Jos Museum Arabic Manuscripts Conservation (JMAMC) Project 27-31 August 2012

Michelle L. Biddle, Wesleyan University

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/mbiddle/11/
HISTORY
Through an accident of history an important and large collection of manuscripts in Arabic script (over 1500 manuscripts) are currently being held by the National Commission of Museums and Monuments’ Jos Museum. NCMM was originally the Nigerian Antiquities Service with a broad remit to collect and to care for all Nigerian cultural heritage material.

The Jos Museum Arabic Manuscripts Collection has sometimes been referred to as the Palmer Collection since Sir H.R. Palmer, an early colonial administrator, gathered a core of its manuscripts in the early 20th century. His collection was augmented by the manuscript collecting activities of Malam Muntaka Coomassie Zaria, Bernard Fagg, founder of the Jos Museum, and others. The collection was partially catalogued by Arif and Hakima in 1966 (A descriptive catalogue of Arabic manuscripts in Nigeria Jos Museum and Luhard Hall Library, Kaduna). Scholars such as Murray Last (The Sokoto Caliphate, 1967) and Terence Walz (“The paper trade of Egypt and the Sudan in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,” in Modernization in the Sudan, 1985) used the collection in their research. Many of its holdings are listed in Arabic Literature of Africa II: The Writings of Central Sudanic Africa, 1995.
I first surveyed the collection in 2008 (see Saving Nigeria’s Manuscript Heritage http://works.bepress.com/mbiddle/1/) and found the collection so disorganized, so dirty, so full of insects and mold that out of forty works cited in Walz’s paper I could only locate one. Security was non-existent. Volume one of the historically important Yunfa Qur’an was missing. Single folio manuscripts were stored upright in decaying plastic folders off-gassing acetic acid. Unscreened windows were open for air circulation, in the absence of electricity necessary to run ceiling fans, allowing free access to insects. The ceiling above the collection dripped with black slimy mold.

JMAMC PROJECT
Because of the collection’s importance, its extremely poor housing and condition, the Jos Museum Arabic Manuscripts Conservation (JMAMC) Project was created. It was funded entirely with Nigerian sources channeled through the Centre for Regional Integration and Development under the guidance of Director Dr. Hamid Bobboyi, one of the editors of Arabic Literature of Africa II. This project was carried out by conservator Michaelle Biddle of Wesleyan University, Malam Musa Muhammed of Arewa House Kaduna and Malam Musa Yakuba of NCMM, with some assistance from the Jos Museum Library staff. The goal of the week-long project was to gather fine-grained, detailed information as to the state of the collection so that a more comprehensive conservation, cataloging and digitization project could be formulated.

When the JMAMC Project team arrived on Monday, 27 August 2012, we found that the manuscripts were still stored in open or glass fronted presses in the general research library. Whilst the black mold-coated ceiling directly above the collection had been repaired, the ceiling in the opposite corner was still coated with black mold. Sunlight still hit the presses from the un-curtained windows, heating up the manuscript collection, baking it and speeding up the collection’s decay. We found that several windows blown out in January 2012 had not been replaced.

Brown haze of dust covering Jos Museum Arabic Manuscript Collection - 27 August 2012
There are two acquisitions registers – one for the Arabic manuscripts and one for Arabic printed books. We found that the Arabic manuscripts in green cloth-covered portfolios and some of the printed books were interfiled in one numerical sequence. We found manuscripts everywhere. Several had been used as bookmarks in the printed Arabic books. Others were interfiled with archival collections. Some were rolled up and had been used as insect swatters.

Manuscripts mixed up with dusty, unorganized tin-mining archival collections

A very small portion of the collection, not in green cloth-covered portfolios, had been boxed
The boxed manuscripts were in no order, making retrieval and use difficult.

We sampled approximately 15% of the collection, examining these manuscripts folio by folio. Based on this sample approximately 5% of the collection is missing and a quarter of the folios, approximately 10,000, need conservation. 15% of the collection is unfit to handle largely through active insect infestation and the results of severe water and mold damage.

62 manuscripts were found to have been ‘bound’ with permanent white glue. Several were bound with the pages upside down. Others were bound with two manuscripts in one with the pages mixed together. Approximately 200 more manuscripts were found stapled together.
We found numerous instances of substituting a smaller manuscript for a larger one. For example in the portfolio supposedly housing MS 15 there were 8 folios instead of the 533 folios listed in the Arif-Hakima catalogue.

