



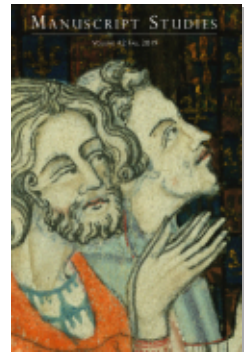
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*The Arts and Crafts of Literacy: Islamic Manuscript Cultures in Sub-Saharan Africa* ed. by Mauro Nobili and Andrea Brigaglia (review)

Evyn Kropf

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## REVIEWS

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Mauro Nobili and Andrea Brigaglia, eds. *The Arts and Crafts of Literacy: Islamic Manuscript Cultures in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Studies in Manuscript Cultures 12. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017. 367 pp., color illustrations. ISBN: 9783110541403. Open access version available online: <https://www.degruyter.com/viewbooktoc/product/488161>.

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THIS COLLECTIVE VOLUME PROVIDES a compelling treatment of Islamic literacy in sub-Saharan Africa as embodied and embedded in a rich heritage of manuscript book production, circulation, and reception. In choosing this focus on sub-Saharan manuscript cultures, the authors follow directly the holistic approach put forward by Graziano Krätli, Ghislaine Lydon, and contributors in *The Trans-Saharan Book Trade: Manuscript Culture, Arabic Literacy and Intellectual History in Muslim Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 2011). This approach advocates for an expansive study of manuscripts that eschews a narrow focus on textual elements and instead considers their contents within the material, technological, economic, cultural, and intellectual dimensions involved in their manufacture, dissemination, appreciation, consumption, and preservation.

The volume opens with Mauro Nobili's introduction, in which he makes a compelling case for holistically interrogating sub-Saharan Islamic literary sources for African history and Islamic history despite the complex marginalization of these sources in favor of African oral traditions and the "dominance" of the Arabo-Persian Islamicate center. This "old and deep literate tradition" (4) in Arabic and in *ʿajamī* (African languages written in Arabic characters) as embodied in thousands of manuscripts, has much to

contribute to the history of Islamic knowledge in general and to challenging the traditional paradigm which views sub-Saharan Africa as “a continent of ‘oral societies’” (7). The eleven contributions that follow explore sub-Saharan manuscripts and literary traditions from a range of perspectives.

The essays of Michaelle Biddle and Andrea Brigaglia explore the materiality and production of manuscripts via their writing materials. Expanding on the seminal work of Terence Walz while complementing more recent work by Natalia Viola, Biddle offers a valuable contribution refining the typology of watermarked papers used in sub-Saharan manuscripts, particularly papers that can be associated with the Galvani mills. While the majority of papers used in sub-Saharan manuscripts are of European manufacture and bear watermarks and countermarks, most do not appear in existing watermark catalogs and databases. This substantially limits their utility for dating otherwise undated manuscripts. Working from a corpus of nearly 1,300 manuscripts, of which fewer than forty-eight bear an explicit dating, Biddle was able to determine that the vast majority of papers are of Italian manufacture (coming mainly from an area north of Venice) and that most date from the second half of the eighteenth century to the early decades of the twentieth century. Her detailed treatment of the ubiquitous Galvani papers allows for more precise dating based on countermark, watermark, and whether hand- or machine-made.

Brigaglia presents an intriguing analysis that associates the wooden tablet (or writing board) utilized in traditional Qur’anic education in northern Nigerian Muslim societies (and elsewhere in Africa) with a complex ritual of initiation based on the reenactment of the Qur’anic revelation. Brigaglia argues that, beyond serving as a tool for the transmission of Qur’anic knowledge, the wooden tablet is the central component of a complex array of symbols supporting an educational and initiatory process. Indeed, the entire cycle of the preliminary stage of Qur’anic education operates in a dense complex of analogies that allow the Muslim pupil to symbolically identify with the Prophet Muhammad at the descent of the Qur’an and establishment of the Muslim community.

The essays of Dmitry Bondarev and Susana Molins Lliteras explore the important marginal and interlinear spaces of West African manuscripts.

Bondarev discusses the insights that codicological features such as layout can provide with regard to the broader intellectual and cultural contexts in which manuscripts played a significant role. Specifically, he explores the correlation between layout and content in order to demonstrate that “practices of Islamic education can be deduced from analysis of manuscript production” (106). Intended as a preliminary investigation and invitation to take up such work more comprehensively, Bondarev’s study concentrates on annotated manuscripts from Borno, Senegambia, and Adamawa, and reveals connections between deliberate page layout—particularly ample interlinear or marginal spacing—and learning and teaching practices through several phases of education and scholarly activity. Interlinear glosses represent an intermediate stage of learning in which Arabic grammar is applied as adjusted to the structure of the target vernacular in a form of translational exercise. Marginal commentaries represent a more advanced scholarly stage in which a substantial body of Arabic texts are drawn upon as source material with which to engage and explore the main text. In most cases, a deliberate approach to layout on the part of the copyists accommodated and supported the paratextual exploration.

