

WEST AFRICAN ARABIC MANUSCRIPT
COLOPHONS
I: ASKIYA MUḤAMMAD BĀNI'S COPY OF THE
RISĀLA OF IBN ABĪ ZAYD

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'Corners conceal treasures' (Arabic Proverb)

Although a good deal of attention has been paid to the collection and analysis of manuscript copies of Arabic works written by West African Muslim scholars, less attention has so far been paid to problems concerned with the transmission of Islamic learning in the region. To date we have only one analysis, and that a partial one, of a West African Arabic library,¹ a single article on calligraphic traditions,² and one study of the *'isnād'* or 'teaching genealogy'.³ I know of no study, so far, of traditions of manuscript copying, either as concerns the copyists themselves or as concerns their methodology in authenticating transmission. Publication of the present colophon and those which will follow in subsequent articles is designed to provide materials for the study of the copyist's art in West Africa. The colophons selected for study will be those which give a clear indication of the identity of the copyist and the date and place of copying. In some cases

1 Abdullahi Mohammed and Richard Hay, jr., 'Analysis of a West African Islamic Library: the Falke Collection', in B. Mittman & L. Borman (eds.), *Personalized Data Base Systems*, New York 1975, 75-94.

2 A.D.H. Bivar, 'The Arabic calligraphy of West Africa', *African Language Review*, vi, 1968, 3-15.

3 Ivor Wilks, 'The transmission of Islamic learning in the Western Sudan', in J. Goody (ed.), *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, Cambridge 1968, 161-97.

the colophons will provide incidental information of historical interest which may throw light on political economic or social matters.

The colophon published in this article concludes a copy of the *Risāla* of Abū Muḥammad °Abdullāh b. Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī (d. 386/996) penned for the seventh askiya of Songhay, Muḥammad Bāni b. Askiya Dāwūd (reg. 995/1586–996/1588). The *Risāla* was the earliest summary of Islamic law according to the school of Mālik, and despite the enormous popularity of the *Mukhtaṣar* of Khalīl b. Ishāq (d. 776/1374 or thereabouts), it remained a favourite legal text in West Africa. It was an important item of the curriculum in sixteenth-century Timbuktu and was probably the favoured legal text at court. Askiya Muḥammad Bāni had his copy made within seven months of his accession, while his father, Askiya Dāwūd, must have possessed his own copy since he studied the whole work with the aid of a teacher while he was ruler.⁴ For the other askiyas there is no evidence as yet of possession or study of the *Risāla*, but, surprisingly, there does seem to have been a copy at the court of Sunni °Alī which was read and interpreted to him by his Moroccan secretary Ibrāhīm al-Khidr.⁵

Muḥammad Bāni's copy of the *Risāla* has been preserved in the Kattānī collection of the Bibliothèque Générale et Archives, Rabat, where it bears the shelf-mark K5. The history of the manuscript is not known, but it no doubt reached Morocco as part of the loot of the Sa°dian expedition of 1591 which sealed the fate of the Askiya dynasty. As far as I know, it is the only material object from the court of Gao during the Askiya period to have survived, and this gives it a very special interest. This copy of the *Risāla* consists of 398 sewn folios, each page containing six lines of text in a very

4 See Maḥmūd Ka°ti/Ibn al-Mukhtār, *Ta°rīkh al-Fattāsh*, ed. & trans. O. Houdas & M. Delafosse, Paris 1913, 94.

5 See °Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sa°dī, *Ta°rīkh al-Sūdān*, ed. O. Houdas, Paris 1898-1900, 65; English trans. in J.O. Hunwick, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire*, Leiden 1999, 97.

large hand.⁶

The text is fully vocalised and headings appear in red, yellow or blue. The early part of the text contains some scattered marginal comments or glosses in Arabic. The paper is evidently a European import. When I examined the manuscript in Rabat in 1967 I noted two watermarks. The first was of the head and shoulders of a man bearing a staff across his left shoulder, within a circle and having two letters, S (?) M, beneath. This most closely corresponds to no. 7598 in Briquet's catalogue,⁷ which is a watermark appearing on paper manufactured in Messina in 1580. The other watermark is one of the famous 'jug' watermarks common on sixteenth and seventeenth century papers manufactured in a wide variety of locations in north-eastern France, the heart of the industry being in the mills of Normandy. It had a wide distribution in northern Europe, including England, through the activities of Dutch merchants.⁸ The mark noted on the pages of the *Risāla* most closely corresponds to no. 12,662 in Briquet's catalogue and this design was being used on paper manufactured between the years 1534 and 1560. These two examples illustrate the potential contribution which Arabic manuscripts can make to the history of paper making and the trade in paper, a potential which so far seems to have been untapped.

