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Michaelle L. Biddle, *Wesleyan University*



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Recent Preservation and Conservation Activities for Northern Nigerian Manuscripts in Arabic Script

Michaëlle Biddle

Collections Conservator and Head of Preservation Services,
Wesleyan University Library, Middletown, Connecticut, U.S.A.
mbiddle@wesleyan.edu

Abstract

Nigeria has a rich Islamic manuscript heritage in danger of being lost due to lack of in-country preservation and conservation efforts. Of interest to scholars worldwide, these manuscripts in Arabic script are dispersed throughout Nigerian institutional and private collections. Since 2007 there has been a sustained effort to increase local awareness and Northern Nigerian regional capacity for care, conservation and maintenance of these collections.

Keywords

Preservation; conservation; education; manuscripts; West Africa; Nigeria; Sokoto; Adamawa; Bornu; Borno; Wesleyan University Library; United States Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation; Usmanu Danfodiyo University; National Archives Kaduna; National Museum Jos; Arewa House Kaduna; Modibbo Fufore Collection; Chukkunga *Qur'an*; American University of Nigeria; Nigerian Arabic Manuscript Project; NAMP

Preliminary Conference

In March 2007 Arewa House, Ahmadu Bello University, Kaduna, and the Public Affairs Section of the United States Embassy in Nigeria, sponsored the *Preserving Nigeria's Scholarly and Literary Traditions and Manuscript Heritage* conference.¹ Its main goal was to review and assess the current

¹ T. El-Miskin, Y.Y. Ibrahim, M. Hamman, and S. Bala, (eds.). *Proceedings of an international conference on preserving Nigeria's scholarly and literary traditions and Arabic/Ajami manuscript heritage*. Kaduna: Arewa House, Ahmadu Bello University, 2009.

state of the manuscript heritage in Nigeria, and to explore how modern technologies could assist in the preservation and conservation of these manuscripts, rendering them more accessible to researchers, scholars and the wider public.

Survey of Northern Nigerian Manuscript Collections

As a result of this symposium, a United States Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation Grant was made to Arewa House in order to bring a U.S. conservator to survey Northern Nigerian manuscript collections in Arabic script and to make recommendations on how best to proceed in order to begin working with Nigerian collections to facilitate these manuscripts' preservation and conservation. I was selected for this task and during March-April 2008 traveled 4500 km by road, supported by Arewa House staff, to survey the following manuscript collections:

- Kaduna—National Archives of Nigeria (NAK), Arewa House Archives and Museum (AH), National Museum Kaduna;
- Zaire—Kashim Ibrahim Library, Northern History Research Scheme, Ahmadu Bello University (NHRS);
- Kano—Kano History and Cultural Bureau (Gidan Dan Hausa), Gidan Mikama Museum, Bayero University Library—Document Section;
- Salame—Al-Torodi Collection (private);
- Sokoto—Waziri Junaidu Collection (private), Center for Islamic Studies—Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Waziri Junaidu History and Culture Bureau (WJHCB);
- Katsina—Katsina History and Culture Bureau (two private anonymous collections);
- Maiduguri—Borno Museum (National Museum Maiduguri), Center for Trans-Saharan Studies, University of Maiduguri;
- Yola—Fombina Palace Museum (National Museum Yola), Modibbo Ahmadu Fufore (MAF) and Modibbo Muhammadu Raji Collections, Hamidu Alkali/Alkali Hamma Joda Collection (private);
- Jos—National Museum Jos, Collection of Arabic Manuscripts (Jos)

In 2008 there were approximately seven thousand manuscripts in public Northern Nigerian collections. In size these manuscripts range from a single folio to over seven hundred. Like all West African manuscripts in Arabic

script they are unbound. These may represent a fraction of the surviving manuscripts of Bornu-Kanem, Hausaland and the Sultanate of Sokoto. Nigerian scholars estimate more than 80% are still in private hands but this may be an optimistic estimate. Paper manuscripts have many enemies, including the ubiquitous termite. In 1849 Barth recorded that the new Kanemi dynasty in Bornu endeavored to obliterate the memory of the previous thousand-year-old Saifawa dynasty by 'assiduously destroying all of its records whenever they could be laid hold of'.² Also, during the Fulani *jihād*, the Bornu leader Al-Kanemi reproached the Sokoto Fulani for having ordered the destruction of Arabic books in captured cities.³ There is also the not uncommon problem of research materials disappearing. For instance, the whereabouts of the thirty manuscripts in Lugard Hall Library Kaduna, catalogued in the 1960s,⁴ are presently unknown.

