CHALLENGES IN PROCUREMENT AND PRESERVATION OF ARABICL/AJAMI MANUSCRIPTS IN NIGERIA: LESSONS FROM RECENT FIELD EXPERIENCES OF AREWA HOUSE, ABU, KADUNA

Musa Salih Muhammad
CHALLENGES IN PROCUREMENT AND PRESERVATION OF ARABIC/ AJAMI MANUSCRIPTS IN NIGERIA: LESSONS FROM RECENT FIELD EXPERIENCES OF AREWA HOUSE, ABU, KADUNA

BY

MAHMoud HAMMAN AND MUSA. S. MOHAMMED

AREWA HOUSE,
CENTRE FOR HISTORICAL DOCUMENTATION AND RESEARCH,
AHMADU BELLO UNIVERSITY, KADUNA
ABSTRACT

One of the most serious challenges facing historians of West Africa and Nigeria in particular, is related to the utilisation of Arabic and Ajami manuscripts. This is because while this vital source material is known to be available in large volumes in the areas that came under the influence of Islam, like Northern and South-Western Nigeria and the Sene-Gambian region, only about 20% of them are in the custody of public repositories and therefore potentially accessible to researchers. The remaining 80% or so are in the hands of private individuals/Ulama’a and hence dispersed all over the region. Secondly, in spite of the efforts of pioneer researchers who collected and deposited these documents in the repositories, the contents of most of the Arabic manuscripts in these repositories are not well known because of the fact that many of them are not even catalogued, not to talk of being translated into working languages in order to enable non-Arabic speaking researchers to have access to them. Thirdly, there is the problem of conservation of these manuscripts, some of which are several centuries old. All the surveys recently conducted on the public repositories and some of the private holdings are unanimous that the conditions under which the manuscripts are kept cannot ensure their long term survival and therefore require urgent remedial action. It is therefore quite necessary and urgent for the manuscripts in private hands to be recovered and for those in public repositories to be properly preserved and conserved through the application of modern scientific methods. The issue of organisation and cataloguing of the manuscripts should also be seriously addressed in order to enable researchers to have easy access to the documents and use them for the production of new knowledge. Arewa House, Centre for Historical Documentation and Research, ABU, Kaduna, has in the last two years resumed field operations for the recovery of the Arabic/Ajami manuscripts and its efforts in this regard had yielded positive results.
Introduction

The idea of recovering Arabic/Ajami Manuscripts Systematically for use as one of the source materials for the reconstruction of the history of various polities in Nigeria developed in the University College, Ibadan, in the mid 1950s under the initiative of the late Professor K.O. Dike, with the support of the Government of Northern Nigeria and his professional colleagues like the late Professor Abdullahi Smith and Dr. S.O. Biobaku. This was their response to the then intellectual anachronism which maintained that hitherto there did not exist sufficient material for the study of Nigerian History before the beginning of colonial rule. (Dike, K.O. 1962,1 and Smith, H.F.C, 1962,2).

As a result of the pressure mounted by Dike, the colonial Government established a Public Records Department in 1953 under the supervision of professor Dike himself. By 1954 W.E.N. Kensdale collected Arabic manuscripts from various parts of Northern Nigeria and deposited them in the Library of the University of Ibadan where the Headquarters of the National
Archives was first located. Since then, great strides had been made in the endeavour to assemble the voluminous but dispersed Arabic/Ajami Manuscripts which had been in the possession of private individuals or families in Northern Nigeria in particular but also in Yorubaland and Northern Edo at least since 1400 A.D. for the Arabic and 1700 A.D. for the Ajami manuscripts (Smith, 1962,4)

For instance, in the period 1957-1967 the National Archives Kaduna collected more than 5,000 Arabic manuscripts from 14 provinces of the North, including Kaduna Capital Territory (Usman, A.B., NAK, 2/8/72). Meanwhile, from 1959 up to the mid 1960s Professor Abdullahi Smith, M. Hisket, M.A. Alhaji and M.D. Last traversed various provinces in the North collecting manuscripts which were filmed in Ibadan. Subsequently, many of these manuscripts (528) were microfilmed and brought to ABU where the Northern History Research Scheme (NHRS) was launched in 1964. Up to 1967 the successes recorded in the collection of Arabic/Ajami Manuscripts in the North was the
result of a joint effort between the Ahmadu Bello University and the University of Ibadan.

