

# A West African Arabic manuscript database

*Charles C Stewart*

Nearly 15 years ago I had an opportunity to microfilm a private library of Arabic materials in Boutilimit in southern Mauritania built, initially, by a scholar who had spent a dozen years studying under Kunta tutelage in the Timbuktu region, 1812–24. This project led to my developing the first version of a bilingual manuscript catalogue database and search engine to record the roughly 110 000 folios of material.<sup>1</sup> That particular effort was written up and hard copies of the collection description were subsequently made available to a number of libraries, as was the national collection at the Mauritanian national repository for Arabic manuscripts when the software became available in 1991. Subsequent to entering those two collections, others were added in the early 1990s before the project nearly came to a halt while my attentions were focused elsewhere. Only in November 2006 was the material transferred to a new platform, an easily accessible, internet-based site with an enhanced search engine. In this database we have amassed the largest single collection of titles and authors (over 20 000 extant Arabic manuscript sources) from West African collections, focused in the main on the libraries in and around Timbuktu. This chapter will propose that this database be utilised as a beginning for a universal, online resource for Sahelian Arabic-script manuscript identification.

The literary heritage of Timbuktu has been greatly celebrated in recent conferences, on websites, and by the generous subvention by organisations like the al-Furqan Foundation for preserving and cataloguing existing libraries in that region. From my own experience, one of the challenges with identifying local manuscript fragments, and of gaining some relative sense of the value of particular collections, is our lack of more than a notional feel for what constitutes standard (not to mention extraordinary) scholarly activity in particular collections. Indeed, how to assess the Arabic literary heritage of pre-colonial West Africa remains elusive in the absence of a comparative base for evaluating individual collections, complicated even further by the recent (near exclusive) attention that has been heaped on Timbuktu's rich heritage at the expense

One of the challenges of identifying local manuscript fragments, and of gaining some relative sense of the value of particular collections, is our lack of more than a notional feel for what constitutes standard (not to mention extraordinary) scholarly activity in particular collections.

of scholarly activity to the west and east of the Niger Bend. In effect, the West African Arabic manuscript database provides an anecdote for these problems and moves us forward in our efforts to identify partial records and author names. As other document collections are added to it – and this chapter serves as an invitation for additional materials to be so contributed – its value as a ‘baseline’ for assessing Arabic scholarship not only in Timbuktu but across the West African Sahel will be enhanced.

The database presented here began with the first version of our Arabic Manuscript Management System (AMMS), created in 1987 as a finding aid for an Arabic manuscript microfilm project that preserved over 100 000 folios of material from the private library of Haroun ould Sidiyya in Boutilimit, Mauritania.<sup>2</sup> Our object then was to produce a bilingual hard-copy finding aid for that collection, which consisted of diverse types of material ranging from letters and notes to local histories and classical treatises in the Islamic sciences. Our goal was a simple and quick computer-generated entry system using untransliterated Latin letters alongside Arabic entries that could be equally accessible to readers (and input specialists) using either Arabic or English. Our end product was a bilingual catalogue with indices that would be user-friendly in both languages. The original AMMS program was written using an early Arabdos software to create 31 possible fields for entries about each manuscript and with an indexing capability to cross-reference and locate up to three fields in either language. Two years later the same software was employed to input a finding aid and generate indices for the Mauritanian national manuscript collection at the Institut Mauritanien de Recherche Scientifique (IMRS).<sup>3</sup> The possibility of expanding the number of entries to include other West African collections prompted a second version of AMMS, on the same platform, with the capability of merging files into a single database. Subsequently, in the early 1990s other published catalogues and hand-lists from West African collections housed in Niger,<sup>4</sup> Paris,<sup>5</sup> Timbuktu<sup>6</sup> and Evanston, Illinois,<sup>7</sup> were entered in the database. Taken together, over 19 000 records from these 6 collections were recorded in the AMMSvers.2 database, possibly a majority of the extant titles for the West African Sahel (excepting correspondence) at the time.