Except for the National Archives Kaduna, with approximately three thousand manuscripts, and the Jos Museum Collection, with one thousand four hundred, each of these collections contain no more than several hundred manuscripts. Each collection had unique problems although all suffered from lack of

- cleanliness
- temperature, humidity and light control
- sufficient maintenance of existing buildings and facilities
- adequate storage facilities
- complete data about physical characteristics and condition of the manuscripts
- handling procedures and access policies
- complete cataloging
- theoretical preservation and conservation knowledge
- trained personnel in preservation
- personnel with technical skills in conservation

² H. Barth, *Travels and discoveries in north and central Africa... in the years 1849-1855*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1857, vol. 2, p. 16.

³ A.D.H. Bivar, & M. Hiskett, 1962. 'The Arabic literature of Nigeria to 1804: a provisional account', in: *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 15 (1/3, 1962, pp. 104-148), p. 106.

⁴ A.S. Arif, & A. Hakima, *A Descriptive Catalogue of Arabic Manuscripts in Nigeria Jos Museum and Lugard Hall Library, Kaduna*. London: Luzac & Co., 1965.

The manuscripts themselves are in critical condition and in urgent need of stabilization. Even though there was widespread microfilming done in the 1960s there is no functioning microfilm reader in Northern Nigeria. Computers are often obsolete but the lack of reliable electricity makes their use and access to the Internet undependable. The dispersal of these collections across the width and breadth of Nigeria, coupled with the lack of local educational opportunities to benefit cultural collections' preservation and conservation, makes the preservation and conservation of these manuscripts a daunting challenge.

After this initial survey tour was completed, Arewa House brought together many of the stakeholders involved in the management and preservation of the manuscript heritage in Nigeria and NAMP (Nigeria Arabic Manuscript Project) was formed. Emphasis was given to

- importance of good management
- institutional administrations giving priority to providing safe conditions for the collections they hold in trust
- the necessity of assigning specific responsibility for the care of collections to particular staff members
- individuals at all levels in these institutions should assume responsibility for providing the support that will allow these collections to survive
- importance of stabilizing manuscripts in order to prevent further damage prior to digitization

The results of my initial survey are summarized in the *Saving Nigeria's Islamic Manuscript Heritage* report (available at <http://works.bepress.com/mbiddle/>).

Courses in Sokoto and Kaduna—Conservation in a Box

It was clear that training for local capacity building was going to be the key to implementing any effective preservation and conservation activities. I returned to Nigeria in August 2008 under a U.S. State Department Speakers Grant, to provide practical hands-on training in weeklong basic paper-conservation courses titled *Conservation in a Box*. Everything needed to stabilize these manuscripts would be in a metaphorical box since very few of the needed conservation tools and supplies are available in Northern

Nigeria. One course was taught in Sokoto, and the other in Kaduna, graciously hosted by Usmanu Danfodiyo University and the National Archives Kaduna respectively.

Eight students attended each course. Of these sixteen students, fourteen were from institutions in the initial survey and two from private collections. Each student was provided with a full kit of conservation tools and supplies. This kit included a collapsible custom-made Formica topped table on which to work. The course in Kaduna also had a revolving body of two-dozen observers who rapidly became participants. Tools were shared during exercises with enthusiastic Hausa, Fulbe and Arabic translations of my English instruction, racing between participants. I also compiled a written primer of paper treatments and procedures (available at <http://works.bepress.com/mbiddle/>) for these courses since access to the Internet is so unreliable and conservation reference materials in Nigeria are largely nonexistent.