**The Achievements and Limitations of the Pioneers**

(a) Achievements

When the Northern History Research Scheme was launched in 1964 its founding Director, Professor Abdullahi Smith, stated that the “.... Primary task of the scheme would be to proceed in as systematic fashion as possible with the ‘recovery’ of this material and its cataloguing with a view to making available for future enquiry a substantial central research library located at Zaria in the heart of the area under study” (Smith, 1962, 4-5). Commenting on the scope of the scheme, Murray Last noted that “it is all the various written expressions of a society’s culture that the Northern History Research Scheme is trying to collect and put at the disposal of research scholars” (Last, M.D., 1962, 22).

There is no doubt that in the twenty year period between 1964, when the NHRS was launched and 1984, when Professor Abdullahi Smith passed away, the scheme registered
tremendous success, especially in quantitative terms (Smith, 1967, 3-4; Last, 1966, 28-55, 1967, 34-47 and 38-41). According to Smith himself, by 1967 they recovered 637 Sokoto correspondences (essentially between the Caliphal authorities and the Emirates) covering the period 1804-1903 (Smith, 1967, 3). Similarly, an enormous volume of material was recovered by Last in the field of Fulfulde and Hausa Poetry, (Ibid, 5). This spectacular achievement as noted earlier, was the result of extensive field work, both locally and internationally, by Smith and his colleagues and students in the period between 1959 and 1967.

The outcome of these field operations and subsequent ones conducted by the various researchers was reflected in the Interim Reports of the Northern History Research Scheme, starting from 1966. In the first Report, it was stated that large scale microfilming of manuscripts was started in June, 1965 in Sokoto (Last, 1966, 26). In July, 1965 rare manuscripts were filmed in the Shahuci School in Kano, while in the same year some 400 pages of manuscript were found in Zaria and also
filmed (ibid). 528 manuscripts held on microfilm by the NHRS were also catalogued in the year, mainly letters and Poems (Ibid, 28-55). Through the initiative of the scheme, various foreign collections were either examined or procured on microfilm in 1966. Moreover, Last reported that some work was done in the Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris, in the Moroccan archives, Rabat, and in the Senegalese Archives in Dakar and that microfilm of important texts were expected from the last two institutions. (Ibid, 26-27).

Earlier on, in 1959, three manuscripts on a film were donated by I.F.A.N., Dakar (Ibid, 26) in addition to other foreign collections on microfilms made available to the Kashim Ibrahim Library, ABU, Zaria as indicated in the 1966 Report. These consisted of historical documents taken from Segu in 1890, including al-Hajj Sa’id’s history of Sokoto and material illustrating the disputes between al-Hajj Umar and Muhammad al-Amin al-Kanemi (ibid).

The 1967 Interim Report indicated substantial progress in the recovery of the Arabic Manuscript literature of the North.
637 letters, 74 Arabic and Hausa Manuscripts on microfilm and 70 Fulfulde poems were catalogued in this Report (Smith, 1967, 3; Last, 1967, 34-37, 43-46, 49-70).


The Sixth Interim Report (1979-1981) printed in 1987, catalogued 148 manuscripts, consisting of 114 manuscripts other than letters and 34 letters (6th Interim Report, 1987, 2-12 and 13-16). It is very disheartening, however, that field operations by the NHRS stopped since around 1981.
As noted earlier, the National Archives, Kaduna (N.A.K.) had more than 5,000 Arabic Manuscripts in its holdings. Out of this number, 4,379 were catalogued. Unfortunately, however, major procurement by the Archive stopped since 1976.