Many manuscripts had no acquisitions number nor any record in the acquisitions register. When piled in one stack, these manuscripts measured 32 inches high.

The manuscripts housed in the decaying, acidic plastic folders had been roughly bundled and were now stored flat.
JMAMC PROJECT RESULTS
Other than the approximately 650 manuscripts housed in the green cloth-covered portfolios, the collection was not in acquisition register numerical order. This made use of the collection next to impossible. We therefore decided to place the manuscripts that were not in the green cloth-covered portfolios in numerical sequence, folder and box them. Boxing protects manuscripts from dust and slows insect infestation. First, we removed the manuscripts from the decaying acidic plastic portfolios and foldered them in acid-free photocopy paper. This is a basic phased conservation approach when collections have multiple and complex issues.

Manuscripts foldered in acid-free photocopy paper and placed in numerical sequence.
The new boxes are drying on the shelf above.

We then took the boxed manuscripts, foldered and labeled them as necessary, and then interfiled them with the manuscripts from the plastic folder group into one numerical sequence.

Reorganizing boxed manuscripts into one numerical sequence

We had to move all the printed Arabic books in order to shelve the manuscript collection in sequential shelves.
Relocating 32 linear feet of heavy, dusty books printed in Arabic

Custom made boxes will keep the manuscripts dust free whilst the white folders will minimize handling

Malam Musa Muhammad and Malam Musa Yukuba – 31 August 2012
Note that the original labeling ‘Arabic Manuscripts’ above the consolidated, numerically ordered collection
CONCLUSIONS
Over time NCMM’s focus has shifted to one devoted to objects and World Heritage Sites such as Sukur. The long term, neglected state of the manuscripts at Jos Museum indicate that their presence is now a burden on NCMM. The present condition of the Jos Museum Arabic Manuscripts Collection casts a negative shadow on NCMM’s international reputation.

It is important to understand the complex issues that confront the custodians of manuscript collections. From the time a manuscript book is created it may be used, displayed and perceived in many different ways. Damage is related to what the manuscript is made of, how and where it has been stored, its construction and how it has been used.

A manuscript’s condition is the result of physical forces resulting in damage through handling and use dissociation with loose elements detached or lost or out of order fire water pests pollutants light incorrect temperature and incorrect relative humidity.

The present condition of Jos Museum Arabic manuscript books reflect all these factors but at the extreme of negativity. These manuscript books are stacks of loose folios and therefore prone to being disordered with individual folios damaged or lost when used. Half the collection is stored in acidic strawboard portfolios covered in green starch-filled cloth that were fabricated by the British Museum in the 1950s. The strawboard holds high levels of moisture and therefore is prone to mold whilst the starch in the cloth is an insect attractant. These high humidity levels also attract psocids or book lice. They live on the fungi and molds in damp situations and damage paper in the process of eating the mold. The portfolios are also constructed with flaps that are only half a folio high allowing the edges of the flaps and the tapes to make deep impressions on the manuscript’s paper. In some cases these impressions have led to breakage in the paper. These green cloth-covered portfolios must be replaced immediately but with the manuscript cataloging notes they contain preserved. This will be a challenge as these notes have been pasted or glued onto the portfolio boards.
Strawboard is acidic. On the left one can see the acid has leached through the paper lining the portfolio and partially stained the manuscript. On the right the spots possibly indicate foxing, a type of mold that affects damp paper.

Leather beetles, *dermestes maculus*, can be identified by their fecal pellets joined together like a row of beads. These fecal pellets are sticky and brush cleaning is usually not sufficient to remove them. This makes use of a variable speed controlled vacuum a necessity. Here leather beetles have attacked the paper note pasted to the inside of the leather wrapper or *tadarishi*. Leather beetle fly readily and are known to enter windows near their breeding sites.
Insect debris in the windows adjacent to the Arabic manuscript collection

The windows adjacent to the presses housing the Jos Museum Arabic Manuscripts Collection reveal an accumulation of insect debris many decades in the making. Access to these windows is blocked by a very heavy map case.

In January 2012 six windows in the library were blown out. They have yet to be replaced, leaving the library and its invaluable manuscript collection, and its books too, completely open to the weather, insects, rodents, birds, bats and abrasive dust.