The research potential of a union index of authors, nicknames, titles and subject matter in these collections of West Africa’s Arabic literary heritage, with the capability of expansion as other collections are uncovered, became obvious. AMMS provided us with a mechanism to reunite a literary tradition represented by tens of thousands of Arabic documents across the West African Sahel that has been largely unknown beyond the work of a small band of local scholars and an even smaller cohort of western-trained Arabists. Even where these materials were accessible to researchers in public repositories, the importance of this literary tradition has been well masked by the disparate systems used to record it and the dispersal of individual collections in Africa, Europe and North America. The AMMS project seeks to bring together, in a single database, a sizeable cross-section of these Arabic materials, despite their imperfect annotation

and documentation, to provide us with an index to roughly 200 years of Sahelian literary activity. It was at this point, in the early 1990s, that the work of editing over 19 000 entries for consistent orthography and subject identification foundered on the magnitude of that task, an increasingly fragile software platform, and difficulties in disseminating an unwieldy end product. One positive result of my inattention to the project for nearly a decade is that these problems have now been largely resolved, thanks to advances in computer technology. In 2002 all of the 19 778 records were ported onto a Windows platform, the screen was redesigned and, most significant, a search engine was created that overcame many of the previous difficulties that had arisen from the inconsistency of our input parameters. The present AMMSvers.3 allows for easy addition of new material, internet access to these collection entries, and an opportunity to finally reunite an impressive quantity and range of Arabic writing representative of a broad sweep of intellectual life in Sahelian West Africa in, mainly, pre-colonial times. During the decade this project was on hold, new finds of manuscripts in private libraries in Mauritania and Mali continued apace, and the numbers of additional manuscripts now catalogued from 'new' collections may have eclipsed the number of initial entries in AMMSvers.2; we welcome the addition of these new entries into the AMMSvers.3 database to build this resource for future generations of scholarship.

The database is, purposely, a low-tech, simple program designed to be easily accessible by users who may not have either sophisticated machines or detailed knowledge of (or concern with) refined transliteration systems. The principle at work here is that once enough data have been entered about specific manuscripts, it should be possible to establish comparisons across the database and resulting identifications or likely identifications with like works, thanks to a powerful search engine. At present the input screens provide space for a title (in Arabic only), the form the work takes (generally, poetry or prose with subsets of descriptors if available), subject matter (in Latin characters and Arabic), author name, *nisba*, and familiar name in both scripts, date of composition and author's dates, copyist's name and, for correspondence, additional identifiers, all in both scripts. Two larger fields at the close of each record allow for additional information in Latin script and Arabic. Currently, we are consolidating some of the lesser-used fields and adding fields for inputting the first lines of individual manuscripts and an additional field to identify variants on the author name. But the important thing is that these fields cover the basic identifiers traditionally used in manuscript documentation and the search engine will function equally well in either script or a combination of them.

The manuscript collections that form the base for this database are representative of the Sahel region, thus allowing researchers a glimpse into the intellectual traditions represented by five centres beyond the Niger Bend as well as Timbuktu. Early indications suggest subtle differences in the literary heritage across the breadth of the Sahel, but for the purpose of simply identifying major influences and contextualising the

The AMMS project seeks to bring together, in a single database, a sizeable cross-section of these Arabic materials, despite their imperfect annotation and documentation, to provide us with an index to roughly 200 years of Sahelian literary activity.

Timbuktu tradition of scholarship, this database allows us to easily compare individual manuscripts as well as whole collections for the first time. A summary of the collections that have been entered follows, in the order in which they were added.

### **The 'Boutilimit' entries in AMMS**

The manuscripts that make up the Boutilimit collection come from the private library amassed by Haroun ould Sidiyya Baba (1917–78) who spent the last 30 years of his life reconstituting the library and letters of his great-grandfather, the Moorish savant Shaykh Sidiyya (d.1868), as well as his wider family's literary record – from Sidiyya's mentors in Timbuktu (Sidi al-Mukhtar al-Kunti and his son Sidi Muhammad), Sidiyya's son, Sidi Muhammad (d.1869), and his son, Sidiyya Baba (d.1926). At his death Haroun left over 100 000 folios of manuscript material that was microfilmed and catalogued in 1987–88 (the beginning of the AMMS project). The description of that process can be found in the introduction to the catalogue as well as several journal articles that focused on the construction of our bilingual, computer-based finding aid.

