ACCESSING MANUSCRIPTS IN NORTHERN NIGERIAN REPOSITORIES: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract

Since the discussion on Arabic/Ajami manuscripts recovery was started under the International conference series in Arewa House, Kaduna in the year 2007, not many thought of the enormous task ahead in the way those pursuing the project in the field are currently experiencing. Whether it is at the level of determining the state of the manuscripts, their scope, attempt to recover and preserve them in the best way researchers could benefit from their resourcefulness, the problem has been the same. While progress is being made with strong commitment to reach the destination of these vast unexplored resources, and where possible collect and preserve those using modern techniques, a critical problem now discovered in the field is that of permanent loss
of some of the manuscripts in private hands. This paper attempts to highlight the problem of damage facing the manuscripts using specific examples of some private repositories in parts of Northern Nigeria.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

When the project on Preserving Nigeria’s Scholarly and Literary Tradition and Arabic Manuscripts Heritage was conceived one of the several strategies of achieving the set goals was in establishing contact with existing manuscripts preserving agencies and the Ulama (Islamic scholars) as much as it could be possible. The purpose of doing that is to assess the materials so as to offer advice on the care and control and opening up of these priceless resources to the society. In addition the project also seeks for the acquisition of those manuscripts by way of photocopying, digital photo, gift or purchases by Arewa House for permanent preservation and future uses. To the vast unexplored collections, the mission is to survey, document, preserve and provide access to them as they are located in thousand homes across Northern Nigeria and
beyond. So far the mission in its conference series has reached the stage of penetrating these wide-ranging sources. What is the experience like with these unexplored sources spread in private hands that are quite unknown, yet of high intellectual quality? This paper discusses some of the latest experiences, which are showing danger signals in the field work to preserve and prepare for access manuscripts in the private hands so far contacted.

2.0 A GENERAL OVERVIEW

The attempt to venture into a project on Arabic/Ajami manuscript is not new for this part of the country although it was not started here. Then at University College Ibadan it was basically a response to set the records straight against an inconsistent position taken by colonial historiographers and administrators that Nigeria had no sufficient source material for the reconstruction of its past. Even at the very early stage, Smith (1958) drew attention to likely problems of preservation, access and studying the documents as they are being recovered. This prompted an appeal on what he referred to as world of scholarship to ensure that texts are properly preserved and made available to students who have a sincere interest in the study of Arabic/Ajami manuscripts. Whether this has been maintained the purpose of our gathering today and indeed the last three years tells much. Further summary discussion on the scope, achievements and limitations of this early breakthrough has been presented in last year’s conference (Hamman and Muhammad, 2009) and therefore needs not much detailed mention.

What seem important perhaps is the cessation of field works on the procurement and preservation of these vast materials by the concerned agencies and bodies since the 1970s and early 1980s. The effect of this cessation on the general aspects of historical reconstruction in
Nigerian communities, which forms another area in itself, has also been highlighted by Bunza (2009).

Whatever impact was felt, however, the sweeping current of globalization, which only emerged in the last few decades made a revisit on ways of recovering, preserving and more importantly accessing the remains of this our cultural heritage and intellectual tradition a necessity. It then beholds that even without this initiative championed by the then United States Ambassador John Campbell since 2004, the nations documentation agencies should by now have gone far in this exercise. But sadly enough, we all know today that not much attention is being accorded to history let alone the preservation of materials that help to shape it. In this situation therefore, one can hardly think of adequate funding for such related projects that would improve on making more unexplored sources accessible to the public. Our nation’s archives are urging for funds to survive the day to day challenges while those in the universities and centres of research are not anything better. Hence, one could say that this project on Nigeria’s Scholarly Traditions and Manuscript Heritage is therefore timely as it has so far come into the third of its conference series.

