was a collection housed by the most important centre of research in the region, the Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire, formerly Institut Français d'Afrique Noire (IFAN). The *Catalogue des manuscrits de l'IFAN* (actually an inventory) was prepared

by Thierno Diallo, Mame Bara M'Backé, Mirjana Trifkovic, and Boubacar Barry⁴² and was supplemented in the following decade by Ravane El-Hadji Mbaye and Babacar Mbaye.⁴³ More recently, Khadim Mbacké and Thierno Ka published a new inventory including the manuscripts which had been acquired by the institute since 1975.⁴⁴ During the same period Mokhtar Ould Hamidoun and Adam Heymoski produced a provisional handlist of Mauritanian manuscripts including approximately 500 authors and more than 2,000 titles.⁴⁵

The latter two contributions are the only ones that appeared in former French colonies until the 1980s, revealing an astonishing difference as to what happened in Ghana and Nigeria. The explanation of the backwardness in French West African manuscript studies is related, as convincingly suggested by Zakari D. Issifou, to the different policy of colonisation pursued by France and Britain. The French policy of 'assimilation' excluded any medium of acquisition and transmission of knowledge other than the French language, while the British indirect rule, which exploited the cooperation of native authorities, preserved and even stimulated traditional forms of learning and power.⁴⁶ Therefore, it comes as no surprise that at the end of the British colonial rule and during the first years of independence, scholars like Hunwick, Last, Smith or Wilks, as already mentioned above, – who have been among the most prolific authors of West African historiography – were active at universities in Ghana and Nigeria.

3.2 Chronological overview: 1970s–2000s

While the 1970s did not offer any further contribution in terms of description of West African manuscript collections, the 1980s were characterised by interesting research projects. In 1980, Elias N. Saad briefly presented some of the approximately 200 manuscripts of the Paden collection of the Northwestern University,⁴⁷ while in 1984 the collection of Arabic manuscripts of the Institut de recherches en sciences humaines, Université Abdou Moumouni in Niamey,

³³ Hunwick 1988, 378.

³⁴ Ibidem.

³⁵ Last 1966 and Last 1967; superseded by Hunwick, and Muhammad 1995–1997.

³⁶ I have been unable to consult these reports and insofar rely on Hunwick 1988, 380 for the information provided.

³⁷ Al-Bīlī 1984.

³⁸ Hunwick 1988, 380.

³⁹ Arif, and Abu Hakima 1965.

⁴⁰ Boyo et al. 1962. Unfortunately, I have not yet been able to consult this publication.

⁴¹ *Arabic Manuscripts at the Institute of African Studies*, University of Ghana. Accession list. In 1993, the late Wilks donated to the Herskovits Library copies of manuscripts from the collection of the University of Ghana. The inventory has thus been superseded by the online catalogue of West African collections at the Northwestern University.

⁴² Diallo et al. 1966.

⁴³ Mbaye, and Mbaye 1975.

⁴⁴ Mbacké, and Ka 1994.

⁴⁵ Ould Hamidoun, and Hymowski 1965–1966.

⁴⁶ Issifou 2002, 34.

⁴⁷ Saad 1980. The publication has now been superseded by the online catalogue of West African collections at the Northwestern University. Since the 1960s, Northwestern University has been the institution of affiliation of several scholars engaged in the study of West African manuscripts, the likes of the above-mentioned Hunwick and Wilks, as well as John Paden. As a result of their work, the Northwestern library houses today an important number of manuscripts.

was introduced by Ahmed M. Kani.⁴⁸ In the following year, Nourredine Ghali, Mohammed Mahibou and Louis Brenner published the inventory of the West African manuscripts of the BnF.⁴⁹ After the completion of this catalogue, the BnF acquired more manuscripts from West Africa, which Marie-Geneviève Guesdon analysed in her short description of new acquisitions in the early 2000s.⁵⁰ More recently, this supplementary information has been incorporated in the online catalogue of the BnF (section 'Manuscrits d'Afrique sub-saharienne' at <http://archivesetmanuscrits.bnf.fr/cdc.html>).