### **Contents**

The significance of this collection lies, first, in its very breadth – roughly 100 years of book collecting (c.1810–1910), interspaced with letters and treatises from and about Shaykh Sidiyya, his son, grandson and two of his great-grandsons. This representative work of four generations of scholars within the same family includes 700-odd pieces of their correspondence, in addition to the literary works they consulted. Second, this four-generation 'slice' of intellectual life is linked to one of West Africa's premier scholarly lineages, the Kunta savants in the Timbuktu region where Shaykh Sidiyya studied for 12 years (1810–23), and includes over 130 letters Sidiyya copied from his Kunta mentors.

### **Access**

One copy of the film is available for consultation at the University of Illinois Library Archives, filed under 'CC Stewart Collection'; two other copies of the film were returned to Mauritania in the care of Baba ould Haroun, custodian of his father's collection, for deposit in an appropriate national repository. The originals of these manuscripts remain in Boutilimit in the care of Baba ould Haroun.

### **The 'Nouakchott' entries in AMMS**

The manuscripts that make up the Nouakchott collection were recorded in the AMMS in 1988–89 from the hand-list of the national repository for Arabic manuscripts at the IMRS in Nouakchott. The IMRS began purchasing Mauritanian libraries and individual manuscripts in 1975 and by the late 1980s had acquired over 3 100 items

entered in AMMS. A separate project at IMRS focused on the preservation of poetry and is not included in this list that primarily focuses on major literary works rather than on ephemera (correspondence, individual legal decisions, etc.). The manuscripts in this collection bear comparison to two other hand-lists of Mauritanian work by Mokhtarould Hamidoun and Adam Heymowski in 1964–65, and Ulrich Rebstock's microfilmed selection of 2 239 manuscripts (including over 600 from the IMRS collection) in 1985.

### Contents

At the time this listing was compiled the IMRS collection was made up of manuscripts from 72 libraries, mainly from the region of Trarza in the south-west quadrant of the country and with a focus on manuscripts of local authorship. The AMMS listing includes a number of items (493) that had not been identified at that time, but the number of multiple copies in this collection points to the possibility that the contents may be broadly representative of scholarly activity in the region adjacent to the right bank of the Senegal River.

### Access

The IMRS provides access to its collection by bone fide researchers who make application through the Bibliothèque Nationale in Nouakchott.

### The 'Ségou' entries in AMMS

The manuscripts that make up the Ségou collection were recorded in the AMMS in 1988–89 from the catalogue prepared in 1985 by Ghali, Mahibou and Brenner, *Inventaire de la Bibliothèque 'Umarienne de Ségou* (Inventory of the 'Umarian Library at Ségou). The collection has been variously called the Ahmadou Library and Fonds Archinard (the latter after the French officer who seized the manuscripts at the time of conquest in 1890). References to these manuscripts had appeared previously but incompletely in a 1925 catalogue of Arabic manuscripts at the Bibliothèque Nationale, and in a 1976 catalogue based on a selective inventory of the collection done in 1947–52. These efforts both omitted much material of interest to West African historians, which led to the entire collection being re-catalogued and microfilmed between 1979 and 1982; the inventory cited above was published three years later.

### Contents

The Ségou collection is from the library of Ahmadu Seku, son of al-Hajj 'Umar, who inherited his father's conquests and ruled a territory increasingly under siege from 1864 until the French conquest in 1890. It contains numerous fragments and single-page items and a large, valuable body of correspondence. Its disparate make-up lends it a certain air of authenticity as a working library, a repository of day-to-day writings not filtered by an owner self-conscious of his scholarly image.

### Access

The Ségou collection is available at the Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris, Section des Manuscrits Orientaux. Xerox copies and/or microfilm of the collection are available at Yale University Library, Africana Collection, and at the Ahmed Baba Institute in Timbuktu.

### The 'Timbuktu' entries in AMMS

The manuscripts that make up the Timbuktu collection were recorded in the AMMS in 1990–91 from a photographed copy of the hand-list maintained at Cedrab, made available for this project by the then director Mahmoud Zoubair. At that time 5 640 manuscripts had been recorded at Cedrab, a compilation of locally gathered materials that has since grown to over 16 000 holdings. The al-Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation began printing a series of catalogues for Cedrab in 1995 with rather more attention to individual manuscripts than was possible for us as we worked from the hand-list, and although the numeration of the first 5 640 items in AMMS.3 roughly corresponds to the printed volumes, there is some discrepancy and researchers will need to confirm the record numbers for the Timbuktu collection that are cited in AMMS.3 entries with the official published volumes.<sup>8</sup>

The order in which manuscripts are listed in these catalogues and the AMMS.3 numeration are not always exact and the online description of this collection explains where these discrepancies appear.

