



Some Notes on the Arabic Manuscripts in the Northern History Research Scheme (NHRS), Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria (1962-2020)

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ABSTRACT

From the establishment of the Northern History Research Scheme (NHRS) in 1962 to the present, there are 1,913 Arabic manuscripts in its various repositories. Despite the plethora of manuscripts covering virtually all the branches of Islamic literature ranging from theology, jurisprudence, Arabic language and literature, philosophy, astronomy to astrology, many researchers often do not have easy access to the contents of the manuscripts due to lack of proper classification, as well as some obscurity surrounding their provenance. Using a qualitative, historical and descriptive methodology, this paper throws a little new light on the historical evolution of NHRS, its repositories, classification of manuscripts, its challenges and prospects. It is part of the findings of the paper that despite the large number of Arabic manuscripts in NHRS, little is known about its corpus (literature) and the group of scholars. This is because, out of the 1,913 Arabic manuscripts available in the NHRS repository, about 900 manuscripts are anonymous.

KEYWORDS

Arabic Manuscript, Ajami, History, Classification, Preservation.



1. Introduction

The introduction of Islam into the Central Bilād al-Sudān in the 11th century came along with the illuminating culture of Arabic and *Ajami* (the latter refers to writing in indigenous languages using Arabic letters) manuscripts. This culture, according to Abdullahi (1993) symbolises ‘possessions of the social elite’, which later reached a certain level of development, transforming to a hobby among most Muslims of the present Northern Nigeria. The proliferation of Arabic manuscripts started with the infiltration of some corpuses on the various branches of the Islamic sciences such as *Tafsīr* (Qur’anic exegesis), *Hadith* (Prophetic tradition), *Fiqh* (Islamic Jurisprudence), *Hisāb* (Mathematics) and *Adab* (Arabic literature), mainly, from the Arab world and through the works of Arab writers such as Ibn Batūta, Muhammad bn Muhammad al-Idrissy, Hasan bn Muhammad Wazzen al-Zayyati (Leo Africanus), Jalāluddin Suyūti, Qādi Iyād, among others.

With the 1804 Jihad of Sheikh Uthman bn Fūdi and the subsequent establishment of the emirate system of government, there emerge massive transformations, and spread of manuscript culture to all the nooks and crannies of the Central Bilād al-Sudān and beyond (Augi 1993).

During Sheikh Uthman’s migration from Degel to Gudu in 1804, Augi (1993) argues that Uthman’s library collection was so massive that it could not be transported in ‘one go,’ despite the fact that the services of a Tuareg, Malam Agali were solicited.

It should also be noted that the presence of professional scribes and calligraphers who mostly work in the palaces of the *Mais* of Borno and the *Sarakuna* of Hausaland, further aided the spread of not only the Arabic manuscripts, but also the art of calligraphic embellishment. Despite the high cost of paper at the time it was not locally produced, the pressing demand by scholars, students and the emirate courts of the Sokoto Caliphate made it always in supply.

The tradition of sourcing, documenting and preserving Arabic manuscripts gathered momentum in the colonial period in which large numbers of manuscripts were collected from private repositories throughout Northern Nigeria (Hamman & Mohammed, 2010). This effort, resulted in the establishment of the Centre for Arabic Documentation, Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan (1963), Jos Museum (1954) as well as the National Archives, Kaduna

(1957) (Hamman, 2009; Kratli, 2015). Besides, there are other Arabic manuscript repositories for both state and federal governments, apart from those privately owned. Hamman (2009) observes that most of these repositories are located at Kano, Kaduna, Sokoto, Borno, Adamawa, Plateau, Oyo, Kwara and Lagos states.

Commenting on the deplorable condition of most Arabic manuscript repositories at both public and private custody, Alegbeleye in Biddle (2008) argues that:

...most of our cherished documentary resources are either totally destroyed or in extreme jeopardy. Although there has been a measure of success in the preservation of the built and natural heritage, there had been no parallel development on a national scale for collections of art, history, literature, information and science housed in our museums, galleries, libraries, archives and associated organisations and could provide collections held by individuals and corporations.