The Federal Museum Library, Jos, started collecting Arabic Manuscripts in 1958 and has about 1,500 manuscripts in its holdings. However, only 700 out of this were catalogued since 1962.

Arewa House, Centre for Historical Documentation and Research, was established in 1970, but until April, 2009 had only about 207 photocopied manuscripts other than letters and 527 letters which are not catalogued. Procurement of Arabic Manuscripts by the Centre had also stopped since the early 1980s. However, as a result of intensive field work undertaken in the last one year in Plateau, Adamawa and Katsina States, the Centre has got almost 1000 original Arabic Manuscripts in its holding and about 700 of this number have been catalogued.

The Centre for Trans-Saharan Studies, university of Maiduguri, has a total of 325 Arabic Manuscripts which it
collected in the period between 1980 and 1986. However, its field operations seem to have stopped since the latter year.

The History and Culture Bureaux of Kano and Sokoto have large volumes of Arabic materials, but they are largely uncatalogued.

(b) Limitations:

Viewed against the background of the foregoing data, there is no doubt that the research activities of the pioneers in the field of Arabic manuscripts had yielded good result in terms of the recovery of huge volumes of documentary material that were hitherto virtually inaccessible to most scholars. Nevertheless, a number of problems have also developed even as the researchers were making progress in the field. In fact some of the problems were anticipated by the researchers themselves even before they assumed serious dimensions.

For instance, Abdullahi Smith had drawn attention in the Second Interim Report of the NHRS to the problems of recording the work that had been done and of housing and cataloguing the material accumulated by the Research
Fellows and associated scholars in the service of the scheme. Specifically, he noted the task of organising the steadily growing mass of research material so that it may remain permanently available to workers in this field. He then tied up any future success to a special financial provision to be made for the manuscripts' permanent organisation (Smith, 1967, 10).

However, one of the indicators that the above problems have not yet been properly addressed, not to say resolved, over the years, is that most of the Arabic Manuscripts in the public repositories are not catalogued. For instance, the present writers' estimation is that about 65% of the Manuscripts in the present holdings of the NHRS library ABU, Zaria, are not catalogued. As noted earlier, almost 60% of the Arabic Manuscripts of the Jos Museum Library are not catalogued. The National Archives, Kaduna, is the only exception in this regard as most of its Arabic Manuscripts are catalogued. Needless to say, the significance of the failure to catalogue these manuscripts is that as long as they continue to be in this
state, they will remain inaccessible to researchers and therefore, any damage that sets in cannot be easily detected.

Another problem associated with the manuscripts in most of the public repositories is the nature of the formats in which they are stored. As professor Smith had noted with respect to the NHRS, but certainly not limited to it, the manuscript collections as at 1967 were virtually all of microfilm material. For the NHRS alone, the Arabic Manuscripts (including the Fulfulde and Hausa Ajami) amount to some 23,000 frames of film (Smith, 1967, 11).

Two problems come to mind immediately with respect to the microfilms as medium of storage. These are the issues of printing and cataloguing in order to make them accessible. Printing is presently made difficult because of the obsolescence of the microfilm machines and the deteriorated condition of the films themselves as a result of aging process. It is sad to note at this juncture, that all the more than 1000 titles of Arabic Manuscripts on Microfilms in the Kenneth Dike Library of the University of Ibadan are completely damaged and irretrievable.
and had to be buried because they were already becoming health hazard to the workers and users of the Library (Batiste, A.D., 2007, 12 and Alegbeleye, G.O. Oral briefing, Abuja, March, 2009) The condition of the huge volume of microfilm in the NHRS is not even known because they have not yet been evaluated by experts, while they have now been in storage for several decades.

Manuscripts that are held in photographic and photocopy formats also face enormous problems, ranging from folding or tubing, fading and becoming brittle. Unfortunately, however, a large number of the Manuscripts held in the NHRS Library in particular, and in BUK (Documents section) are in photographic or photocopy format.

