

THE TRANSMISSION OF KNOWLEDGE:
A NOTE ON THE ISLAMIC LITERATURES OF
AFRICA

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The following pages contain a summary of data collected during many years of research on Islam in Africa. The material is already amply sufficient for a book, but so far no publisher has been found. Eight books and a dozen collections of songs may give an idea of the Swahili material.¹

While collecting texts for my *Islamic Poetry of Africa*,² and for my article 'The use of Arabic Script for the Languages of Africa',³ it became clear that there are many *lacunae* in our knowledge since no systematic research had been conducted and/or published, whereas all the while new material is coming to light in the form of manuscripts in languages which were hitherto believed to possess no literature at all, let alone Islamic literature in Arabic script.⁴

- 1 Jan Knappert, *Traditional Swahili Poetry*, Leiden: E.J. Brill 1967; *idem*, *Swahili Islamic Poetry*, 3 vols., Leiden: E.J. Brill 1971; *idem*, *An Anthology of Swahili Love Song*, London 1972; *idem*, *Four Centuries of Swahili Verse*, London 1979, 1982; *idem*, *Epic Poetry in Swahili and Other African Languages*, Leiden: E.J. Brill 1983 and *idem*, *Islamic Legends*, 2 vols., Leiden: E.J. Brill 1985; also by J. Knappert, a series of articles in *Afrika und Übersee* [Hamburg], 1961-1990. See further *Swahili: Journal of the East African Swahili Committee*, Dar es Salaam, xxxiii, xxxiv, 1962-64, ed. J. Knappert.
- 2 J. Knappert, 'The Islamic poetry of Africa', *Journal of Islamic Studies* [Johannesburg], x, 1990, 91-140.
- 3 To appear in *Manuscripts of the Middle East*, ed. J. Witkam.
- 4 Diedrich Westermann and Margaret Bryant (*Languages of West Africa*, London: International African Institute, 1952) bemoaned

What is an Islamic literature? Literatures written in Arabic script are normally Islamic literatures, but not all Islamic literatures are so written. In Amharic and in Zulu there is Islamic literature but not in Arabic script. Islamic literature is normally the work of an Islamic people, but not all Islamic peoples have created Islamic literatures. For instance, the epic poetry in Mandinka⁵ is recited by bards who are Muslims, but their epic songs are not Islamic. The explanation is that these epics continue to be recited by and for people who have become Islamicised in a period of history subsequent to the creation of the epic. The reverence for this national poetry has survived the Islamisation process. A similar situation seems to exist in Iran where the epic of the heathen kings, the *Shāhnāmé* is still revered and recited.⁶ Similarly, in Malay and Javanese, the epic of the Hindu period is still held in high esteem, and recited, in spite of Islam.⁷

Islamic literature is written by Muslims for Muslims. It usually implies some degree of Islamic propaganda, since it usually deals with the history of Islam, Islamic legends,⁸ and the stories of the personalities mentioned in the Qurʾān. In the poetry of the Muslim peoples hymns to God and His Prophet predominate, as well as such liturgical works as the *mawlid* and *miʿrāj* tales to be recited at the appropriate

the lack of indigenous African literature. Since that time a wealth of documents in West African languages has come to light; see, for example Gordon Innes in B. Andrzejewski, S. Pilszewicz and W. Tyloch, *Literatures in African Languages*, Warsaw/Cambridge 1985.

- 5 Gordon Innes, *Sunjata*, London: SOAS 1974. For the Islamic elements in that poem, see Knappert, 'The Islamic poetry of Africa', 128-9.
- 6 See *EI* (2), II, 920; P.J. Chelkowski, *Taʿziyeh. Ritual and Drama in Iran*, New York: New York University Press 1979, 166, 194, 198, 249.
- 7 Jan Knappert, *Malay Myths and Legends*, Kuala Lumpur 1980.
- 8 See Knappert, *Islamic legends*.

times.⁹ On the edges of Islamic literature are the poems and songs composed by Muslim poets on secular themes such as love and politics, but nurtured entirely within an Islamic culture.¹⁰ The following is a very condensed survey of the Islamic literatures that have come to light up until now (1996). I have omitted many names and details in order to keep the survey short. I shall be grateful if scholars in the field would kindly write to me concerning Islamic documents in African languages.

