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EXPLORING TIMBUKTU MANUSCRIPTS' CHARACTERISTICS

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Résumé

Ceci est une enquête dans les manuscrits de Tombouctou afin d'en dégager certaines spécificités. Ces spécificités constituent, parfois, un handicap à la recherche et à l'exploitation des manuscrits, car les chercheurs n'y sont pas habitués. L'objectif de cette étude est d'examiner systématiquement ces manuscrits afin d'identifier et d'analyser certaines spécificités qui pourraient affecter la compréhension des chercheurs et leurs efforts dans l'exploitation de ce trésor. Les recherches se sont intéressées jusqu'ici à l'étude critique et à la traduction des manuscrits. Pour obtenir les données, nous avons procédé à l'interview des propriétaires des manuscrits, à l'exploration des copies et des catalogues des manuscrits, et à l'exploitation des recherches précédentes en la matière. Cette étude montre que les manuscrits de Tombouctou ont des spécificités imputables à la personnalité, à la compétence intellectuelle, et à l'appartenance ethnique, géographiques et religieux des auteurs et des copistes. Cela demande une étude plus sérieuse de ces spécificités et l'implication des chercheurs locaux dans la recherche.

Mot clés : Calligraphie, Caractéristiques, Genres d'écriture, Manuscrits, Styles d'écriture.

Abstract

This is an investigation into Timbuktu manuscripts to determine some of their specificities. These specificities, sometimes, constitute a hindrance for research and manuscript exploitation due to researchers' unfamiliarity with them. The objective of this study is to examine thoroughly Timbuktu manuscripts in order to pinpoint and analyze some of the specificities that could affect researchers' understanding and their efforts in exploiting the manuscripts. The research works exerted so far about ancient manuscripts have been interested in authenticating and, sometimes, translating them. To obtain the data we needed in this qualitative study, we proceeded to interviewing manuscript owners, reading libraries' catalogues, exploring manuscript copies, and reading researchers' works about the issue. This study has found that Timbuktu manuscripts have some specificities imputed to authors' and copyists' personalities, intellectual competence, and geographic and religious belonging. This requires new interests in studying the specificities and involving local researchers in research efforts.

Keywords: Calligraphy, Characteristics, Manuscripts, Writing Genres, Writing Styles.

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Introduction

This qualitative research is exploring Timbuktu manuscripts for their features and characteristics. These immense intellectual riches in manuscripts constitute a scientific boon for humanity, and make of Timbuktu a Mecca of science in the heart of the Southern Sahara where scholars used to meet after peregrinations of some days and months.

These manuscripts have not been fully exploited due to some inherent factors. They are the product of another era different from ours in many respects, which makes it difficult for researchers to go through them for a better exploitation. Pinpointing some of these factors through a short study of this kind could guide researchers in handling the contents of these manuscripts, and help decision makers make a breakthrough in their daily struggle to face today's challenges. The solutions that some manuscript authors suggest for their social, political, scientific, religious, jurisprudential, and medicinal problems could be a source of inspiration. This demands an urgent enterprise of studying these manuscripts for a better understanding of their contents.

This study aims to examine the perceptible singularities related to writing characteristics and copyists' artistry in copying manuscripts. This singles out this study in the lot of research works interested so

far in the individual contents of the manuscripts.

The interest that these manuscripts have had on the part of researchers has essentially focused so far on studying and examining them critically. On a lesser scale, some efforts in their translation have been exerted before or after their authentication. This study aims to be one of the first contributions to acquainting Timbuktu manuscripts to researchers. To that end, it is organized as follows:

- Introduction
- Methodology, consisting in the systemic procedures adopted to collect data.
- Results and discussion, involving the outputs of the research methodology operated, and interpreting and discussing them in the light of the context.
- Conclusion, denoting the corollary of the research results.

1-Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research methodology. The methodological procedure that we adopted herein to collect data comprises two phases. The first one consisted of an investigation into the manuscript

catalogues of two major manuscript libraries of Timbuktu, Mama Haidara Library for Islamic manuscripts and Ahmad Baba Institute for Higher Studies and Islamic Research of Timbuktu. This phase led us to another one consisting in reading through the manuscripts according to the disciplines and authors indexed in the catalogues, and through some studies by local researchers about the authentication of some manuscripts and the data documented therein. The two phases are combined with some unstructured interviews of two of manuscripts specialists at Ahmad Baba Institute and Mama Haidara Library.

We were able thereby to uncover the disciplines and the domains around which the manuscripts evolve. We were also able to find out the names of their authors and their backgrounds. The qualitative approach also allowed us to have the data we needed regarding the characteristics of the manuscripts, the writing features of the authors they pertain to, the difficulties related to their understanding and translation, and the state of the manuscripts nowadays.

2. Results and Discussion

Our investigation allowed us to discover two sets of singularities. Almost all Arabic-Islamic manuscripts of Timbuktu share the first one. The second one stands out as a specificity pertaining to the intellectual personality of the scholars and artists of Timbuktu of the time.