Similarly, Hamman (2009) also notes the level of deterioration of Arabic manuscripts in Northern Nigeria, and more specifically, those in the repositories of the Arewa House Centre for Historical Documentation and Research, Kaduna. He also opines that the procurement, and preservation, of such manuscripts have been a major challenge, at least, in the last fifty years. Hamman equally observes that it was the deterioration of the Arabic manuscripts that necessitated the organisation of conferences and workshops by the Arewa House in 2007 and 2008, which were funded by various local and international organisations and bodies such as UNESCO, Ford Foundation and the National Commission for Museums and Monuments.

Although the NHRS has a large collection of manuscripts (both Arabic and *Ajami*), this paper throws a little new light on the history and nature of such Arabic manuscripts. The paper also attempts a classification of the NHRS repository focusing on its challenges and prospects. The paper also makes an incursion into the processes used in the sourcing, retrieval, documentation and preservation of manuscripts throughout Northern Nigeria.

2. Literature review

Most scholars have written on the history, nature, types, challenges and contributions of Arabic manuscripts in Africa (Nobili, 2011; Sanni, 2014; Ngom, 2017; Lydon, 2010; Joshua, 2016; Hunwick and Joseph, 2012; Hafiz, 2020). Saeed

(2010) defines manuscript as any document that is written by hand using a pen, brush, or pencil as opposed to documents that are electronically printed.

Saeed further argues that Islam came to Africa with the tradition of manuscripts and observes that this was so due to the lack of modern technology in the region before the European colonial penetration. Citing Nigerian and West African sub-region, Saeed opines that Arabic/*Ajami* manuscripts have contributed immensely in recording the rich cultural heritage of the people, particularly where Islam and Islamic education was concerned.

Citing Leo Africanus who wrote in the mid-16th century, Sanni (2019), states that it has been 900 years since Africans have been using Arabic characters. In addition, it was noted that the presence of epigraphic inscriptions in the 10th century Mali, manuscripts and designed amulets from West African in the 11th century, as well as the availability of chronicles and bi-lingual documentation from the 16th century East African Kilwa sultanate, is a clear testimony of the sophisticated nature of the African continent in terms of civilisation and educational cultural heritage. Sanni equally maintains that by the mid-20th century, Sudanic Africa possesses a large number of manuscripts in virtually all Islamic sciences and subjects such as history, which was the focal point of John Hunwick's *Arabic literature of Africa*, a five-volume work in form of bibliographical details on Sudanic African authors. Admission, however, is made that despite the western criticism of the African Arabic manuscripts, they still serve as important sources in the reconstruction of the African history (Sanni, 2019). This was one of the reasons behind the evolvement of various repositories in most parts of the world, housing the African manuscripts apart from the conduction of projects such as the Timbuktu Manuscript Project that ended up with outstanding outputs, one of which is *The Meanings of Timbuktu* in 2008.

Similarly, Bang (2008) extensively, discusses the role of textual Islamic and Arabic materials in Zanzibar's National Archive. It is submitted that the 800 manuscripts of Zanzibar National Archive, most of which are dated from the late 1700s, make substantial contribution to the literary heritage of Africa, apart from the depiction of Zanzibar's role as a seat of learning and scholarship. Like most manuscript repositories in Africa, the Zanzibar collection cuts across various treatises on Islamic branches of knowledge such as law, theology, Prophetic traditions, jurisprudence, grammar, poetry, rhetoric, to mention but a few.

Despite the contribution of Arabic manuscripts, particularly in the reconstruction of the past, most are presently exposed to danger and extinction. In this vein, Abioye (2010) identifies the inherent chemical instability of the components of materials, unsuitable environmental conditions and inappropriate storage handling practice, natural disasters, theft and vandalism as the major problems leading to the deterioration of manuscript heritage in Nigeria and beyond. It should, therefore, be noted that although most scholars have contributed to the historical development, roles and challenges of Arabic manuscripts in Africa some of whom are cited here, there is no single detailed work on the classification of Arabic manuscripts in the NHRS. Though Dogara (2012), Gwadabe and Adamu (2010) have attempted to study the NHRS repositories, their focus is more on the management and preservation of such manuscripts.

3. Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative, historical and descriptive methodology. Apart from the sourcing of relevant documents on the topic of discussion, the researcher closely analyses and examines the available manuscripts in the NHRS collection. This process aided him tremendously in classifying the 1,913 Arabic manuscripts into seven categories viz; *Shi'ir* (poetry), *Tārikh* (history), *Fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), *Hadith* (Prophetic traditions), *Tasawwuf* (mysticism), *Lughā al-Arabiyyah* (Arabic language) and *Tauhīd* (theology). It also gives the researcher ample opportunity to identify the major problems affecting the NHRS manuscripts collection.

Through purposive sampling, the researcher selects a number of manuscripts from each of the seven categories, and English versions of their titles were equally provided. This couples with a snow-balling technique, which enabled the researcher to identify the interim reports written by the pioneering scholars of the NHRS from 1962-1981, which no doubt gives basic information about the sourcing, management and preservation of manuscripts in the NHRS. Snow-balling technic on the other hand, is a reliable means of obtaining data in which one informant links a researcher to other informants in order to find out answers to research questions.

Through the corroboration of sources, the researcher was able to reconstruct the historical development of NHRS and its manuscript repositories. Besides, through the triangulation, selection and interpretation of facts, the researcher identified six problems associated with the classification, management and preservation of manuscripts in the NHRS. He also proffered some solutions to such problems.

4. Discussion

The Historical Development of the Northern History Research Scheme (NHRS), Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria

The main reason behind the establishment of the Northern History Research Scheme (henceforth NHRS) was born out of the unrelenting efforts of the Nigerian historians to further promote material culture into global academic limelight so as to debunk the claim that Africa lacks history (Chimee, 2019). In 1960, however, Kenneth Onwuka Dike, a towering Nigerian cum-African historian, conceived the idea of establishing the NHRS (Gwadabe & Adamu, 2010). The scheme, the authors further observe, was conceived as interdisciplinary research involving various branches of knowledge ranging from history, anthropology, archaeology, literature, astronomy to language. They also state that the NHRS collection was sourced largely from the then government of Northern Nigeria and that of the University College of Ibadan.

The major reason for the establishment of the NHRS was to properly support research on the history of Northern Nigeria, which was hosted by the then regional government, especially through the documentation and preservation of historical materials of, and, about the region. With the establishment of Ahmadu Bello University in 1962, however, the NHRS was incorporated into the University's History Department pioneered by H.F.C. Smith (later became Abdullahi Smith). Bello (2008) states that NHRS plays an important role, particularly in the retrieval, documentation, preservation and translation of Arabic manuscripts of Northern Nigeria, apart from its position as a post-graduate library of the Department of History (see Figure. 1).



Figure 1: NHRS Entrance (Source: Nadir A. Nasidi, 2020)

Dogara (2012) opines that the large number of Arabic manuscripts available at the NHRS was principally received as donations from private collections of great Islamic scholars throughout Northern Nigeria. They were sometimes, purchased, especially from the families of deceased scholars in the region. Equally, it was observed that the manuscripts are sequentially arranged by ascending order, serving as the call number to the documents, which are properly catalogued in both Arabic and English (transliteration) giving details about their bibliographical information.

Unfortunately, the NHRS now suffers a great set-back. This problem left the repository virtually non-operational as it also lacks funding, as well as skilled manpower to run it. For this simple reason, Gwadabe and Adamu (2010) believe that what the NHRS has as a scheme is nothing but a 'ceremonial' director at whose watch the sourced Arabic manuscripts are gradually 'decaying'.

The Classification of the Arabic Manuscripts in the Northern History Research Scheme (NHRS)

Presently, there are 1,913 Arabic manuscripts at the NHRS. Out of this number, 1360 have full bibliographical information, while 553 manuscripts are completely anonymous. The manuscripts generally fall within different fields of knowledge such as history, mysticism, theology, astronomy, philosophy, Qur'anic exegesis, Arabic language and literature, poetry, bio-and autobiographies, botany, zoology, medicine, Islamic jurisprudence, as well as the Prophetic traditions.