The courses were both theoretical and practical. Manuscripts were brought in from private collections in Sokoto and from the National Archives in Kaduna to aid decision-making exercises. Cultural background, uncertain budgets and management context were always kept in mind.

Topics covered were

- general concepts in preservation and conservation
- causes of manuscript deterioration
- building maintenance and monitoring
- learning to see and to act
- phased preservation and conservation project planning and record keeping
- conservation vs. restoration
- manuscripts as cultural heritage

Certificates of successful completion were awarded to those ten participants who submitted a report on their preservation and conservation activities during the six months following the course.

Conserving the Modibbo Fufore Collection

My initial tour had included a survey of a notable private library of manuscript books and letters, the multi-generational Modibbo Ahmadu Fufore

Collection in Yola. Modibbo Fufore had been Chief Alkali in Adamawa. On his death in 1960, his family had carefully stored his library in the family compound but the intervening years had seen deterioration from the impact of severe climatic conditions and animal/insect infestations. The family agreed that the collection should be transferred to an institution that could provide continuity of care and access for scholars interested in using the manuscripts. With the generous financial support of Modibbo Fufore's descendants, under the leadership of Alhaji Saidu M. Ahmad, I was invited to come to Yola with a nine-person team to stabilize and house the collection of over four hundred manuscripts prior to its transfer from Yola to Arewa House Kaduna. This intense two-week project also allowed for further preservation/conservation/project planning and management experience for Nigerian participants. The Governor of Adamawa State graciously provided a guesthouse for the project, which proceeded with the blessings of Lamido Dr. Aliyu Musdafa, the longest reigning Emir in Northern Nigeria. After the collection was transferred to Arewa House, stabilization activities continued under the able direction of Malam Musa Muhammad, Archivist at Arewa House. This project generated positive press, and subsequently two other private, previously unknown manuscript collections have been donated to Arewa House. (A report on the Modibbo Fufore Project is available at <http://works.bepress.com/mbiddle/>.)

Conserving the Chukkunga Qur'an in Yola

In May 2009 The Islamic Manuscript Association provided a grant for stabilizing and housing the great Chukkunga *Qur'an* now on display in the Lamido Palace Museum Yola. Access to the *Qur'an* and project space in the recently completely Lamido Zubairu Educational Centre Yola was graciously granted by the Lamido Palace Council under the leadership of Alhaji Murtala Aminu, Galadima Adamawa. The Chukkunga is known to have belonged to the first Emir of Adamawa, Modibbo Adama Hassana (1771-1848). The Chukkunga Project also provided further preservation/conservation/project planning and management experience for a small team, one a staff member of the National Commission of Museums and Monuments (NCMM). My host, Martha Speirs, American University of Nigeria Library Director, also provided support beyond bed and board by releasing three of their staff to aid in the project.

Arewa House Course

Immediately following this Chukkunga Project, Arewa House, with aid from a Ford Foundation Grant, funded a third practical hands-on paper conservation course with twelve students, each of whom were curators, librarians, or support staff in Northern Nigerian institutions. Again each student was provided with a basic set of conservation tools and supplies for their respective institutions. In addition there were twenty-three observers, all administrators from the students' home institution. Their inclusion permitted further emphasis on the importance of desirable management practices.

My research into the formulations of the various inks used in these Northern Nigerian manuscripts,⁵ and my experience during the rainy season in Northern Nigeria during the Modibbo Fufore Project, led me to revisit several conservation procedures, resulting in a slightly revised primer *Conservation of Nigerian Manuscripts in Arabic Script* (available at <http://works.bepress.com/mbiddle/>).

Preservation Goals and Conservation Treatments

In addition to these practical aspects of conserving manuscripts on paper, the broader philosophical topic of conservation's goal of supporting civil society and education with a balanced body of knowledge, not just artifacts but documentation of traditional creative skills, examples of resilience in coping with the vicissitudes of existence, and institutions of which they are a part exemplifying good management and in good working order was also broached.