The first gathering convened in March 2007 was on “Preserving Nigeria’s Scholarly and Literary Traditions and Manuscript Heritage”. Following the conference were some observations on the current repositories and main collections in Northern Nigeria by Batiste (2007, pp-11-12) that despite the significance of Arabic collections as potential aid in understanding indigenous knowledge systems and the dynamics of intellectual discourse in the religious, political, economic and cultural matters among communities of the Central and Western Sudan they suffer from neglect. This preliminary review went further to suggest suitable protective measures and
urgent preservative action particularly in special care and archival quality housing taking into consideration environmental and treatment conditions. The existing aspects of manuscript and other document preservation measures in the areas studied have been found to be totally inadequate for their safekeeping. Thus, the challenge to save this hidden treasure went on as the immediate need to engage conservators, preservation librarians, archivists and other stakeholders based on short and long range plan also became apparent. At the level of government, it is on record that in February 2008 the Education Trust Fund (ETF) supported a National conference on Heritage Preservation. In October the same year, the Federal Ministry of Culture, Tourism and National orientation sponsored a Forum on National Preservation and Conservation Policy for Heritage Collections (Abioye, 2009). This is just by the way on the part of government. But back on the Arewa House project, a report prepared by Biddle (2008,p4) in a survey conducted on nineteen collections located in parts of Northern Nigeria points to what Batiste (2007) earlier observed on the state of the manuscripts. The broader sense of the latest study, however, is in the area of conservation, house keeping, enclosures, and shelving, assessing the weather and climate influences on the collections in these centres that are mostly funded by governments. A follow up to this assessment was the second conference organized in May 2009 with the theme “Exploring Nigeria’s Arabic/ Ajami Manuscript Resources for the Development of New Knowledge”. Several presentations were made by scholars and stakeholders on the scope, relevance, nature and state of Arabic/Ajami manuscripts with some study also made on preservation and cataloguing. Side by side with this conference series is the technical training aspect of the Arabic/Ajami manuscript project. In it, Archivists, librarians and other stakeholders drawn from agencies are being engaged in intensive sessions on techniques of
preservation and repair of damaged materials. At the centre of this technical session too is Biddle on two occasions in March and August, 2008 (Hamman and Muhammad, 2009: 19).

The third of this technical session has just taken place last May in Arewa House, Kaduna. All these are with the aim towards re-opening the Arabic/Ajami project started more than fifty years ago. So far so good with these multiple efforts that we meet here today to assess through a conference like this. Our study here as it is expected to make further contributions towards shaping this project it seems, would be on some of the problems which Biddle (2008) highlighted with regards to the damage of manuscripts and challenge of access as experienced in the field search so far conducted by Arewa House.

3.0 THE CHALLENGE OF ACCESS

According to Word Web (2006), Access is “the right to obtain or make use of or take advantage of something”. While in the Encarta Dictionary Access is “the opportunity or right to experience or make use of something”. From these definitions, it goes to show the importance of access and extent of its relationship in the project of procurement and preservation of manuscripts. While preservation ensures the continued availability and usability of the information contained in records, access is the use of such by researchers and other members of the public as they may need them. Essentially, therefore it is the need for an item that prompts its preservation, just as the preservation of such document provides chance for continued access. One may question what purpose is there to preserve information (manuscripts) that would not be accessible to a researcher? (De Stefano, 2000 and Ward, 2000). This further underscores the centrality of access in the project on Arabic/Ajami manuscript in Northern Nigeria.
Preliminary results from some experiences in the field seem to indicate that the issue of access to manuscripts faces a lot of challenges just as the efforts to overcome some of the problems in procurement and preservation of manuscripts are being stepped up. Some of these have been identified by Bunza (2009) as language drawback, which limits the accessing of these Arabic manuscripts by most researchers. There is also the problem of recovering the documents as considerable numbers are still in private hands. This can be understood to mean the difficult process of identifying these private repositories and most importantly making the owners to agree to make the manuscripts accessible to researchers and the public. It would seem that most owners are either not so disposed to offering their treasure for safe keeping or copying by whichever agencies that embark on a recovery project like this. Practical experiences of a member of this presentation reveal either no success yet or where access has been achieved it took much explanation to accomplish. The remaining part of this presentation wishes highlight these experiences with pictures aimed at drawing our attention to the magnitude of damages caused these materials that are yet to be procured and or preserved, but only left improperly hidden in thousand homes across Northern Nigeria. We are here in total agreement with an earlier submission elsewhere that not only through this initiative, our governmental institutions, research centres and other stakeholders should double their task in the recovery, editing and translating of such valuable historical manuscripts for wider use.