2.1. Timbuktu Manuscripts' General Characteristic

In a general term, Timbuktu manuscripts are the ancient documents that date back to 70 years or earlier in the region of Timbuktu in the Republic of Mali. Nowadays, Timbuktu manuscript libraries are housing more than 416 491 ancient manuscripts (Alkadi Cissé of Ahmad Baba Institute & Bazoumana Traoré of Mama Haiara Library, interviews held in Bamako in February 2022). Many other thousands are still jealously guarded by their owners in containers and in less favorable conditions. The precious documents of this huge number share some characteristics that are more or less perceptible all along.

These manuscripts are mostly the works of the scientific movement scholars of the 14th century and beyond. However, some of them date back as far as to the 12th century. They are overwhelmingly written in Arabic, but some are written in some local languages such as Fulani and Songhai.

The most distinct general characteristic is the manuscripts' contents. Timbuktu manuscripts are not restricted to Islamic sciences as most people think in Mali because they are just written in Arabic. They tackle many other interesting topics that may be classified as follows:

2.1.1. Manuscripts related to Faith and Reconciliation

This category of manuscripts is divided into two types. The first type focuses on the subject matters of Islamic rites. The second type deals with the populations' creed, conflicts, and repentance to Allah through referring to the Koran and Hadith.

The manuscripts related to Islamic rites mainly construe notions about Hadith, Sharia, Islamic dogma, Islamic inheritance, Islamic rituals, and Islamic jurisprudence that sometimes comprises most fields related to Islamic rituals.

As for the manuscripts related to the rectification of populations' creed, social habits, and conflict resolution they are of epistolary forms. They are addressed to the society or to the populations in order to remind them of the right path of Allah when they are wayward with religion and good cohabitation, or to attempt to put forward some answers and solutions to the religious and social issues of the time. An example of that is a manuscript by Othman Dan Fodio named *Siraj Al-ikhwan* (Lamp for Brothers) (Mama Haidara, no 443). For example, he gives his opinion about the people who pronounce the two testimonials of Islamic creed and practice Islam, but soil it with heathenry practices in the following lines:

“I say, may Allah guide me!
Do know, my brothers, that
waging Jihad against these people
is unanimously an obligation,

¹ Translation mine.

because they are heathens, and Islam with idolatry does not count. It is stated in the *Jaza-eri* poem: ‘They are like heathens, even if they are pertained to Islam. [They] are just heathens, not less.’¹ (Karambe, 2018, p. 26)

The manuscripts that are related to conflict resolution are generally addressed to princes and kings. An example of that is a manuscript by Al Hajj Omar called *Al Nushul Mubin* authenticated by some researchers of SAVAMA NGO in 2021. It is in poem form addressed to the princes of Hausa region and those of Bornu region when he found them at loggerheads on his to Mecca. The author said the purpose of his work in the following words:

“...until we arrived to Hausa region. We met its prince and some of its scholars and nobilities. We found that there was an abhorrent conflict between them and the prince of Bornu that year. This inflicted us greatly. We could not talk to the prince of Hausa about that, and we could not proceed to any mediation, despite our good intention for that. (...) and as we want to benefit from this great boon, and we realized that oral communication could not meet our need, we wanted to write some advice we could afford to that end.”² (Zoubeir et al, 2021, pp.42-44)

These epistolary manuscripts generally imply the meaning of titles such as ‘letter’ or ‘epistle’. Scholars, considered references and

² Translation mine.

models for people in the society, generally write them.

2.2.1. Manuscripts related to Arabic Language Studies

This category of manuscripts is about Grammar, Morphology, Versification, Poetry, and Rhetoric. Some scholars also have collections of their own poems interpreted in personal notes, or jealously guarded in pamphlets by their students. One can find in this category many copies of the ancient masterpieces of Arabic Grammar and Morphology by reference grammarians of Arabia. An example of that is a manuscript written by Abdurrahman bin Abi Bakr Alsouyouti at Ahmad Baba Institute (Catalogue 2, no 1656)

2.2.1.1. Manuscripts related to Local History

Some manuscripts of this kind trail back the history of the three greatest empires of West Africa, Ghana, Mali, and Songhai. An example of that is a manuscript by Mahmud Ka-at about the history the three great empire (Ahmad Baba Institute, cat 1, no 64). Writing about Mali Empire, he comments:

“It is said that Mali comprises about four hundred cities. Its land is very prosperous. There is no land in the world, except Syria, that is more prosperous than Mali. Its inhabitants are rich and live a luxurious life. Suffice it their gold

mines and kola nut trees that you can find nowhere in the land of Tekrur except in Baraku...”³ (Tarikh Al-Fattash, Ahmad Baba Institute, 2014, p. 84)

Besides, some other scholars have chronicled the history of some local areas such as Abul Khair Abdullah bin Marwan about the history of Arawan (Ahmad Baba Institute, cat 1, no 1079).