### Contents

The Timbuktu collection was built from various individual collections in northern Mali beginning in the late 1970s. Among the most important local libraries that were incorporated into the Cedrab collection was that of Ahmad Boularaf, a Timbuktu bibliophile of Moroccan ancestry. By the early 1990s, Cedrab had become the major Arabic manuscript repository in West Africa, recipient of Unesco (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) and al-Furqan funding and with facilities for researchers and manuscript preservation that are unparalleled across the Sahel. Its early accessions reflect the bias found in other national repositories towards classical works and major local authors, although more recent acquisitions (as reflected in the published catalogues) include a large amount of correspondence and lesser works, perhaps more reflective of the locally produced literary record of the region. This first online version of AMMS.3 has not been coordinated with the additional data relative to individual entries that appear in some of the published catalogues, and it must therefore be used as a rough, and partial, guide to the Cedrab collections. We hope, in the short term, to reconcile this early listing of Cedrab materials with the published record and add those materials that had not yet been catalogued in the early 1990s.

## The 'Kano' entries in AMMS

The manuscripts that are listed under 'Kano' are drawn from three collections housed at the Africana Library at Northwestern University that were entered in the AMMS by staff there in 1990–91. While they are not exclusively drawn from Kano, they are indicative of northern Nigeria's rich literary heritage. AMMS entries 2 055–2 614 come from the Paden collection, acquired by John Paden for Northwestern in the 1970s; AMMS entries 2 615–5 948, labelled 'Falke', come from the 'Umar Falke Library, also acquired by Northwestern in the 1970s; and AMMS entries 2 949–6 263, identified as 'Hunwick', come from Professor John Hunwick's collection.

### Contents

The 'Kano' collections have been surveyed by Muhammad and Hay,<sup>9</sup> and the Paden collection by Saad.<sup>10</sup> By comparison to the compilations of manuscripts from 'national' collections that appear in AMMS and which feature heavy concentrations of classical texts, the Paden and Falke private libraries tend to privilege contemporary, twentieth-century material heavily influenced by writings associated with the Tijaniyya *tariqa*. Saad estimated that about one-half of the Paden accessions were privately printed pamphlets and books from Kano, Zaria and Cairo. Like the private library that makes up the Boutilimit collection, the Falke entries hold special interest as the library of an individual bibliophile.

### AMMS subject rubrics

Titles, authors and discrete collections aside, it has been the subject headings for entries that have attracted our greatest attention. As an indicator of where we have arrived, to date, in this ongoing process of identifying manuscript entries, I refer readers to the AMMS website homepage (see endnote 1) under 'subject headings', where the complete listing of our current classification system is available, in both Arabic and English. The range of subject headings used in AMMS expands upon the subject headings developed for the Boutilimit and Nouakchott collections, but in cases where there is a minimal level of detail annotated, the subject headings have been reconstructed from titles where these are available.

The subject headings that identify the AMMS entries were developed from the content of individual manuscripts identified by cataloguers of manuscripts cited in AMMS, rather than from an externally imposed set of classifications. The rubrics represent an editing of those subject entries, their consolidation and standardisation, but occasionally the same or similar material may appear under more than one general rubric, following the best judgement of different cataloguers. Cross-references in the subject headings noted above draw attention to the most common of these overlapping references; references that appear in italics (as in *see Belief: theology*) indicate the rubrics under which that particular material can be located, and so on.

The Timbuktu collection was built from various individual collections in northern Mali beginning in the late 1970s. Among the most important local libraries that were incorporated into the Cedrab collection was that of Ahmad Boularaf, a Timbuktu bibliophile of Moroccan ancestry. By the early 1990s, Cedrab had become the major Arabic manuscript repository in West Africa, recipient of Unesco and al-Furqan funding and with facilities for researchers and manuscript preservation that are unparalleled across the Sahel.



