

THE HAROUN OULD SIDIA COLLECTION OF ARABIC MANUSCRIPTS*

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The library which forms the core of this microfilm collection at the University of Illinois at Urbana dates from the career of a southern Saharan savant, Shaykh Sidiyya “al-Kabīr” (1774-1868), whose studies and travels took him from his native Trarza region (today’s southwest Mauritania) to Timbuctu in the east and northwards as far as Fez. In many respects, the library which he thus accumulated represents something of a culmination of the known and studied Islamic sciences in West Africa on the eve of European penetration. It also was one of the last large private libraries amassed before the advent of printed material in Muslim communities in West Africa.

At the death of Shaykh Sidiyya’s grandson Bābā (1924), the collection was dispersed among several of his eleven sons, but one of them, Hārūn (1918-1978), spent the greater part of the last thirty years of his life on a project that effectively reestablished the core of his father’s library. Several years after Hārūn’s death, his son, Bābā, contacted me in a request that I assist in preserving the collection by microfilming the material his father had accumulated.

Phase one of the microfilming project in 1987-8 tackled 25.5 lineal feet of manuscript material, which came to slightly over 100,000 manuscript pages, filmed on 80 reels. At the close of the spring 1988 filming, five reels of material (56 works) from the personal library of Ya[°]qūb b. Muḥammad b. Bābā were added. During the second phase of filming, in May and June 1989, a third library, the origin of which was also in large part from the Sidiyya Bābā collection, owned by the jurist Ismā[°]īl b. Bābā (d. 13 December 1988), was added to the above. The third phase of the filming took place in November and December 1989 when the last part of the “family archives” was filmed, bringing

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the filmed collection to 104 reels. Two copies of this collection, one positive print and one negative print, were returned to Bābā b. Hārūn in Nouakchott, one for the family and one for deposit with a national repository of manuscripts; two copies remain at Illinois, a positive print in the University Archives and the original negative in the University Library photographic services film store.¹

This filmed collection consists of several discrete sets of material that overlap in part. First, in its entirety, the film is the record of a private manuscript library from West Africa that represents about 100 years of book collecting and copying (c. 1810-1910) and which must rank among the the largest such collections in that region – indeed, among the largest private libraries of that chronological depth in sub-Saharan Africa.

Second, this collection contains a record of the literary works for four generations of scholars within the same family who worked from essentially the same library. This represents an intellectual tradition which ranges chronologically from the early nineteenth century into the third-quarter of the twentieth century and topically from theology and jurisprudence to mysticism and politics. Further, this four-generation “slice” of southern Saharan scholarship is itself, intimately linked to West Africa’s premier scholarly lineage, the Ahl Sidī Mukhtār al-Kuntī.² Interspaced among the library works and major studies written by the Awlād Shaykh Sidiyya and Ahl Sidī Mukhtār al-Kuntī, is a family archive of 700-odd pieces of correspondence that touch on the day-to-day affairs of the Sidiyya clan during a 140 year-period from 1825 onwards.

- 1 For a catalogue of the collection, see C.C. Stewart: *Catalogue of Arabic Manuscripts among the Ahl Shaykh Sidiyya*, ([xerox], Urbana, 1990), forthcoming (1991) in a new microfiche series with InterDocumentation, Leiden, *Arabic Manuscripts in the Western Muslim World, Catalogues and Indices*.
- 2 Dissertations that have taken on aspects of the Kunta story include the work of Thomas Whitcomb, Ph.D., University of London 1973 (see his “New Evidence on the origins of the Kunta”, *Bulletin SOAS*, xxxviii, 1975, 103-23, 407-17), A.A. Batrān, “Sidi Mukhtar al-Kunti and the recrudescence of Islam in the Western Sahara and the Middle Niger”, Ph.D., University of Birmingham 1971; Abdelkader Zebadia, “The Career and Correspondence of Ahmad al-Bakkay of Timbuctu, from 1847 to 1866”, Ph.D., University of London 1974; a useful recent synthesis of material on the Kunta appears in Ann McDougall, “The Economics of Islam in the Southern Sahara: The Rise of the Kunta Clan”, *Asian and African Studies*, xx, 1, 45-60, repr. in N. Levtzion & H. Fisher, *Urban and Rural Islam in West Africa*, Westview 1987.

In all, at least 500 authors appear in the collection. For twenty-seven of these authors, the collection contains eight or more entries, and the total number of works by this group of writers account for nearly half (973) of the manuscript records.³ These works make up slightly less than one third of the total number of microfilmed pages, or about 35,000 pages; the most prolific of them (authors with more than 3,000 pages each) are Sīdī Mukhtār al-Kuntī, Sidiyya al-Kabīr, Muḥammad b. Mālik al-Andalūsī, Muḥammad b. °Abd al-Salām al-Bannānī and °Abd al-Qādir b. °Abd Allāh b. Muḥammad b. Muḥammad Salim al-Majlisī.⁴ A survey of the works in the collection reveals the large amount of correspondence, the numerous legal opinions and judgements, the diverse spiritual counsel, and the volume of prayer and poetry, frequently on one, two, or three pages and which, when studied, promise to open up new material to social and economic analysis. A quick survey of the “jurisprudence” points to the value of that literature, too, for insights into social and economic change in the region during the past 200 years.

Subject matter classification in any cataloguing exercise is an imperfect process, and, so too, in the finding aid developed for this collection. Our classification system matured as new material was entered and as a parallel cataloguing project for the national manuscript repository in Nouakchott progressed, making possible a standardization of subject headings across slightly over 5,000 manuscripts. Thanks to AMMS computer software developed for these projects, which permits bilingual listings of record entries,⁵ we were able to develop subject classifications that were sensitive to two notions of the ordering of knowledge, and, where appropriate, to annotate the same manuscript with two subject classifications, one in Arabic, one in English.

The Haroun ould Cheikh Sidia Library is a unique resource for the study of Islamic jurisprudence in a nomadic society, for historians of the western Sahel from the Senegal Basin to the Middle Niger, for

- 3 The number excludes two early lithographed works, each exceeding 8 volumes, which, were they included with these manuscripts, would bring this number to 1,000 records.
- 4 [A more detailed discussion of these twenty-seven authors appears in the full version of this article, in *History in Africa*.]
- 5 A description of the computer program, AAMS, utilized in this project appears in C.C. Stewart and Kazumi Hatasa, “Computer-based Arabic Manuscript Management”, *History in Africa*, xvi, 1989, 403-411. A manual for the program is available on request.

students of Arabic literature and pedagogy, and for the study of West African intellectual history. The chronological depth of the collection, nearly two centuries, and the very large amount of correspondence in it, about one-third of the 2,056 records, promises to reveal much about daily life in nineteenth-century West Africa, just as it should help document the transition in that society as it moved into the colonial economy in this century. Equally attractive, in some respects, is the foundation this collection, with the IMRS catalogue, lays for a data base of West African manuscripts which will make it possible to trace particular works or the focus of particular subject matter or authors across several different scholarly traditions and locales. Of such stuff should emerge an intellectual history of West Africa's Muslim scholars.