2.2.1.2. Manuscripts related to some Social Events of Local Areas

This kind of manuscripts is of less important quantity in the lot of Timbuktu manuscripts. They have relatively less volume, and are sometimes written by unknown authors. Some manuscripts of this category document the stories of some local conflicts. An example of that is an act by an unknown writer about a dispute over a well between Kel Alharm and kellad (Ahmad Baba Institute, cat 2, no 1501.). Some manuscript owners mention some manuscripts of this category documenting the occurrence of some natural calamities, such as pests, famines, epidemics, flooding, etc. but we never had chance to fall on such manuscripts.

1.1.1. Manuscript related to the Biography of Scholars

Biography manuscripts have their interest in the role model of scholars and pious Muslims. In addition to the life story of local

³ Translation mine.

scholars, many manuscripts of this category elaborate upon their works, their religious virtue, and some miracles that occurred by their godly qualities and good deeds. Chroniclers have written about the life of scholars of diverse disciplines throughout the cultural renaissance movement of Islam, but the biography manuscripts in Timbuktu are generally about the life of religion and language scholars. *Tarikh Sudan* (1900) involves an example of that when it cites one of Timbuktu greatest scholars in the following lines:

“One of them is the jurisprudent scholar, the ascetic, the pious, our sheikh Alamin bin Ahmad, brother of the jurisprudent Abdurrahman bin Ahmad. He had a tongue softened by invoking the glory of Almighty Allah. Mohamad, the Bald used to call him Glory Invoking Alamin.” (p.55)

1.1.2. Manuscripts related to Science

This category comprises two types of science, modern science and occult science. Modern science manuscripts usually deal with the medicinal virtue of plants. An example of that is a manuscript (Ahmad Baba Institute, cat 2, no 1672,) in medicine and wisdom by Mahdi bin Ali Al-sunbury. Another example is that manuscript (Ahmad Baba Institute, cat 3, no 5719,) by Ahmad Raqady, authenticated by Y. Saed (2020). In this manuscript, the author evokes the virtue of rice, for instance. He believes that it is the most nutritive plant

for animals and wheat, and most commended by people. He also believes that everything Allah created contains disease except rice. It has no disease (Y. Saed, 2020, pp. 30-31). Some manuscripts of this category provide data about animal organs and social utilities of things. It is also frequent to chance on astronomy titles in Ahmad Baba Institute manuscripts catalogues. One of those is a manuscript numbered 1649 about lunar mansions and zodiacs by an unknown author.

Occult science manuscripts regularly enclose information and instructions about the practice and the interpretation of esoteric science symbols. The occult sciences that are treated in Timbuktu manuscripts are geomancy, astrology, and the cabalistic science based on the Koran. The latter delves into Koranic verses, numerology, and genie-spiritualism in an attempt to tell fortunes or influence the occurrence of things. An example of that is a manuscript by an unknown writer at Ahmad Baba Institute (cat 2, no 1734,). It comments some Koranic verses in this term:

“He who writes these verses with these [godly] names, carry them (with himself), or bathe himself with (the water that washed them), or drink (that water), Allah will protect him from every misfortune, on his right and on his left.” (p.1).

1.1.3. Poem Manuscripts

Poems in Timbuktu manuscripts touch on traditional topics of Arabic poetry. However, one can observe a considerable interest in what poets were living. Their poems, in addition to the Prophet's laudatory odes⁴, deal with themes that are more social. They go around welcoming notes, congratulations, wars and events, social classes, apologies, replies, proselytization, homilies, and advice, etc. Manuscript number 827 at Ahmad Baba Institute, entitled Advice to Mentors, by Abi Saad bin Ibrahim Silly, is an example of poems about advice. It reads as follows:

“Be led by scholars and consult with them! / when you do not know [something], and remember your Lord's words ‘Ask [scholars]’

“The best governors are those who emulate scholars / and the worst scholars of the nation are those who tie bonds with those who go wayward”. (p.1)

The above general characteristics are common features that could be shared by other categories in other regions of the Islamic world. Besides them, Timbuktu manuscripts have some singularities in other aspects that are not forcibly shared elsewhere. This leads us to their specific features.

2.3. Timbuktu Manuscripts' Specific Characteristics

The specific features of Timbuktu manuscripts are akin to the marks that the locals have contributed with to the science and the Islamic knowledge they received from other regions of the Islamic world. They are mainly as follows:

2.3.1. Writing Genres in Timbuktu Manuscripts

We generally come across four writing genres in Timbuktu manuscripts: Prose, technically called al-Nathr, Poetry, Didactic Poetry, termed al-Manzuma, and a combination of al-Nathr and al-Manzuma, named Sharh-almanzuma. Every kind of the four genres have its inherent characteristics, but not seemingly restricted to any particular field or domain of knowledge. Scientific domain authors use al-Nathr as well as al-Nazm, and literary field authors proceed likewise.