The aim of the conservation treatments was stabilization of the present state so that manuscripts might be handled without further damage. With every folio needing some sort of treatment, phased conservation is the only reasonable approach. No restoration techniques were involved. Loose dirt was brushed off carefully. Tears and broken folios were mended only where necessary with emphasis on tears threatening text. Extremely fragile or

⁵ See Michaëlle Biddle, 'Inks in the Islamic Manuscripts of Northern Nigeria. Old Recipes, Modern Analysis and Medicine', in *Journal of Islamic Manuscripts* 2 (2011), pp. 1-35.

fragmented leaves were put into folders made of acid-free, multi-purpose office paper, a pragmatic rather than an ideal treatment. This paper was also used as folders for smaller manuscripts. Manuscripts were then housed in purpose-made boxes. Polyester film folders proved to be unsuitable due to their high static cling during the dry season and extreme ambient humidity during the rainy season. No holding institution has temperature control in their manuscript storage facilities except for Arewa House, which created an air conditioned manuscript storage room in early 2010.

In both the Modibbo Fufore Project and the Chukkunga Project, my principal and most able partners were Malam Musa Muhammad, Archivist at Arewa House, and Malam Ahmadu Girei, Librarian at the Centre for Trans-Saharan Studies, University of Maiduguri. Both individuals were students in the first Kaduna course. They have been supported by Arewa House Directors Dr. Mahmoud Hamman and Dr. Kabiru Chafe, and Trans-Saharan Centre Director Professor Mohammed Nur Alkali and Deputy Director Dr. Abubakar Garba. Dr. Garba and Malam Girei recently completed a statistical analysis of the various conditions afflicting the manuscripts in the care of the Trans-Saharan Centre and are now planning a digitization project.

Future Projects

Jos Museum Arabic Manuscript Collection

Arewa House and I are now seeking funding in order to stabilize and then digitize the Jos Museum Arabic Manuscript Collection. The National Museum in Jos was founded in 1952 by Bernard Fagg and is recognized as among the best in Nigeria. I was fortunate enough to have talked with Bernard Fagg whilst an intern at SOAS. He preferred to talk about the importance of the Jos Arabic manuscripts rather than the Nok. His enthusiastic admiration and concern for the Jos manuscript collection fell on fertile ground as I'd read Barth as a child. The Jos collection has sometimes been referred to as the Palmer Collection since Sir H.R. Palmer gathered its core in the early 20th century. His collection was augmented by the manuscript collecting activities of Fagg, A.D.H. Bivar and Malam Muntaka Coomassje in the 1950-60s. It contains 18th to early 20th century manuscripts. This collection has been without a curator since 1995 and the collection is presently

in a critical, disastrous condition. Any handling of these manuscripts is hazardous both to researchers and to the manuscripts.

Conservation Lab at Arewa House

Arewa House has been awarded a seed grant towards establishing a paper conservation lab. After further fund raising we hope to move forward on this project. During all conservation projects and training, pragmatic emphasis has been given to using local materials whenever possible—acid-free, multi-purpose office paper as separation folders, acid-free corrugated boxes broken down to provide material for purpose-made boxes for manuscript housing—but the reality is that the majority of specialized conservation tools, equipment and supplies must be imported into Nigeria, which adds to the expense and complexity of this undertaking.

Conclusion

Nigeria has a rich manuscript heritage that documents the complex intellectual and social history of West Africa but this heritage is in extreme jeopardy. These manuscripts are of interest to scholars not only in Africa but world wide, scholars working in a wide variety of fields from history to medicine, archaeology to jurisprudence. Since Nigeria's national cultural authorities' current focus appears to be on objects, not books, and certainly not on manuscripts, it has been left to holding institutions' individual efforts, coupled with the energetic leadership of Arewa House and support from generous international grants, to address the dire preservation and conservation needs of their manuscript collections. Whilst some Nigerians view the rediscovery of the past as a luxury in a time of political instability, poverty, underdevelopment, and the onslaught of HIV/AIDS, a more informed knowledge of past accomplishments could inspire the present, and renew cultural and national pride.