### The principal subject categories in AMMS

(with numbers of records, effective 30 September 2003)

Arabic language (1 258)	Ethics (424)	Politics (572)
Belief (1 936)	Geography (20)	Prophet Muhammad (480)
Biography (213)	Hadith (516)	Qur'an (854)
Conduct (105)	History (488)	Reform (44)
Devotional (1 632)	Jurisprudence (3 934)	Science (231)
Economy (554)	Literature (1 841)	Social matters (159)
Education (174)	Logic (107)	Sufism (731)
Esoteric sciences (455)	Medicine (99)	

The AMMS search engine is sensitive to individual words, irrespective of their placement in subcategories in this listing. For example, a subject search for the word 'oaths' will identify manuscripts in two different secondary headings under jurisprudence as well as under politics; a search for 'conundrums' will identify records under Arabic language, jurisprudence, literature and Qur'an; 'genealogy' appears under three different rubrics; 'slaves' and 'captives' appear under four different rubrics, and so on.

Currently, AMMS is under contract with the al-Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation to incorporate listings of manuscripts from seven of the West African catalogues published by the Foundation. We welcome additional material as well as suggestions for refinements.





## NOTES

- 1 See <http://www.westafricanmanuscripts.org/>.
- 2 This project was described in Stewart & Hatasa (1989).
- 3 Published by xerography. See Stewart et al. (1992).
- 4 *Liste des manuscrits en langues arabe et ajami a l'Institut de Recherche en Sciences Humaines, Niamey – Niger*. Niamey, Institut de Recherche en Sciences Humaines, 1979, no author listed.
- 5 Ghali et al. (1985) manuscripts seized by the French at the time of occupation of Ségou, conserved at the Bibliothèque Nationale.
- 6 Based on the first 5 640 entries in a hand-list filmed at the Centre de Documentation et de Recherches Ahmed Baba, Timbuktu (Mali) in 1991.
- 7 Three collections, labelled as 'Paden' (from a purchase by John Paden), 'Falke' (the 'Umar Falke Library) – both from Kano, Nigeria – and 'Hunwick', the collection of Professor John Hunwick.
- 8 See Ould Ely & Johansen (1995: records 1–1 500); 'Abd al-Muhsin al-'Abbas (1996: records 1 501–2 999; 1997: records 3 001–4 500; 1998: records 4 501–6 000); and al-Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation librarians (1998: records 6 001–9 000).
- 9 Muhammad & Hay (1975).
- 10 Saad (1980).

## REFERENCES

- 'Abd al-Muhsin al-'Abbas (Ed.) (1996) *Handlist of manuscripts in the Centre de Documentation et de Recherches Historiques Ahmed Baba, Timbuktu, Mali, Volume 2*. London: al-Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation
- 'Abd al-Muhsin al-'Abbas (Ed.) (1997) *Handlist of manuscripts in the Centre de Documentation et de Recherches Historiques Ahmed Baba, Timbuktu, Mali, Volume 3*. London: al-Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation
- 'Abd al-Muhsin al-'Abbas (Ed.) (1998) *Handlist of manuscripts in the Centre de Documentation et de Recherches Historiques Ahmed Baba, Timbuktu, Mali, Volume 4*. London: al-Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation
- al-Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation librarians (Compilers and eds) (1998) *Handlist of manuscripts in the Centre de Documentation et de Recherches Historiques Ahmed Baba, Timbuktu, Mali, Volume 5*. London: al-Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation
- Ghali N, Mahibou M & Brenner L (1985) *Inventaire de la Bibliothèque 'Umarienne de Ségou*. Paris: CNRS editions (Fontes Historiae Africanae, Subsidia Bibliographica)
- Muhammad A & Hay R Jr (1975) Analysis of a West African library: The Falke collection. In B Mittman *Personalized data base systems*. Los Angeles: Melville Publishing Company
- Ould Ely SA & Johansen J (Compiler and ed.) (1995) *Handlist of manuscripts in the Centre de Documentation et de Recherches Historiques Ahmed Baba, Timbuktu, Mali, Volume 1*. London: al-Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation
- Saad E (1980) The Paden collection of Arabic materials from Kano. *History in Africa* 7: 369–372
- Stewart CC & Hatasa K (1989) Computer-based Arabic management. *History in Africa* 16: 403–411
- Stewart C, Salim A & Yahya A (1992) *General catalogue of Arabic manuscripts at the Institut Mauritanien de Recherche Scientifique*. Urbana: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