2.3.1.1.al-Nathr

This kind of writing consists in displaying data in dissertation form, no matter what the discipline or field may be, instead of referring to scientific formulae, when the writing is about science, for instance. This does not forcibly exclude, for the writers of this kind of writing, the possibility of inserting some isolated diagrams or illustrative drawings.

⁴ An example of that is manuscript no1590, by Mohammad bin Bakka Al-alawi, Ahmad Baba Institute, cat 2.

a-l-Nathr manuscripts of Timbuktu are characterized with a religious introduction: starting with the name of God and paeon to His glory, prayers for peace upon His prophet, Mohammed, his family and disciples before broaching the core matter of the subject under display. Before broaching the matter, the author would introduce himself. To do that, he would refer to himself with personal pronoun “he”, as token of humility; “the needy servant of Allah, who begs for the forgiveness of his Lord, says...”.⁵

During his display of the content, the author would go through other disciplines that have not forcibly bond with the discipline he is handling. This process depends upon what the author judges important and worth reporting in making the point clear and comprehensible. This could lead him to the labyrinth of linguistics, to the debates of grammarians, to the theories of traditional medicine, to the postulates of theology, etc. An example of that is the digression of Mahmud Kaat (2014) in *Tarikh Alfattash* (Ahmad Baba Institute, no 64) authenticated by Ahmad Baba Institute researchers. Writing about the death of a scholar called Alkadi Othman Dirma, he pushes his way in mausoleum mysticism. He covers a whole page writing about the virtue of visiting some mausoleums in some local sites (Ahmad Baba

Institute, 2014, p.148-149). The process could cover several pages of digression before coming back to the main subject under discussion. Sometimes, he would mention the names of the authors he is reporting from, and the references of the data reported to back his arguments. To conclude, he pays tribute and glory to Allah for having allowed him to terminate his book. He would then pray for salute and peace upon Prophet Mohammad. He would mention the date at which he finished the book. Many manuscripts are terminated by the concluding notes of copyists⁶. It would be worth noting that the dating system in Timbuktu manuscripts is the Hegira one, a system adopted by the second caliph of Islam, Omar bin al-Khatab in the 7th century.

2.3.1.2.al-Manzuma

al-Manzuma is a writing genre meant to be an easy means of imparting educational or scholarly information in a poem form committed to memory. This kind of poem is unique in that it does not forcibly respect the traditional rules and restrictions of classical Arabic versification. The main purpose of such poems is to make the memorization of what is taught easier for the learner. To that end, the author of al-Manzuma poem takes advantage of what the specialists call Poetic

⁵ See, for example, *Nus-hul Mubin* by Alhajj Omar, authenticated by Mahmoud Zoubeir and others, 2021, p. 41

⁶ See, for example the concluding notes of *Tarikh Alfattsh*, Ahmad Baba Institute, 2014, p. 233.

License: breaking sometimes the rules in order to reach a particular meaning. An example of al-Manzuma is a manuscript in astronomy (Ahmad Baba Institute, cat 2, no 1781) by Abdurrahman Alsogayar bin Mohammad Alakhdori.

Except the digression to which manuscripts authors are used, the manuscripts that are in al-al-Manzouma form have the same make-up as those designed in al-Nathr or prose: Islamic introduction, Islamic conclusion, etc. In the matter, some authors of Timbuktu manuscripts do not respect any rule of classical versification. Consequently, their al-Mazuma comes out as a simple song easy to learn by rote.

Naturally, al-Manzuma poems are concise and laconic. This necessitates another effort to explain and interpret them when they are destined to schools or educational purposes. This necessity has given birth to another writing genre called Sharh-almanzuma.

2.3.1.3. Sharh-almanzuma

This writing genre is a professional interpretation of a text framed out in al-Manzuma form. The author is a specialist in the matter who takes to explain, interpret, and comment the different elements of al-Manzuma. The document interpreted is generally the work of another author, but sometimes al-Manzuma designers take on the task of explaining and interpreting their own

works. An example of that is an al-Manzuma (Ahmad Baba Institute, cat 2, no1800) in arithmetic explained and interpreted by its author, Ahmad bin Souleyman Alrasmuki.

The author, in his systemic interpretation, may deal with individual words; defining them etymologically, morphologically, or terminologically. He would give a specialist's interpretation. He may report the definitions of other authors and their viewpoints in other definitions. Sometimes, the discussion will lead him to other issues in other disciplines that are far away from the matter under study as indicated above. This is why some ancient manuscripts could serve as references in other domains other their specialties, such as linguistic, Islamic law, philosophy, jurisprudence, etc. depending upon the erudition of the commentator. On the basis that most commentators of ancient manuscripts were multidisciplinary scholars, we can assert that Timbuktu ancient manuscripts constitute precious documents that bear valuable data about different facets of human knowledge for the researchers interested in that epoch.