Against this backdrop, it would seem that the best medium for keeping the manuscripts is in their original paper state, subject of course to the application of modern scientific techniques of conservation and preservation. Digitisation, which is now in vogue, cannot be a solution for now because of its fickleness and cost of periodic migration. Arewa House lost
25 CDs of digitised manuscripts of the Premiers Office Records last year simply because they were kept for two years without being transferred to new sets of CDs.

However, as is well known, except for the Jos Museum Library which has 1,452 original MSS, the National Archives, Kaduna, with over 5000 MSS, the Waziri Junaidu History and Culture Bureau Sokoto, and the Kano State history and Culture Bureau, Kano, which have large volumes of original but uncatalogued Arabic Materials, the original manuscripts constitute only a small proportion of the holdings of the other public repositories in the country. For instance, in the NHRS there are 196 folders each containing varied numbers of catalogued manuscripts. However, only 16 of them contain original MSS numbering about 147. All the rest are photocopies and photographs. The MSS holdings of the Documents section of the BUK Library in Kano also consist mainly of photocopied material. The Centre for Trans-Saharan Studies, University of Maiduguri, as noted earlier, has only 47 original manuscripts out of the total of 325. Until April, 2009, as noted earlier, Arewa
House itself had only 3 handwritten original MSS and 34 so-called ‘market copies’ out of 207 manuscripts other than letters. However, the situation has now been reversed with the new acquisitions made from Adamawa (over 500 catalogued originals), Plateau (156 catalogued originals) and Katsina (30 catalogued originals) with still many originals from Adamawa and Plateau unsorted or catalogued.

While it is heart-warming to note that most of the MSS in the holdings of the major public repositories are original ones, there is as yet no cause for cheer. This is because from the reports of recent surveys conducted in Northern Nigeria by experts from the U.S.A., namely Angel D. Batiste of the Library of Congress and Michaeelle Biddle of the Wesleyan University Library, Connecticut, the State of all categories of MSS in our repositories and the condition of the environment in which they are kept, are extremely unsatisfactory. This, of course, affects even the MSS that are in their original state (Batiste, A.D., 2007, 8-18; Biddle, M., 2008, 2-11 and 2009, 1; Musa, S.M., 2009, 3).
Recent Field Experiences of Arewa House

One of the objectives of the International Conference on Preserving Nigeria’s scholarly and Literary Traditions and Arabic Manuscript Heritage that was held in March 2007 was the sensitisation of stakeholders, both individuals and institutions, on the urgency for addressing the issue of recovering and preserving Nigeria’s Arabic/Ajami Manuscripts heritage which are fast deteriorating because of poor storage and long-standing neglect. This objective, coupled with the implementation of one of the resolutions of the Conference which required Arewa House to establish an umbrella body to be known as Nigeria Arabic Manuscript Project (NAMP) with a functional Board, Kick-started a process of field operations that have yielded positive result in terms of procurement and preservation of Arabic/Ajami Manuscripts in some Northern States of Nigeria.

When considered in relation to the amount of time so far spent on this project, i.e. about one year (March 2008 – May, 2009) one can even say that the outcome of the effort is
spectacular. It is the lessons gained from this experience, both from the point of view of speedy procurement and the application of modern scientific methods to preserve these vital documents that we want to share with other stakeholders in this conference.

(a) The Surveys:

An important pre-requisite for a successful outing for manuscript recovery is a comprehensive survey of target areas and institutions. Arewa House was fortunate in this regard because one of the participants in the March, 2007 Conference, Dr. Angel D. Batiste of the Library of Congress, was undertaking a Survey Tour to Northern Nigeria from March 3-19, 2007. The focus of the Survey was ‘The state of Arabic Manuscript collection in Nigeria’. The tour took her to most of the public repositories in Northern and Southern-Western Nigeria. The report that she produced highlighted the basic problems or the Arabic Manuscripts and the unsatisfactory condition of their storage (Batiste, 2007, 8-18). In her observations she had this to say:

“The priceless Arabic Manuscript Collections in the Northern Nigeria region represent one of the most important sources of documentary heritage of the African Islamic world. The Manuscript, particularly
those generated by Nigeria’s indigenous scholars, greatly aid the ability to understand local indigenous knowledge systems and the dynamics of intellectual discourse in the spheres of religion, politics, economics and culture in the west African Sub-region from the earliest times to the present day.