Security at the Jos Museum Library is poor. Even after the JMAMC Project’s massive reorganization many manuscripts are still missing. For instance, volume 1 of the Yunfa Qur’an (Jos MS 62), the Qur’an found after Uthman Dan Fodio defeated Gobir, could still not be found. There is evidence of pilfering by substituting one manuscript for another, an easy task since none of the staff can read Arabic script. We found dozens of such examples although we also found many more manuscripts had vanished altogether.

Manuscripts were found to have been glued together with white glue, which is not reversible. The use of this glue on manuscripts ignores the most basic tenant of conservation that any treatment be reversible. The white glue can be softened with certain chemicals and slowly scrapped away but it does not dissolve and some residue will always remain affecting the strength of the paper. Several hundred more manuscripts were found to be stapled together, drilling holes in fragile paper.

The Jos Museum Arabic Manuscripts Collection has not had a knowledgeable curator, one familiar with its diverse Arabic and Adjami texts, since 1995. Its present condition also betrays the fact that it has never had anyone familiar with even the basic tenants of preservation and conservation methodology nor with basic manuscript care such as keeping the manuscripts in acquisition register numerical order. Their present condition is an extreme disservice to the Nigerian and international intellectual community as using the collection in its present state is
unreasonably time consuming, if not impossible. Currently the acquisitions register and the incomplete 1966 Arif-Hakima catalogue provide the only access. Creating an adequate catalogue that reflects the present state of the collection should be a priority.

A conservation plan assessing the cultural significance of the collection identifies where that significance is vulnerable and sets out policies to safeguard it. This appears to be beyond the present custodians of this collection.

RECOMMENDATIONS
I strongly recommend that the Arabic Manuscripts held at the Jos Museum should be immediately transferred to Arewa House where they can be accurately catalogued and knowledgeably conserved. Researchers interested in these manuscripts would be well served as, at Arewa House, they would have the access to the language and content expertise of one knowledgeable in both Arabic and Adjami. In addition Arewa House has excellent storage facilities that are clean, secure and have some environmental controls. Arewa House also has staff trained in the basics of paper conservation that can ensure their long-term maintenance, preservation and conservation. They also have a well-lit room prepared as a conservation laboratory space with adequate work counters that can easily be kept clean and basic conservation equipment.

Due to the complex conservation issues of many Jos manuscripts more advanced conservation training will be necessary for whoever is charged with their conservation.

Arewa House staff also have the expertise to digitize these manuscripts, a desirable project in this age when so much research is conducted via the internet. The time is also long past due for compiling a comprehensive digital database of these fragile, ephemeral materials, which have, in times of political instability, a good chance of being lost. We need only look to the present state of the libraries in Timbuktu for an example. These manuscripts are germane to African historiography, cultural anthropology and archaeological material culture study. Such a database would also be an invaluable, promotional resource for international study but it should be the creation of Nigerians not the British Library whose concern for the conservation of others’ cultural property is minimal.

This transfer from NCMM to Arewa House could be in the form of a long-term or permanent loan where NCMM retains ownership but transfers the care of this collection, a national cultural heritage treasure, to Arewa House. This is a common practice in the U.K. and the U.S. when individuals or institutions are burdened with the ownership of materials for which they cannot adequately care and/or for which they cannot provide adequate security and/or timely access. This should be done quickly and done before this collection disappears and before it turns into a pile of moldy dust.
These manuscripts provide a lens beyond their words through which we can examine the history and culture of West Africa. Their paper comes from Europe documenting trading routes that varied through time. This paper also documents the European paper industry, a little studied subject. The ink and pigments are locally sourced and reflect a robust and thorough knowledge of local resources that were used in unique and sophisticated ways. The leather wrappers and bags are fabricated from locally produced leather, known to be widely traded throughout West Africa since the days of Leo Africanus. The Qur’an and other Muslim texts are primarily from the Islamic heartlands but some are from India, Anatolia and Andalucía – reflecting that people, as well as ideas, travelled. Other texts are locally composed and cover every subject.

These manuscripts are a tangible manifestation of Nigeria’s multicultural dimension. Unlike printed books each manuscript is unique. Their significance lies not just in their words but in their materiality, a materiality that betrays a mental structure or worldview. The text, objectified by paper and ink, embodies relationships and lineages of scholars. These manuscripts are about people, embodying many different aspects of human activity – intellectual, spiritual, literary, ideological, artistic, historic, political, economic and emblematic. As windows to past lives they facilitate vital understanding between past, present and future. Unless the care of these manuscripts improves dramatically and improves soon, that window will close, a great loss of important cultural heritage for Nigeria and for the world.