2.4. Authors of Timbuktu Manuscripts

It is common to associate the origin of Timbuktu manuscripts with the region of Timbuktu, at least for their location. Thereby, most scholars who are not specialists in the matter think that these precious documents are the product of the genius and efforts of only

the scholars of Timbuktu. A quick tour in Timbuktu manuscript libraries refutes this theory. Undeniably, these libraries contain manuscripts of other regions' authors of the Islamic world. This fact instigated our scientific curiosity to go through these priceless documents and the catalogues designed by Ahmad Baba Institute in order to identify the origins of their authors. Our investigation uncovered the following categories of authors in Timbuktu manuscripts.

2.4.1. Arab authors

We mean by Arab authors those Arabs who were not originally from Timbuktu region. Timbuktu ancient manuscripts constitute an aspect of the continuation of translation and copying tradition and phenomenon of the ancient works by ancient Greece authors in some Muslim caliph's epoch. This scientific phenomenon attained its apex at the time of the Abbasid caliph, Almamun. However, we can ascertain that the copying movement started with the copying of the Koran in the first century of the Islamic era. It became later the inspiration source for all copying movements in the Arabic-Islamic world. This accounts for the existence of some manuscripts by authors of other regions, for commerce in manuscripts became prosperous in some regions of the Islamic world. Some Arab authors exist in the lot of those foreign authors. Their works are still honoring the

shelves of Timbuktu ancient manuscript libraries today, and the big cases and bags of the families are still brimming with some of them jealously hoarded in mansions. We distinguish two categories of Arab authors in Timbuktu manuscript.

2.4.2. Arab authors who did not live in Timbuktu

This category of authors is composed of all Arabs, authors of classics in Islamic or language sciences, who lived neither in Timbuktu nor in the 14th century, the region's scientific renaissance era. The era they lived in is sometimes unknown. The works of such authors deal with diverse subjects of several domains. Some authors of this category that are catalogued by Ahmad Baba Center are:

- The Egyptian author, Jalal Din Esseyuti of the 14th century, in Koran sciences (Catalogue 1, no 1).
- The Iraqi author, Alhassan bin Hussein bin Alhaitham of the 10th century, in astronomy (Catalogue 1, no10)
- The Russian author, Mohammad bin Ismael Alboukhari of the 9th century, in Hadith sciences (Catalogue1, no 61).

Most of the classics by the authors of this category are well known throughout the Islamic world. They have been copied through ages by the copyists of different regions of Islam scientific coteries around the world. The

copies of these classics integrated the ring of cross-border commerce before the invention of modern printing. They overstepped the distance between the Arab world and the Western Sahara region in the bags and belongings of merchants, scholars, pilgrims, professional travelers, and copyists before being copied many times by local copyists.

Even though the authors of this category did not live in Timbuktu, some other foreign Arabs lived there and contributed to the scientific glow of the region with their works.

2.4.3. Arab authors who lived in Timbuktu

Timbuktu status as a center of Islamic culture hosting scholars and schooling buildings became a factor of attraction. Scholars, students, professional travelers, and descendants of the Prophet came from all over the world to settle in Timbuktu. Some of these settlers contributed to the enrichment of science and knowledge through their writings that copyists copied several times in the learning and teaching processes of the region. The works of this category of authors are generally about the traditional themes of the Islamic teaching fields and some social issues of the time. Some of these authors are:

- The Moroccan author, Ahmad Abul A-araf of the 19th century (Catalogue 1, no 5632).

- The Algerian author, Sayyed Ali Aljazuli, in jurisprudence (Saadi, 1900).
- The Algerian author, Mohammad bin Abibakr Tawati, in occult sciences (Catalogue 1, no 1059).

The difference between this category and the one mentioned before is that the latter and some Timbuktu scholars were contemporaries. They were active part of the social and cultural life of the region, and were accepted and adopted by the population.

2.4.4. Local authors

Besides the manuscripts by Arab authors, we come across some manuscripts in Timbuktu libraries that are of the local scholars' genius of Western Sudan. This points out the contribution of the local people to the cultural and scientific production of the region. Two categories of local authors are definitely noticeable in the manuscripts of Timbuktu.

2.4.4.1. Authors from Timbuktu

Some citizens of Timbuktu contributed to the scientific production of the region. Science was not restricted to any particular ethnic group in this multiracial town, neither was scientific production. However, time was tender with some authors whose works resisted the misconduct of humans and the vicissitudes of time. This resulted in the existence of works by Tuareg, Sonhadji,

Fulani, Songhay, Wangara, and Wakorey authors. These authors took on nearly all traditional domains of Islamic studies. Besides, they put forth their solutions for problems and plagues that befell the society of their time. They also wrote about the history of kings and kingdoms. Some of them had interest in the biography of scholars of the regions. Some others went farther to deploy their talent in occult science, such as geomancy. All this is added up to the lot of the manuscripts dealing with the traditional themes of Arabic language. Some authors of this category are:

- Ahmad Baba bin Ahmad Sudani, of the 17th century, in diverse fields of knowledge (Catalogue 1, no 1058).
- Ahmad Albakkayye bin Mohammad bin Almkhtar Alkunti of the 19th century, in diverse fields of knowledge (Catalogue 1, no 1103).
- Abdurrahman bin Abdullah bin Omran Sa-adi of the 17th century, in history (Catalogue, 1, no 81).