The 1980s to early 1990s saw a surge of interest in the study of Mauritanian manuscripts. First, the German scholar Ulrich Rebstock accomplished the amazing task of microfilming 2,239 manuscripts from Mauritanian libraries and completed, in 1985, an inventory of these materials that was published in 1989.⁵¹ From this fieldwork, the Universities of Freiburg and Tübingen developed the Oriental Manuscript Resource (OMAR), a database available at <http://omar.uni-freiburg.de> which includes full reproductions of the manuscripts described.⁵² At the same time, Stewart published two inventories of Mauritanian collections. The first concerns the manuscripts of the Institut Mauritanien de Recherche Scientifique (IMRS),⁵³ a collection started in the middle of the preceding decade by the first director of the Institut, Abdellah Ould Babacar.⁵⁴ Stewart also produced the catalogue of the library of Sīdiyya Bābā, a library that had grown substantially in the twentieth century thanks to the activities of Sīdiyya's son Harūn (1919–1977).⁵⁵

The mid-1990s were marked by the increasing public attention to manuscripts preserved in West Africa, probably due to the democratisation of Mali that 'restored citizens their democratic rights, among which was the right to establish foundations, companies and private societies'⁵⁶ in order to promote families' manuscript heritage. In this climate, Timbuktu and its manuscript collections acquired a new appeal. The fascination with the city and its 'hidden

treasures' culminated in a series of BBC documentaries.⁵⁷ Subsequently, many private libraries opened in Mali as well as in other West African countries, such as Mauritania.

While quite a number of contributions promoting these libraries have been published in recent years,⁵⁸ the main progress in the field of cataloguing and manuscript studies was achieved by the Al-Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation's launching of an important project of handlists and catalogues of West African collections that has covered many West African regions to date: Ghana, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal. This project has so far analysed the collections of the National Archives of Kaduna (see above),⁵⁹ IHERI-AB (formerly Centre de Documentation et de Recherches Ahmed Baba – CEDRAB),⁶⁰ the towns of Šinqīt and Wadān in Mauritania,⁶¹ the libraries of Šaykh S. M. Cisse al-Ḥājj Malick Sy and Ibrāhīm Niasse in Senegal,⁶² the Ghana Libraries,⁶³ the Mamma Haidara library of Timbuktu,⁶⁴ the University of Ibadan (see above),⁶⁵ the manuscripts of the Mauritanian towns of Ni'mah and Wallatah,⁶⁶ the manuscripts of the Institut de Recherche en Sciences Humaines (IRSH) of Niamey,⁶⁷ and the al-Zeiniyyah Library in Boujbeïha, Mali.⁶⁸ The Al-Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation descriptions have rendered some of the inventories and handlists discussed on the preceding pages obsolete and represent the most up-to-date knowledge on West-African manuscripts.⁶⁹

Another relevant contribution of recent years includes the online catalogue of the West African collections of manuscripts of the Herskovits Library of African Studies at the Northwestern University (<http://digital.library.northwestern.edu/arbms/index.html>). Initiated in the early 1990s by John Hunwick, Hamid Bobboyi and Muhammad S. Umar, the catalogue follows the criteria of WAAMD. It includes the descriptions of manuscripts from West Africa

⁵⁷ Krätli 2011, 331.

⁵⁸ See, for example, the presentations included in Gaudio 2002, Jeppie, and Diagne 2008.

⁵⁹ Hunwick, and Muhammad, 1995–1997.

⁶⁰ Ould Ely et al. 1995–1998.

⁶¹ Ould M. Yahya, and Rebstock 1997.

⁶² Kane 1997.

⁶³ Muhammad, and Zaki 2000.

⁶⁴ Haïdara, and Sayyid 2000–2003.

⁶⁵ Hunwick and Muhammad 2001.

⁶⁶ Ould M. Yahya et al. 2003.

⁶⁷ Mouleye, and Sayyid 2004–2008.

⁶⁸ Haïdara, and Sayyid 2006.

⁶⁹ See fn. 31, 36 and 49.

⁴⁸ Kani 1984. Important historical information has been added by Fadel 1996. The publications have been superseded by Mouleye, and Sayyid 2004–2008.

⁴⁹ Ghali et al. 1985.

⁵⁰ Guesdon 2002.

⁵¹ Rebstock 1989.

⁵² The OMAR hosts today reproductions of 2600 manuscripts.

⁵³ Stewart et al. 1992.

⁵⁴ Stewart 1991, 180.

⁵⁵ Stewart 1994. See also Stewart 1991.

⁵⁶ Haïdara 2008, 268.

forming the ‘Umar Falke Collection, the John Paden Collection, the John Hunwick Collection, the University of Ghana Collection, and other documents from different sources. The descriptions have recently been updated for the online catalogue by Muhammad S. Umar, Andrea Brigaglia, and Zachary Wright.