Afrikaans. This language is spoken, among others, by the 'Cape Malays', a Muslim people of Indonesian origin. They have produced an extensive literature in manuscripts in Arabic script.¹¹

Amharic. Apart from a large body of Christian literature, there is also an interesting corpus of Islamic literature.¹²

Berber. Of the twelve major groups of Berber speakers in north-western Africa, six have been reduced to writing in Arabic script, viz,

- a. *Kabyle*, spoken in northern Algeria in Grande Kabylie.
- b. *Rifian* or *Tarifit*, spoken in the Rif Mountains.
- c. *Shilḥa* or *Tashlihit*, spoken by the Chleuh in western Morocco.
- d. *Tamazight* spoken by the Imazighen in the Middle Atlas.
- e. *Zanagha* spoken by the Iznaghen in southern Algeria and south-eastern Mauritania.
- f. *Twareg* or *Tamasheq* (Tamajeg) spoken by the Tuareg (Tawāriq) in the triangle between Ghadames, Zinder in

9 See my *Swahili Islamic Poetry*, I, Chapter 2.

10 See my *A Choice of Flowers. Chaguo la Maua*, London: Heinemann 1972.

11 See A. Van Selms, *Arabies-Afrikaanse Studies*, Amsterdam 1951.

12 Kappert, 'Islamic poetry of Africa', 106ff.

Niger, Timbuktu and Goundam in Mali.

Chewa, or *Chichewa*, which used to be called *Nyanja*, spoken in Malawi

Dagomba or *Dagbane* and *Gonja* or *Guang*, spoken in northern Ghana.

Fula, *Fulani* or *Fulfulde*, spoken by the Fulbe in the Sahelian region.¹³

Ganda or *Luganda*, spoken in Uganda. I have seen mss in Arabic script.

Harari, spoken in Harar in eastern Ethiopia.¹⁴

Hausa, spoken in northern Nigeria and surrounding areas.¹⁵

Jarma or *Zerma*, spoken in Niger. Closely related to Songhai.¹⁶

Kanuri, spoken in north-eastern Nigeria and Cameroon; the Kanuri have an ancient Muslim culture.¹⁷

Kituba. In Brazzaville I have seen Muslim propaganda books on sale.

Lingala, used by Muslim traders in Kinshasa.

Makua, spoken in northern Mozambique. I have seen mss in Arabic script.

Malagasy. Manuscripts in Arabic script in two dialects.

Malinke or *Mandinka*, *Mandengka*, *Mandingo*, *Bambara*, *Dioula* or *Dyula*, *Bamana*, *Koranko*, *Wasulunka*. Literature exists in several of these dialects, in Roman and Arabic script, also manuscripts.

Ngazija, *Kingazija*, the literary language of the Comorians. Many documents in Arabic script are written in

13 Knappert, 'Islamic poetry of Africa', 110-22 and David Arnott in Andrzejewski & al, *Literatures in African Languages*, 83ff.

14 See Enrico Cerulli, *La Lingua e la Storia di Harar*, Rome 1936.

15 See Mervyn Hiskett, *A History of Hausa Islamic Verse*, London: SOAS 1975.

16 There are mss in Jarma in the Arabic script in the collection of the Institut des Recherches en Sciences Humaines, Niamey.

17 See A.D.H. Bivar, 'A dated Kuran from Bornu', *Nigeria Magazine*, lxxv, 1960.

Swahili.

Oromo or *Galla* in Ethiopia and northern Kenya. Some Muslim literature.

Rundi in Burundi. Most Muslim literature is in Swahili.

Shona in Zimbabwe. I have a 'Life of Muḥammad' printed in Roman.

Somali. Extensive literature now exists in Roman, printed.¹⁸

Songhai, spoken along the Niger in Mali. Arabic script is used.¹⁹

Swahili, spoken in Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, the Comoros. See note 1.

Tigré, spoken in Northern Ethiopia and Eritrea. Muslim literature is mainly in Arabic.

Ungwana or *Kingwana* in Zaire (Kisangani, Kiyu). Literature in Swahili.

Wolof, spoken in Senegal. Rich literature in Arabic script, unpublished.²⁰

Yoruba, spoken in south-western Nigeria. There is literature in Arabic script at the Centre of Arabic Documentation, University of Ibadan.

Zulu, spoken in Natal. The Qur^ʿān has been translated into Zulu. All Muslim literature is in Roman, most of it printed.

The above list is far from complete. I shall be very grateful for any additions and corrections. I have accumulated much data through correspondence with scholars in many countries, and I am very grateful for their knowledge so readily shared. The above list details thirty-one languages in which there is some Islamic

18 See B.W. Andrzejewski, 'The rise of written Somali literature', *African Research and Documentation* [Birmingham], viii-ix, 1975, 7-14.

19 There are mss in Songhai in the Centre de Documentation et de Recherches Ahmad Baba in Timbuktu.

20 See Innes in Andrzejewski & al, *Literatures in African Languages*, 118.

literature, even if it is no more than a few pamphlets printed in Roman or a single manuscript in Arabic script. There is no doubt much more to be discovered. Before I started my research in London in 1959, I was told there were no more Swahili manuscripts to be found. Over the following years J.W.T. Allen collected more than five hundred Swahili manuscripts.