It is worthwhile noticing that, despite their historic renown and celebrity in the quarters of scholars of this era, some prominent scholars of Timbuktu, such as Mahmud Baghayogo, have seldom their names in the pedigree of the manuscript authors of that time. This may be explained by the unfortunate loss of their works along the time or during wars, invasions and natural

calamities. It may also be explained by their deep commitment in managing and solving social issues, which could not permit them to save enough time for scientific production.

2.4.4.2. Authors from elsewhere

Sometimes, we come across some manuscripts in the cases and bags of families, or on the shelves of libraries in Timbuktu, written by authors of other regions. This includes manuscripts by authors from Nigeria, Djenné, Walata, etc. Manuscripts by this category of authors deal essentially with the resolution of social and religious issues that the authors deemed misunderstood. Sometimes, they touch on awakening the religious awareness of people. They are generally in form of epistles, and are sometimes entitled as such. Besides this advisory aspect of their works, the manuscripts by these authors also deal with the same subject matters as those by their contemporary scholars of Timbuktu do. Some authors of this category are:

- Al Hajj Omar bin Saed Alfuti Tall of the 19th century, in diverse fields of knowledge (Catalogue 1, no 1079).
- Ousmane bin Mohammad dan Fodio of the 19th century Nigeria, in diverse fields of knowledge (Mama Haidara Library, No 443).
- Abul Khayri bin Abullah bin Marzuq from Arawan, in history (Catalogue 1, no 1079).

We can observe from what is documented above that the local Sudanese authors were interested in religious, social, sanitary, and political issues of their time. This makes of the manuscripts written by the local scholars of Timbuktu a reflection of the society they lived in, in the 14th century. This fact ascribes some credibility to this kind of manuscripts in the study of that time communities.

2.5. Writing Characteristics

The specific characteristics herein are, above all, related to the authors' writing styles, according to their categorization above, and the calligraphic style of the copyists.

2.5.1. Stylistic characteristics

If we probe the works of authors from different regions, we easily observe some differences in writing aspects. One of those differences is stylistic. The stylistic differences are perceivable in authors' styles according to the region they come from.

2.5.1.1. Arab Authors' Style

Originally, Arab authors' writings have less problems. In addition to what we evoked about the general characteristics of prose in the ancient manuscripts of Timbuktu, the Arab authors write in a formal language sustained with a high level of Grammar and correct morphological rules. The language level is high and versatile. The vocabulary they use is akin to the discipline under

treatment. An example of that is a manuscript (Ahmad Baba Institute, no 1, cat 1) by Egyptian scholar Jalaldin Alsuyuti in Koranic studies

The manuscripts of religious domains are characterized with a proliferation of confessional annotations taken sometimes from the Koran or Hadith of the Prophet. Language manuscripts, in Grammar, Morphology, or Rhetoric, even though dedicated to a particular linguistic discipline, draw their referential models from the Koran and Hadith before any recourse to the poems of ante-Islamic era or the first Islamic era poems. All this is easy to read in a calligraphy more or less familiar, and sometimes worked out with aesthetic skills.

However, we chance upon some ancient manuscripts by some Arab authors studded with orthography mistakes, solecism, and some legibility issues. This might be due to the inadvertence of copyists, or to their miss appreciation of words and syntax. This fact demands, when dealing with the writings of Arab authors, the same caution as applied to the writings of locals when we undertake to translate or analyze them scientifically.

2.5.1.2. Local authors' Style

No surprising that the scholars of Timbuktu walked in the wake of the Islamic world scholars as concerns dealing with science and knowledge. They had the same

means of knowledge acquisition, Arabic language, through which they observed each other. Nonetheless, the scholars of Islamic black Africa, and more specifically those of Western Sudan, had recourse to some stylistic means that reflect their need in knowledge acquisition, and fill their lacuna in the language of the Koran. This need engendered two styles in the region, Ajami style and Arabic language style.

2.5.1.2.1. Ajami authors' stylistic characteristics

Ajami writing is an intelligent reaction of locals in some regions of Africa to the pressing need of putting science and knowledge to the reach of commoners. It is a transcription of a local language in Arabic alphabet. The transcribed language in a Timbuktu manuscript is not forcibly the language mostly spoken locally. Suffice it for a scholar or a learned man to judge it necessary or important to explain some words or texts of a book in local language, or perpetuate a story, an event, or knowledge. He would jot it down in his mother tongue with Arabic alphabet for the future generations. According to manuscripts owners, there are three categories of Ajami manuscripts. The first one is a manuscript completely written in local language with Arabic alphabet. The second category is a manuscript with annotations in local language written with Arabic alphabet. The third category a

manuscript studded with local language words written with Arabic alphabet and chosen on purpose to express some meanings. An example of the latter is manuscript number 1330 at Ahmad Baba Institute about the virtue of some Koranic verses in healing some diseases, if used with some trees. The names of tree and mentioned in Bambara. Unfortunately, we could not chance on any Ajami manuscript completely written in a local language.