Indeed, northern Nigerian history could hardly be complete without recourse to these Arabic/Ajami manuscripts that we are currently yearning to recover, organize and see what our generation would make of it in the process of redefining our distorted past (Bunza, 2009). It is true that the history of communities, migrations, and movements, as well as development of polities and reigns of rulers have been documented and are better known courtesy of what
scholars left behind written in the Arabic language. Again, the encounters with the European imperialists, independent of their partisan accounts are also well documented in form of correspondences and other materials composed in the Arabic language. Similarly, there were records and correspondences indicating political activities, aspects of social movements, development of indigenous scholarship and even diplomatic relations preserved in Arabic language or in the Arabised Hausa, Nupe, Yoruba, or Kanuri scripts (Bunza, 2009). All these add to the richness of accessible materials in Nigerian repositories. However, with more thousands scholars known to have lived in communities all over northern Nigeria and the non-scholars who could read and write either in Arabic or Ajami also leaving documents of their life encounters what we have today as the accessible manuscripts are small.

4.0 SOME SPECIFIC EXAMPLES

In this part, it is an account of the field search for some private repositories as part of assignment under the Arewa House initiative and how the state of accessing the manuscripts looks like as at this stage of the third of a series of conferences and workshops which was started in 2007. A search team was constituted by Arewa House to explore for manuscripts in Adamawa, Bauchi, Kano, Katsina and Plateau States. The focus was to examine collections owned by individuals and families, draw their attention to the danger of improper storage, difficulties of preserving the collections in the traditional setting and the benefits of allowing Arewa House to take custody, preserve and make them accessible to researchers and the public (Hamman and Muhammad, 2009: 20).

According to Muhammad, (2009), he was commissioned by Arewa House to explore Adamawa State, one of the areas said to be rich in these Arabic/Ajami collections held in public/ private
repositories. The tour took him through many families in Yola, which seem to be the main centre of Islamic scholarly activities not only for Fombina but other emirates of the far eastern Sakkwato Caliphate. However, the report so far indicates only one major success and that is in the family of Moddibo Ahmadu Fufore. After discussions and encouraging offers by Arewa House, including the sorting, listing, cataloguing and commencement of treating the manuscripts in their home, the Fufore family gave the entire collection they inherited from the late nineteenth Century born scholar for safe keeping and access to the public (Hamman and Muhammad, 2009: 20-22). It is interesting to mention here that late scholar Modibbo Ahmadu Fufore left a Wasiyya (Will) to the effect that all his collections were to be kept as Hubs () and therefore should not form part of the family inheritance. However, this written Will was only discovered when Arewa House had already taken delivery of the collections. The family has just acted the way of the late scholar.