Despite the historical significance of the Arabic Manuscript Collection in Northern Nigeria, they have been largely neglected.....” (Batiste, 2007, 15)

As a result of what she saw on the ground, Batiste concluded that current arrangements are totally inadequate for the safe-keeping of the MSS. Suitable protective measures and urgent preservation action is needed, particularly special care and archival quality housing. Environmental conditions must also be improved (ibid, 15).

A similar survey was conducted for Arewa House barely a year later by Michaelle Biddle, Head of Preservation Services, Wesleyan University Library, Middle-Town, Connecticut, U.S.A. Her work was supported by a State Department grant to Arewa House from the Ambassadors Fund for Culture Preservation, supplemented by logistics assistance by Arewa House itself. This enabled her to undertake a research tour in Northern Nigeria in March, 2008 to assess the condition of publicly and privately held Islamic Manuscript collections in order to identify
preservation and conservation needs. She visited virtually all the public repositories of Arabic MSS in the Northern States and the private libraries of some Islamic scholars. In the report she produced after the survey she observed that Nigeria has a rich Islamic manuscript heritage that is in danger of being lost due to lack of preservation and conservation efforts. She added that the neglect of African intellectual history and in particular its library and archival materials, was severe and critical (Biddle, 2008, 2). None of the Islamic Manuscript collections surveyed by her were stored in environmental conditions that will support their long-term preservation. The manuscripts were uniformly brittle and some were already turning to dust (ibid, 5). Against this background, she made far-reaching recommendations for the preservation of the manuscripts.

More importantly, however, Mrs Biddle organized two workshops for the technical staff and Administrators of all the public repositories in Northern Nigeria. The first one took place in Arewa House in March, 2008 and the second and technically more comprehensive one took place in the National Archives, Kaduna, in August 2008. During the latter workshop, she donated some working tools and materials to each of the public repositories and also provided each of the participants with a Primer of Basic Paper Conservation Procedures and Treatments titled: CONSERVATION IN A BOX (16 PP).
(b) Treasure Troves of Manuscripts

It was against the background of these important surveys and workshops that Arewa House engaged in serious search for Arabic Manuscripts in line with the resolutions of the International Conference of March, 2007. The search took its team to Adamawa, Plateau, Bauchi, Kano and Katsina States. Its focus was to examine the Manuscript collections owned by individuals and families, draw attention to the hazards involved in improper storage, the difficulties of preserving the documents in the traditional setting and the benefits of transferring them to Arewa House for proper custody under modern scientific methods. While this was going on, Arewa House also offered to sort, list and even catalogue some of the collections, thereby building confidence among the owners of these collections. It did not take long before this approach yielded wonderful results.

The first was the collection of the late Sheikh Ahmad Arabi of Jos, where the family invited Arewa House to examine the collection and suggest how to arrest its rapid deterioration and possible transfer of the entire collection to its Archive in Kaduna. As a result of this development, the Archivist of Arewa House embarked on the work in February, 2008 and submitted a report in May, 2008. A hand list of original Arabic Manuscripts in the report shows that there are 156 items, in addition to over 700 printed materials (Musa, S. M., 2008 part I, 1-18 and part II,
After some discussions, the family decided to allow Arewa House to transfer the entire collection to its Archive in Kaduna and the process has already started on Friday, 1st May, 2009. Most of the original Manuscripts and some of the books were in the first batch to be evacuated to Kaduna.

The second major successful operation was in Yola, where the family of the late Qadi Modibbo Ahmadu Fufere had been in contact with Arewa House since March, 2008. After several visits by the present writers during which the large volume of the Modibbo Fufere’s Multi-generational manuscript family collection was examined, sorted and listed with the help of members of the family, it was agreed that the entire collection be transferred to the Arewa House Archive.