Ajami writing does not follow totally the structure of Arabic manuscripts in all components of Islamic writing, such as Islamic introduction. The focus herein is the information to be transmitted. The most salient characteristic of an Ajami writing is the invention of some letters that do not exist in Arabic alphabet, such as “pa”, “va”, “ja” and other guttural letters proper to some African languages. The local language vowels that do not exist in Arabic alphabet are executed with an extension of some vowels in Arabic alphabet. The vowels [ei] and [e] are executed by an extension of [i]. The vowel [o] is implemented by an extension of [u]. Specific guttural sounds are left to everybody's genius to work it out according to his personal flair.

Some Ajami writings are a mixture of Arabic and local language. Some common people who had no steady knowledge of Arabic language helped themselves with such

writings. In such writings, the acts that imply noises are expressed through popular onomatopoeic transcribed sounds, such as ‘it fell [bribaf]’, and ‘it was raining [ton, ton, ton]’. To understand an Ajami writing, one is guided by the context and the common sense in his choice of a vowel, a letter, or an onomatopoeia rather than another. This is due to the fact that most African languages are characterized with intonation, nasalization, and musical inclinations that neither Arabic nor Latin letters can figure out.

The Ajami style is not restricted to Timbuktu area. It is rife in Fulany, Haousa, Soninke, and Bambara regions. There are no established rules that bind all Ajami writers of all zones. It is finally worth pointing out that it is generally the recourse of less literate people.

2.5.1.2.2. Characteristics of Arabic Language Authors’ Style

The manuscripts written in Arabic constitute the core of this inestimable treasure of Timbuktu. Arabic was the language of science, knowledge and religion in Timbuktu. The writings of the local scholars are of diverse scientific, stylistic, and literary qualities according to the author’s mastery of the domain, Arabic language, and the traditional methodology of the time. A perfect example of that is a manuscript by Ahmad Baba in counselling about bad company (Ahmad Baba Institute, cat 1, no 775). Apart

from copyists mishandling of the work, it is an example of good mastery of Arabic language studies by some local authors.

The local knowledgeable authors’ style has nothing to envy in the style of native Arab authors. It is characterized by the traditional confessional introduction, occasional digressions into other disciplines, etc. The language is formal, the grammar and morphology are correct; rhetorical expressions are well put; and words are well chosen and meaningfully communicative.

The style of authors of less skill is of less formal language. Even though characterized with confessional introduction, it is not safe of grammatical mistakes, morphological and orthographical slips, solecism, and semantic confusions. As indicated above, the authors sometimes have recourse to local languages to express some meanings for which they have no equivalent in Arabic. Those loanwords are sometimes modeled according to the morphology of the Arabic word, or taken and used as it is. Sometimes, the sentence is built according to the local language structure, and is understood only by native speakers or readers with high proficiency in the local language. This fact has made some researchers say that such manuscripts have suffered many interpolations eased in by copyists and Emirs. Tarikh al-Fattash style is an eloquent example of this (Ahmad Baba Institute, cat 1, no 64). The style of this

manuscript is a mixture of sustained and weak languages. Sometimes it too informal to be of a high standing scholar. Sometimes it as high as the style of any masterpiece in stylistics.

It is worthwhile to note that some of these grammatical and orthographical mistakes might be of the carelessness of copyists and their lack of mastery of Arabic, more specifically its morphology and grammar. The problem might be akin to the calligraphic complication of some manuscripts that they cannot decrypt easily.

2.6. Calligraphic Characteristics

The calligraphy in Timbuktu manuscripts constitutes a determining characteristic in understanding and decrypting their contents. Two copies of a manuscript do not forcibly share one calligraphic style. The calligraphic style that we encounter in the manuscripts is not always the same as that a researcher or a reader is familiar with in modern books and documents. We can distinguish four major calligraphic styles in Timbuktu manuscripts:

1. Sudanese calligraphy

This calligraphic style is the artistic and intellectual reaction of West-African people to Arabic writing design. The region to which this calligraphic style pertains extends from Nigeria to Senegal. This style appears mostly in the manuscripts copied by the copyists of this zone. Ethnic and cultural diversity in this zone has given birth to many sub-categories of

this style according to ethnic groups and regions. Some of the sub-categories that we can observe in Timbuktu manuscripts are Songhai, Fulani, Bambara, Hausa and Wolof calligraphic styles (Dadab, 2009).

Appendix 1 is an example of Sudanese calligraphic style from a manuscript of Mama Haidara Library of Timbutu.