Meanwhile, an important aspect of the challenges ahead of the search for Arabic/Ajami manuscripts to which our attention needs to be drawn is that in this tour detail of what happened in the several other families or houses visited for their collections have not been mentioned in the report. Perhaps a major indication on the outcome is no success yet in either the attempt to procure, help to preserve or most importantly open way for formal access by researchers and the public. On the state of the Yola manuscripts, the report speaks of 100% damage due to water stains, wear from strips, mold stains, ink corrosion, insect and rodent damage, fire brats, cockroaches, rats and mice, paper brittle etc. The following pictures as they were captured in some of the places visited would speak for themselves on the urgent need to save these evidences of our cultural heritage and intellectual tradition.
In another report on the tour to Jos, Plateau State, (Muhammad, 2008) has shown that the visit was only to the house of the famous Islamic scholar Late Sheikh Ahmad Arabi whose collections were held by his family. The focus discussions held with the family described as extensive was on the urgent need to rescue the collections from further deterioration and total damage. From the initial offer of technical assistance, further talks on the difficulty of self safekeeping by the family and other huddles led to the hand over of the collections to Arewa House for direct and full protection. The state of the manuscripts in Sheikh Arabi’s collections was described as shocking because of the extent of damage as a result of several factors like the Fufore collections. Again the pictures below are further indications on the likely general state of those several thousands of yet to be procured and or accessed manuscripts in the country.

In Katsina also was a collection of 30 original manuscripts procured from the family of Late Malam Dalhatu Katsina. The extent of the total collection is not reported, but the indication seems this is only a fraction given to Arewa House for safekeeping. At least the discussion with them that led to the offer of the materials was not in vain as probably in the other areas visited. These are the major success stories of the attempt to preserve northern Nigeria’s cultural heritage.
and intellectual tradition in the five states of Adamawa, Bauchi, Kano, Katsina and Plateau in the last three years. From the examples so far cited, it indicates the critical need to address more holistically and sincerely the challenges facing the procurement, preservation and accessing of Arabic/Ajami manuscripts in northern Nigeria private repositories.

Iso (2009) has described Ajami manuscript as a cultural relic reminiscent of a proud past, a tool for reconstructing history and as a fountain of knowledge and wisdom transmittable through endless generation of the human race. He also sees it as a trigger for further quest for knowledge and wisdom to change the world more positively for the advancement of humanity. However, this is not only limited to Ajami manuscript, but more sufficiently involve Arabic manuscript as a cultural heritage of the people of northern Nigeria several hundred years before the contact with imperial Europe. What more intellectual treasure do we then need to turn our nation’s life around for good than come back to these hundreds of thousands of our own peoples work built purely on the basis of knowledge and practice? Indeed by the time all stakeholders engage in the search for these materials and succeed in making them available for research we may not as in the present circumstance require any programme or initiative from outside in order to achieve greatness. A roll call of Nations that have made remarkable achievements in the history of global affairs would show that they all respected, preserved, made maximum use of and even promoted their cultural heritage and intellectual tradition to others with pride. We cannot achieve that greatness with our cultural and intellectual tradition being reduced to debris.
5.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

1) The current slow, lukewarm or negative attitude of authorities and indeed all stakeholders towards the issue of preserving and accessing our vast unexplored Arabic/Ajami Manuscripts must be changed to the positive.

2) That Preservation agencies of States and Federal government should be funded and modalities worked out in a coordinating manner to begin penetrating the nooks and crannies so as save the already deteriorating manuscripts. This should be pursued in such a way that those in custody of the private repositories be given confidence that their cherished inheritance is not been taken away from them for bad.

3) The institution of *Waqf/Hubs* should also be encouraged so that owners of these valuable materials do not just die only for their fountain of knowledge to disappear as a result of improper preservation by inheritors.

4) Universities and other centres of learning and research to source for grants, sponsors and donors essentially from within the country’s wealthy corporations, individuals and governmental bodies in order to fast track the project on preserving this scholarly and literary traditions and manuscript heritage that is first of benefit to us as a people before any other.

5) A deliberate sensitization and heart to heart contact should also be emphasized with Islamic scholars in the various communities putting the Sultan, Emirs and other leading local leaders at the centre of enlightenment and encouragement to preserve either by self where possible or to work together with official curators, preservation agencies and Archives in a clearly understood guideline and procedure.
6) There should be a new approach to the teaching of the Arabic language in our schools so that a wider range of succeeding generation can read and understand the bulk of information in the Arabic Manuscripts now being thought of as a national intellectual treasure.
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