Preserved in brown envelopes with handwritten information about them, the details of which are represented on the card-catalogues. The manuscripts can basically be classified into seven categories namely; *Shi'ir* (poetry), *Tārikh* (history), *Fiqh* (Islamic Jurisprudence), *Hadith* (Prophetic traditions), *Lugha al-Arabiyyah* (Arabic language), *Tasawwuf* (mysticism) and *Tauhid* (theology). Some sketches of these categories are provided below.

Shi'ir (Poetry)

Shi'ir, which is the best medium used by the Arabs to adequately express their feelings and emotions was also given new ethos with the advent of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula. Apart from its genres, ranging from *Rithā* (elegy), *Ghazal* (love poem), *Hijā* (satirical poem), *Wasf* (descriptive poem), *Khamriyyah* (wine poetry), *Tardiyyah* (hunt poetry), *Fakhr* (boasting poem), to *Hamāsa* (radical/war poetry), *Madh al-Rasūl* (eulogy of the Prophet of Islam) and *Qasīdah* (ode) were later added to the Arabic poetic genres. Thus, all these types of poetry are available in the NHRS collection.

Though the aim of this paper is not to analyse the contents of all the manuscripts under this category, the translated bibliographic information of some of them are provided. The poetry collection for instance, include Ibrahim Khalil bn Abubakar's anthology entitled *Ablag Ladaika al-Amr Ta'arifahu* (The Greatest Thing you Know), Ibrahim bn Ahmad al-Barnawi's *Alhamdu Lillahi al-ladhi Allamana* (Glory unto the Lord who Educated us), Al-Barnawi's *Madhu Wazir Borno Mustapha* (The Eulogy of Mustapha the Vizier of Borno), as well as Ibn Kashla al-Aswad's *Laqad Ra'aitu Ajaban fi Mautā* (I have seen Wonders in the Dead).

Other important works of poetry in the NHRS repositories include Abubakar Muhammad Bawa's *Hidāyat al-Sibyan Ilā Mawārid al-Irfān* (Guidance to Children about the Springs of Greatness), Ibrahim Maiduguri's *Asātir al-Thanā* (Legendary Stories of Complement), Shamsuddin Abu Abdallah al-Badamasī's *Fi Madh al-Naby* (In the Eulogy of the Prophet) and Abdulkadir bn Mustapha's *Fi Gazzwat Dākarāwa* (In the Battle of Dākarāwa). These are some of the classic anthologies by both Nigerian and Arab poets from other parts of the world.

Tārikh (History)

Under this category, there are works of history, particularly about the kings of Borno and their wars of conquests, bio-autobiographies, the history of the Fulani of Borno, the history of Kano, travelogues, to mention but just a few. For

instance, al-Barnawi's *Mukhtasar Tārikh al-Mulūk Borno* (An Abridged Version of the History of the Kings of Borno), Abu Tahir Ibrahim's *Qasb al-Sibāq fi Akhbār al-Ushshāq* (The Cane of Race in the Stories of Beloved Ones) and Ahmad bn al-Hajj's *Akhbār Asl al-Fulāta Borno* (The Origin of Fulāta Borno), are classic examples of the manuscripts on history in the NHRS Arabic repositories.

Other important opera in the field of history include Ahmad bn Furtuwa al-Barnawi's *Ghazwat Kānem allati Sāra fiha Sultānana al-Hajj Idris bn Ali* (The Battle of Kānem in which al-Hajj Idris bn Ali was our leader), Idris Ali's *Hurūb al-Sultān Idris Ali ma'a Būlālā* (The Battle of Sultan Idris with the Būlālā), Adam Muhammad al-Arabi's *Al-I'lān bi Tārikh Kano* (Declaration of the History of Kano), Alfa Hashimi's *Ta'arīf al-Hukkām wal Qabā'il bi Tārikh al-Fulāni* (Introduction to Rulers and Ethnic Groups on the History of Fulāni), and Junayd Muhammad al-Bukhari's *Ta'arīf al-Nufūs bi Dhikr al-Ziyārah al-Irāq wal Qudus* (Informing the Souls about the Tour of Iraq and Qudus).