2. Suqi calligraphy

This calligraphy style is related to the scholars and copyists of the ancient city of Suq, a historic town in the north of Mali coveted for its urban and intellectual riches. This style appears generally in the local copyists' works, more specifically those who were schooled in Tuareg zones.

Appendix 2 is an example of Suqi calligraphic style from a manuscript of Mama Haidara Library of Timbuktu.

3. Saharawi calligraphy

This style is known in the intellectual quarters of the Southern Sahara, extending from northern Niger to Mauritania (Dadab, 2009).

Appendix 3 is an example of Saharawi calligraphic style from a manuscript of Mama Haidara Library of Timbuktu.

4. Maghrebi calligraphy

This is generally seen in the manuscripts coming from Maghreb countries, from Tunisia to Morocco. It is mostly used in

Timbuktu manuscripts to copy the Koran, implorations to Allah, and prayer texts for peace upon the Prophet (Dadab, 2009).

Appendix 4 is an example of Maghrebi calligraphic style from a manuscript of Mama Haidara Library of Timbuktu.

Among the calligraphic styles above, it is hard to say that one is definitely the predominant style in the manuscripts of Timbuktu. In as much as copyists copied manuscripts through ages, it is corollary that a manuscript could have different copies of different calligraphic styles depending upon what the copyist would adopt. Moreover, one can hardly say that one particular style is the monopoly of a particular community because the practice of a style in copying a manuscript depended upon the copyist's master of it. Consequently, a Fulani, who studied in a Tuareg region or with a Tuareg scholar, could use the Suqi style because it was the style that he practiced the best.

Finally, we observe that this priceless treasure of Timbuktu has characteristics linked to its different aspects. These characteristics demand serious studies of the aspects thereof. This may be an opportunity to open some other specialization niches in manuscript studies.

Conclusion

Finally, we may be able to conclude that Timbuktu manuscripts represent a

participatory effort of thousands of scholars of the Islamic world to a tremendous intellectual treasure. They reflect the ethnic, geographic, and religious belonging of their authors. This massive participation has given a scientific singularity to this intellectual wealth, and a universal status that bestows upon them a humanity legacy standing. This fact can open up other scientific fields in manuscript domains, each characteristic or singularity constituting an academic specialization in our universities. However, the characteristics that ensue from this universality and participatory efforts constitute sometimes a source of problem and hindrance to the easy exploitation of these manuscripts. Consequently, the characteristics of Timbuktu manuscripts are, at the same time, a riches and a potential hindrance to their ideal exploitation. This implies that the concern about handling and exploiting Timbuktu manuscripts should take into account, alongside the efforts deployed in refurbishing them, training their exploiters in the ways and means of making profit out of them, and involving local scholars in research process. This entails, sometimes, providing them with cultural skills besides technical equipment.

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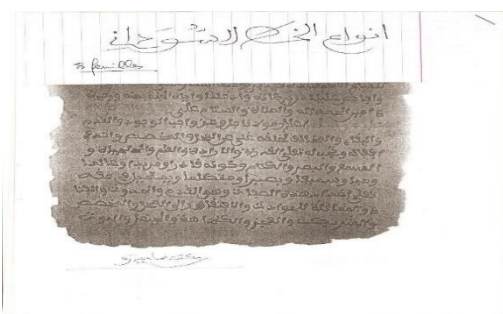
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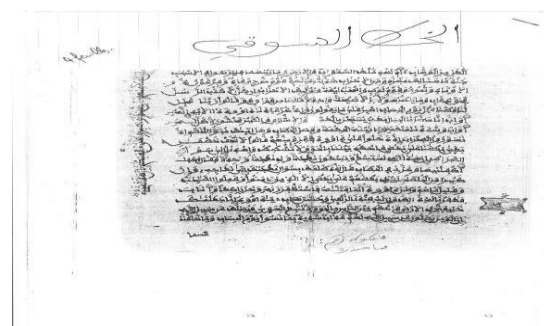
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Appendices

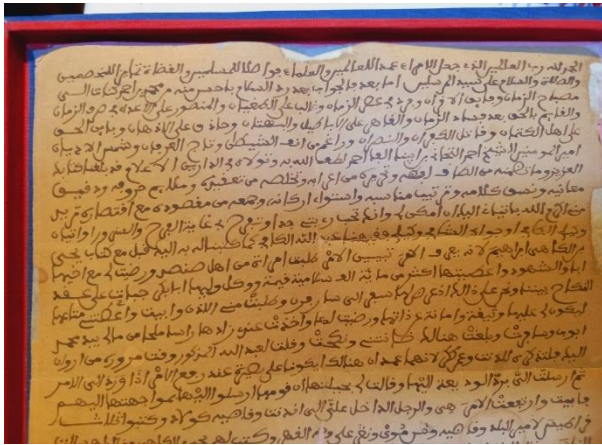
Appendice 1



Appendice 2



Appendice 3



Appendice 4