Molins Lliteras also addresses marginal annotations in her preliminary survey of marginalia within a small selection of West African manuscripts preserved in the Mamma Haïdara Memorial Library in Timbuktu. The survey, conducted with the aid of the scholar Mahmoud Mohamed Dédéou dit Hamou, was taken on just over one hundred manuscripts from the Mamma Haïdara collection, reflecting a range of dates, locations, and topics. Molins Lliteras identifies corrections of various kinds (including those addressing omissions and clarifications), commentaries and glosses expanding on the content of the text, notabilia used to draw attention to particular portions of the text, ownership statements, and excerpts, prayers, and elements of popular culture not directly related to a particular portion of the text. Notably, transmission, reading, and collation statements were lacking in the preliminary survey data. This is likely owing to the small sample size, fully representative neither of the collection nor of manuscripts from the region, which Molins Lliteras duly acknowledges. Though the contribution is extremely valuable for drawing attention to these as yet understudied elements and demonstrating the

remaining work to be done, a more extensive and comparative survey will be more useful.

The essays of Adrien Delmas, Tal Tamari, and Xavier Luffin touch on writing practices and authorship more broadly. Delmas presents a case of co-writing in which the sixteenth-century encounter between the Portuguese and the Swahili-speaking elites of Kilwa resulted in the production of the well-known *Kilwa Chronicle*. Through an analysis of the two extant versions, Portuguese and Arabic, and the absence of material production and circulation, Delmas challenges the traditional notion of “textual contact” and concludes that both versions share a common origin of genealogical tradition reduced to writing “born of an encounter” (200). The Portuguese version emerged from a desire to incorporate new imperial possessions into their own historical narrative. The Swahili version emerged as a response to the challenges of sovereignty and autonomy posed by the European occupiers. In this way the two versions reply to one another without an exchange of books.

Tamari offers a thorough and detailed analysis of five Bamana-language texts written using a specialized ‘ajamī. Expanding on her first publication of these texts in 1994, Tamari relies on extensive research and fieldwork for a fuller understanding and interpretation of the texts. She concludes confidently that the Fulbe scholar Amadou Jomworo Bary was the author and that his decision to write in Bamana may have been inspired by the practice of writing Fulfulde in Arabic script. Further, a desire to have documents in the very language he utilized for preaching and healing may have motivated his decision to write in Bamana rather than in Arabic, Fulfulde, or French. Tamari concludes that his Bamana ‘ajamī is phonologically one of the most accurate such systems known.

Luffin’s contribution sheds light on the vibrant Congolese tradition of Arabic literacy. Drawing on Congolese documents in Arabic script now held in Belgian archives and museums as well as numerous secondary sources, Luffin identifies a range of literate actors active in late nineteenth-century Congo. These include traders, secretaries of various entities, foreigners serving colonial officers, occasional copyists, and clerics—each responsible for certain categories of documents. The overall picture is one in which

literacy predates the arrival of the colonizers and was not at all unusual in parts of Congo in the late nineteenth century.

The volume concludes with a section of brief notes on assorted topics. These include discussion of a handbook in indigenous Fulfulde script and its author by Mohamadou Halirou, presentation of a short text on copyist techniques (specifically the use of certain markings) by Mahmoud Mohamed Dédéou dit Hamou with translation by Shamil Jeppie, a descriptive note on the inscriptions of seven gravestones in the Tana Baru Islamic Cemetery in Cape Town by Alessandro Gori, and finally a captivating account of the Maiduguri-based calligrapher Ka'ana Umar's contemporary production of a manuscript copy of the Qur'an by Maimadu Barma Mutai and Andrea Brigaglia.

Overall, the volume is a fascinating treatment of sub-Saharan Islamic manuscript culture pointing in numerous directions for further research. Despite a few typographical errors, issues with certain images (either too dark or in need of clearer markup), and curiosities in the otherwise valuable index entries (e.g., no entry or cross references under "watermarks" but instead only under more specific watermark exemplars, requiring specialist knowledge), the volume is quite accessible and well-laid out. Most admirably, it has been published online in open access. This book is certainly recommended reading for anyone pursuing a deeper knowledge of Islamic manuscript traditions and their wider literary contexts.

Catherine A. Bradley and Karen Desmond, eds. *The Montpellier Codex: The Final Fascicle. Contents, Contexts, Chronologies*. Rochester, New York: The Boydell Press, 2018. 351 pp. \$99. ISBN: 9781783272723.

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**T**HE MONTPELLIER CODEX: *The Final Fascicle*, edited by Catherine A. Bradley and Karen Desmond, is a wide-ranging collection of essays