Fiqh (Islamic Jurisprudence)

The collection of the works of Islamic jurisprudence in the NHRS is enormous. It includes the classical literature of many local and international scholars. Some of the Arabic manuscripts include; Ibn Jalal al-Basri's *Al-Furū'u* (The Branches of Islamic Sciences), Ibn Al-Hajj's *Kitab al-Madkhal* (The Book of Introduction), Ibn al-Nassaj's *Adab al-Ulama* (The Ethics of the Scholars), Abubakar Ibrahim Umar al-Kanami's *Jawāz al-Safar* (Passport for Travel) and Abu Yazid's *Kitāb al-Akhdari* (The Book of Akhdari). Other important manuscripts in this category are Abu Muhammad al-Ishmawi's *Muqaddimah al-Fiqh* (Introduction to Islamic Jurisprudence), Idris bn Khalid's *Jāmi'ul Masā'il al-Ahkām* (A Compendium of Issues of Judgment), Khidr Jibril al-Fulani's *Al-Masā'il allati lā Yu'addhar bil Jahl fiha* (Issues upon which Ignorance is not an Excuse) and Sa'id Muhammad Bala's *Irshād al-Ābid ila Hadhrat al-Ma'abūd* (Worshipper's Guide to the Path of his Lord).

Hadith (Prophetic Tradition)

Though manuscripts on Hadith are relatively in small number in the NHRS collection, there are a few outstanding works. Some of these works are: Abubakar Muhammad al-Jazuli's *Hisnul Hasīn min Kalām Sayyid al-Mursalīn* (The Invulnerable Fortress from the Sayings of the Leader of all Messengers), Abu Magra al-Haisubi's *Fusūl al-Sunnah* (Chapters of Prophetic Traditions), Jalaluddin al-Suyuti's *Nadhmul Durar fil Ilm al-Athar* (The Organisation of

Pearls in the Science of Narration), Abdullahi Muhammad Amkina's *Ijāzah* (Certification), Annuri Yahya Sharfuddin's *Sharh matn al-Arba'in al-Nawawiyah* (Commentary on Nawawi's 40 Haith Collection) and Imam Ajrum's *Mandhūmah al-Baiqūniyyah* (Baiquniyyah's Poetic Composition).

Lugha al-Arabiyyah (Arabic Language)

Arabic being the *lingua franca* in the Sokoto Caliphate's scholarly tradition makes it possible the writing and importation of classical works on the various aspects of the language. Some of these works in manuscript forms also form an integral part of NHRS collection. These manuscripts include Abu Zayd Abdurrahman bn Muhammad Al-Akhdari's *Al-Jauhar al-Maknūn fi Ilm al-Ma'āni wal Bayān wal Badī* (The Hidden Quintessence in the Science of Rhetoric, Semantics and Stylistics), Abdullahi Muhammad bn Fudi's *Fath al-Latīf al-Wāfi li Ilm al-Arūd wal Qawāfi* (Unlocking the Sufficient Knowledge of Prosody and Rhythm), Abdullah ibn Ridi's *Lam'ul Barq fil I'irāb* (The Dazzling Thunderbolt in the Science of Syntax), Abubakar Ali's *Al-Thaqāfah al-Arabiyyah fi Nigeria* (The Arabic Culture in Nigeria), as well as Al-Zabidi Muhammad Murtada's *Tāj al-Arūs min Jawāhir al-Qamūs* (The Bridal Crown of Quintessential Dictionary).

Tasawwuf (Mysticism)

The manuscripts on mysticism are also available in the NHRS repositories among which are Ahmad al-Tijjani Baba al-Shanqiti's *Munyatul Murīd* (The Aspiration of a Disciple), Junayd Muhammad Bukhari's *Irfān al-Riyāh fi al-Tabarruk bi Dhikr al Sheikh Uthman* (The Gratifying Wind of Blessing in the Remembrance of Sheikh Uthman), Abdulkadir Maisawa's *Farh al-Ahibbah bi Dhikr al-Auliya* (The Joy of Lovers in the Remembrance of the Vicegerents of Allah), Abdulkarim al-Fasi's *Taqyīd Wird al-Sheikh al-Tijjani* (The Observance of Sheikh Tijjani's Litanies), Uthman bn Fūdi's *Usūl al-Wilāyah wa Shurūtiha* (The Essentials of Sainthood and its Requirements) and his *Al-Salāsīl al-Dhahabiyyah li Sādat al-Sufiyyah* (The Golden Genealogy of Sufi Leaders), among many other manuscripts in this category.