This is also the first time an example of Arabic calligraphy from the Middle Niger during the sixteenth century has been published; indeed, this is the earliest example of a West African hand of any type to appear. In style it falls within the broad category of the 'Maghribī' and within that it comes within the range of what may be described as 'Western Saharan'. Among its distinguishing features are the following:

alif: when joined to a preceding letter it has a small 'tooth'

6 See *infra*, Plate I (Exordium).

7 See M. Briquet, *Les Filigranes. Dictionnaire historique des marques du papier dès leur apparition vers 1282 jusqu'en 1600*, 4 vols., Paris 1907.

8 *Ibid.*, I, 34.

below the line.

dāl/dhāl: more than one form used, including a 'Kufic' form, but frequently a form having a very shallow bow to it and extending partly below the line, similar to *rāʾ/zāʾ* .

rāʾ/zāʾ: A plain form is used, but more typically a form with a final upward flourish.

ṣād/dād: lack the 'tooth' which follows the loop.

kāf: In the word *askiyā* only, the 'Kufic' style *kāf* (ڪ) is used.

mīm: The flourish below the line on the final form is curved back under the letter.

nūn: In the final position *nūn* is shallow and very elongated without a dot. The 'regular' *nūn* is also used in some places.

hāʾ/tāʾ marbūṭa: Final *hāʾ* and *tāʾ marbūṭa* are not closed up generally. When the pen reaches the top of the letter it simply concludes it by a diagonal downward stroke.

Text

كامل كتابة الرسالة بحمد الله وحسن عونه / بتاريخ يوم
 الاثني الثالث عشر من شهر شعبان / عام خمس وتسعين
 بعد تسعمائة على يد ناسخه / احمد [بن] ابي بكر بن
 علي بن دنسل وكتبه لحبيبه / شمس المعالي شرف الايام
 والليالي الذ[ي] / عمر [ر] باع الفضل والافضال بعد /
 اندراسها امير المؤمنين اسكيا / ابي عبد الله محمد بن بنى
 الله / الاسلام والمسلمين على يديه / وبنى له في جنانه

غرف⁹ / من فوقها غرف / وبلغه اقصى / نهاية / العمر /
 كما بلغه ابعدها غايات الفخر وابقاه في خير وعافية / عاليا
 ذكره ساسيا قدره وتكون السعادة وفد بابيه / البشائر قرع
 سمعه والساار غداء نفسه / ابن امير المؤمنين اسكيا داوود بن
 امير / المؤمنين اسكيا الحاج محمد لطف / الله تعالى بهم
 لطفا يليق / بكرمه امين بجاه / اشرف / خلقه / محمد /
 صلى الله عليه

Translation

The copying of the *Risāla* was completed, with praise to God and through His goodly aid, on Monday the 13th of the month of Sha°bān in the year nine hundred and ninety-five¹⁰ at the hand of its scribe Aḥmad b. Abī Bakr b. °Alī b. D-n-b-s-l. He wrote it for his dear friend the Sun of Illustriousness, the Honour of the Days and Nights, who revived the pastures of virtue and loftiness after they had wilted away, the Commander of the Faithful Askiya Abū °Abdullāh Muḥammad Bān(i), may God fortify¹¹ Islam and the Muslims at his hands and build for him in His Gardens ‘rooms above which are rooms’¹² and cause him to reach the utmost limit of life and likewise

9 *Sic.*

10 19 July 1587.

11 Lit. ‘build’, the verb *banā* presumably being chosen in order to create a *jeu de mots*. The by-name Bāni is Songhay, meaning ‘good health’, but by form it coincides with the active participle of the Arabic verb *banā*.

12 Cf. Qur°ān, 39:20. The colophon retains the nominative case of the word *ghuruf* as in the Qur°ān, though the syntax of the copyist’s sentence requires the accusative case.

cause him to attain the ultimate limits of glory and cause him to live in ease and good health, in high repute and lofty status, and may happiness be attendant upon his gate and glad tidings assail his hearing, and joyfulness be the sustenance of his soul, son of the Commander of the Faithful Askiya Dāwūd, son of the Commander of the Faithful Askiya *al-ḥājj* Muḥammad, may God Most High be gracious to them as befits His generosity, Amen : through the exalted status (*jāh*) of the noblest of His creation, Muḥammad, may God bless him.

*Plate 1: The Exordium of Muḥammad Bāni's copy of
the Risāla*

*Plate 2: The Colophon of Muḥammad Bāni's copy of
the Risāla*