The last three years has seen increased awareness and improvement in Northern Nigerian regional capacity for preservation, maintenance and conservation of manuscripts in libraries, universities and private collections. By choosing what we humans care for and how we care for it, we are making statements about what we value. When we are so fortunate as to have witnesses from the past, such as these manuscripts, survive the

ravages of time and the vagaries of fortune, it is everyone's responsibility to ensure that these valued objects survive for present and future generations to enjoy, study and understand. They are valuable testaments and resources that can be used to enhance educational opportunities and inter-societal understandings. Investment in conservation enhances and stimulates traditional skills and regenerates community. In times of stress, heritage and culture enhance continuity and feelings of security. Heritage and culture are matters of daily life, for without them people lose their identity and hope for the future. All too often we humans understand the value of things only after they are gone. We must not let this happen with the manuscripts of Nigeria.

Acknowledgements

This work would not be possible without the warm and generous support of the custodians, staffs, librarians, archivists, directors, professors and administrators of these Northern Nigerian collections and institutions. Their concern for preserving their cultural heritage has inspired me to continue this work, which at times has been under daunting conditions. The roads in Northern Nigeria are difficult and being held up by gun-toting bandits is always a sobering experience. But we have a common goal—the preservation of these treasures from the past, to enrich the present and to inform the future.

In addition to individuals, foundations, agencies and institutions already mentioned, these activities would not be possible without the support of Head Librarian Pat Tully and Provost Joe Bruno of Wesleyan University; the Public Affairs Section of the U.S. Embassy in Abuja, Nigeria, and, in particular, Henry Mendelsohn; Director Barbara Jones of the American Library Association Office for Intellectual Freedom; Robert McKelvey and the Adelpic Education Fund; and Dr. David Biddle, my husband.

All photos are by Michaëlle Biddle except Fig. 9, which is by courtesy of Malam Musa Muhammad.



Fig. 1. Manuscripts in a traditional mud brick structure—Salame 2008. Some manuscripts were stored in acidic envelopes, rice sacks, acidic card board boxes or plastic carrying bags (Nigerian 'leathers') providing some protection from pervasive dust and harsh climate. Others have been left to crumble on a table.



Fig. 2. Building II—National Archives Kaduna 2008. Because there is no shelving, documents are placed in rice sacks or bundled in acidic brown paper and stored on the unsealed cement floor. Everyone on staff, including the director, engages in cleaning and dusting, a continual task since there are no window screens and no HVAC.



Fig. 3. A small portion of the Modibbo Fufore Collection prior to being processed and stabilized—Yola 2009.



Fig. 4. Training for local capacity building is the key to implementing effective, sustained preservation and conservation programs. UDU-Sokoto enthusiastically hosted the first week long training 'Conservation in a Box' course in paper preservation and conservation—2008.



Fig. 5. Students practicing paper mending techniques during the first 'Conservation in a Box' course held in the UDU Sokoto computer center—2008.



Fig. 6. During the second 'Conservation in a Box' course held at the National Archives Kaduna, students discussed the range of treatment priorities for thousands of manuscript folios needing conservation—2008.



Fig. 7. Each folio in the Modibbo Fufore Collection was brush cleaned. As some folios supported mold, cleaning was done outside even though the temperature hovered at 40 C—Yola 2009.



Fig. 8. Fabricating over 30 meters of Klucel coated 5 gsm tenjucho Japanese tissue was labor intensive and time consuming. Activated with methylated spirits, this tissue was used in stabilizing ink corroded Chukkunga *Qur'an* folios—Yola 2009.



Fig. 9. Modibbo Fufore Collection after transfer to Arewa House Kaduna's air conditioned manuscript storage room. The manuscripts are clean, stabilized, stored in acid free paper folders and boxed. The butterfly boxes are fabricated from repurposed acid free Nigerian photocopier cartons—2010. Photo courtesy of Malam Musa Muhammad.