More recently, Carmela Baffioni has edited a scanty handlist of the Ahel Habott library of Chinguetti including more than 1,000 items.⁷⁰ A similar item is the repertoire of the Fondo Kati library in Timbuktu, published by the Iranian Grand Library of the Ayatullah al-Uzma Marashi al-Najafi, who also published the catalogue of the Imam al-Suyuti Library and another volume of the catalogues of the Mamma Haidara Library.⁷¹ Finally, two other collections kept in France have been described. The first collection is the so-called Petit fonds Archinard (which should not be confused with the Fonds Archinard kept at the BnF, see above), housed by the Musée national des Arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie [formerly Musée de la France d’outre-mer].⁷² A handlist of this collection of Arabic West African manuscripts was produced in 2000/2001 by Jillali El Adnani.⁷³ The second collection has been described in the catalogue of the Fonds de Gironcourt of the Institut de France, which was published in 2013.⁷⁴

4. Conclusion

In spite of the seemingly high number of contributions under review, the West African manuscript heritage, a huge legacy of the Islamic civilisation that has flourished in the region for centuries, remains largely unexplored. All the initiatives described in this overview show, in Graziano Krätli’s words, a substantial ‘imbalance between the ‘intellectual’ and ‘physical’ dimension in the study of West African manuscripts’.⁷⁵ Some work has been done in order to explore the Arabic literacy developed in the region, ranging from rough translations of texts to critical editions in order to satisfy the African scholars’ thirst for new sources that can cast light on the history and culture of West Africa.⁷⁶ But none of these

studies has addressed the material aspects of a manuscript. Among the few exceptions are the rare analyses of specific Qur’ān handwritten copies,⁷⁷ or non Qur’ānic manuscripts,⁷⁸ the general essays by Hamès and Seyni Moumouni on the West African manuscript tradition,⁷⁹ or the presentations of the Timbuktu manuscripts by John Hunwick and Alida J. Boye (addressed, however, to a non-specialist audience)⁸⁰ or those of the Nigerian city of Ilorin.⁸¹ Some contributions focused on the analysis of the paper used in West African manuscripts,⁸² as well as of the inks⁸³ or covers⁸⁴ used, and more recent publications address the problem of the Arabic scripts employed in West Africa.⁸⁵ Krätli’s and Lydon’s collection of essays *The Trans-Saharan Book Trade*⁸⁶ is the first attempt to study the West African manuscript as both a container of one or more texts and a physical object that reflects the cultural context in which it was created, including the materials, the techniques, skills, circulation, collecting, etc. No further research has been carried out in this field, and a lot of issues relating to the peculiarities of West African manuscripts remain unexplored.

I conclude by quoting once again Krätli’s words: ‘any full understanding and appreciation of this unique cultural heritage, let alone any serious attempt at studying or preserving it, should roughly consider all the material, technological, economic, cultural and intellectual aspects of book production, circulation, consumption and preservation in the area’.⁸⁷

⁷⁰ Baffioni 2006.

⁷¹ Haidara et al. 2010; Haidara et al. 2011; Haidara et al. 2012.

⁷² Today kept at the Quai Branly Museum.

⁷³ Adnani 2000–2001.

⁷⁴ Nobili 2013. For a preliminary presentation of the de Gironcourt collection see Nobili 2008–2009.

⁷⁵ Krätli 2011, 329.

⁷⁶ This scholarly production spans from the late 19th century (see, for example, Houdas 1898–1900) to the recent project Valorisation et Edition Critique des Manuscrits Arabes Sub-Sahariens (VECMAS) promoted by George Bohas (see <http://vecmas-tombouctou.ens-lyon.fr>).

⁷⁷ Abbott 1938; Brockett 1987; Stanley 1999; Jimoh 2007; Hamès 2009; Brigaglia 2011; Bondarev 2014.

⁷⁸ Johnson 2010.

⁷⁹ Hamès 2002; Moumouni 2007a and 2007b.

⁸⁰ Hunwick, and Boye 2008.

⁸¹ Reichmuth 2011.

⁸² Bloom 2008; Waltz 1980–1982 and Waltz 2011.

⁸³ Biddle 2011.

⁸⁴ Viola 2009.

⁸⁵ Bondarev 2014; Nobili 2011; Nobili 2012; Brigaglia 2011; Brigaglia & Nobili 2014.

⁸⁶ Krätli, and Lydon 2011.

⁸⁷ Krätli 2011, 340.

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