However, before the transfer was effected at the end of March, 2009, an important development took place. Arewa House and the Modibbo’s Family agreed that they should jointly invite and partly sponsor Mrs. Biddle to come and treat the manuscripts at Yola and prepare them for proper preservation, using some of the latest techniques and processes in the field of conservation. Mrs. Biddle accepted the invitation and when she arrived she constituted a conservation team of nine (9) persons who worked with her in Yola from 9th – 20th March, 2009.

The team cleaned, stabilised, housed and boxed the Manuscripts before their transfer to Arewa House. Mrs. Biddle
submitted a report to Arewa House on this operation on 1st April, 2009. She observed that there was evidence of pervasive insect infection, rodent and water damage, edge embrittlement, extensive wear, tear and soiling (Biddle, M.L., 2009, 1).

In his own separate report on the Modibbo Fufore’s collection the Arewa House Archivist, Musa Had this to say:

“Modibbo Ahmadu Fufore’s Manuscripts Collection are a testimony of the long intellectual history of Muslims in this country..... These works have played a central role in the cultural development of Muslims and Northern Nigerian History and Civilisation. They are a source of knowledge about the past” (Musa, S.M., 2009, 1-2).

The collection contains more than 500 manuscripts out of which 370 were catalogued by Arewa House.

The third success story was in Katsina state, where Alhaji Iliyasu Dalhatu of Saulawa quarters of Katsina city permitted Arewa House to examine some of the Manuscripts inherited from their father, Mallam Dalhatu Katsina. After some discussions on the merit of transferring the documents to Arewa House for preservation and better storage, Alhaji Iliyasu personally brought 30 of the original manuscripts to Kaduna on the 28th of March, 2009, and they are now kept in the Archive of Arewa House.
(c) The Lessons

From the foregoing experiences of Arewa House in its field operations in the period between 2007 and 2009, a number of lessons can be learnt by other stakeholders. Firstly, in spite of the long cessation of field operations by most of the public repositories in the country the custodians of these documents are still willing to discuss the future of their manuscripts in the context of the clearly unsatisfactory conditions in which they are kept. Secondly, it should be noted that most of the descendants of the original owners of the manuscripts have now acquired modern education and are more willing than their forebears to part with these manuscripts for good cause. It is, therefore, advisable for field workers to identify such members of the families and discuss any proposal with them. Thirdly, in some cases material inducement in the form of compensation may help to minimise resistance to the idea of parting with inherited documents to which the heirs are emotionally attached.
CONCLUSION

The efforts of the various researchers who strove since the 1950s to recover and preserve Arabic/Ajami manuscripts as vital historical source material in Nigeria, has gone full circle. They justifiably started with great optimism when, as professors K.O. Dike and Abdullahi Smith observed, the problem was not so much that of scarcity of the materials or the difficulty of their recovery, but their sheer volume and how to organise and make them accessible to scholars. There is no doubt that a lot had been achieved in this regard, especially in the 1960s and early 1970s, when many public repositories were established and several scholarly works based on these manuscripts were produced, especially at post-graduate level. Unfortunately, however, there followed a long period of stagnation, lasting for about two decades, when all field operations came to a halt virtually everywhere.

However, a new wave of interest in the recovery and preservation of Nigeria’s documentary heritage is now sweeping across the country as testified to by the series of workshops and conferences that are being organised in the last three years or so by various institutional stakeholders. Moreover, there is now a new found interest in Arabic/Ajami Manuscripts among international organisations like the UNESCO and donor agencies like the Ford Foundation who are
collaborating with research and archive institutions in Africa to promote the recovery, preservation, content analysis and utilisation of Arabic/Ajami Manuscripts for the production of new knowledge. Thus there is now a strong basis for optimism in the future of these manuscripts as historical and cultural source material not only in Nigeria, but the whole of Africa.
REFERENCES


Biddle, M. (2008-i), Saving Nigeria’s Islamic Manuscript Heritage (Monograph).