Tauhīd (Theology)

Among the many manuscripts under this section include the works of Abu Muhammad bn Abdurrazak al-Fallati's *Kitāb al-Tauhīd* (The Book of Theology), Ahmad Talib al-Barnawi's *Al-Aqīdah al-Tauhidiyyah* (The Doctrine of Theology), Uthman bn Fūdi's *Ittiba'ul Sunnah wa Tark al-Bid'ah* (Adherence to Sunnah and the Neglect of Innovation), and his *Ihyā al-Sunnah wal Ikhmād al-Bid'ah* (Reviving

the Sunnah and Suppressing the Innovation), Muhammad bn Yusuf al-Jilani's *Al-Tauhīd* (Theology), to mention, but a few.

Challenges

Like most Arabic manuscript repositories in Northern Nigeria, the NHRS also suffers from a number of problems (Figures 2a, b and c). This paper, therefore, identifies the following problems:

1. *Lack of adequate space for the proper documentation and preservation of manuscripts. For this reason, most of the manuscripts in the NHRS are compressed in their shelves, which no doubt damages them.*
2. *Rodents also destroy the manuscripts due to the absence of modern glass shelves, which will not only be transparent for researchers, but also protect the manuscripts from dust and rodents.*
3. *There is a poor awareness about the nature and availability of the NHRS repositories.*
4. *There is the absence of librarians versed in Arabic who can manage, as well as direct visitors to such manuscripts in the NHRS.*
5. *There is also the need for the translation of the manuscripts into the English language.*
6. *The roofing of the NHRS being flat, often experiences water leakages, especially during the rainy season.*



Figure 1: Resources (Source: Nadir A. Nasidi, 2020)

5. Recommendations

By virtue of the nature of the problems of the NHRS manuscript repositories, this paper recommends the following solutions:

1. 1. *There is the need for proper funding for the provision of adequate space, shelving, translation, management and preservation of the manuscripts.*
2. 2. *There is also a strong need to employ professional librarians who are versed in the Arabic language.*
3. 3. *Due to the nature of the present condition of the manuscripts, their digitalization would be a good idea. This will no doubt give researchers in faraway locations access to the repositories.*
4. 4. *The NHRS needs the institutionalisation of a permanent chair for the Arabic manuscripts, which will not only manage it, but will also attract grants through research.*
5. 5. *There is also the need for the creation of an independent website for the NHRS for the dissemination of its activities to the general public.*
6. 6. *While some manuscripts will be open access for global consumption, the remaining have to be paid for by international researchers who are visitors to the NHRS site.*

6. Conclusion

Unlike the conventional, but seemingly generic categorisation of manuscripts in the NHRS repositories, this paper made an effort to classify the NHRS Arabic manuscripts for the first time into seven categories, which are; *Shi'ir* (poetry), *Tārikh* (history), *Fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), *Hadith* (Prophetic traditions), *Tasawwuf* (mysticism), *Lughā al-Arabiyyah* (Arabic language) and *Tauhid* (theology). It also provided an in-depth historical analysis of the establishment and development of the NHRS in the Department of History, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria focusing mainly on the nature and challenges of the documentation and preservation of its manuscripts. Using a purely qualitative, historical and descriptive methodology, the paper identified some of the major problems affecting the NHRS manuscript repositories, which include; lack of space, environmental hazards such as water-spillage, or leakages, dust and rodents, as well as the fallen standard of administrative and managerial skills, which further endangered the continuous survival of the manuscripts.

Similarly, the paper attempts to proffer some solutions to arrest the continuous degeneration of the manuscript collection of the NHRS among which are the need for the solicitation of grants to provide adequate space for the documentation, preservation and translation of manuscripts, the employment of professional librarian versed in Arabic language who can properly manage

the manuscripts and direct researchers, the need for the digitalization of the entire NHRS manuscripts, the institutionalisation of a special chair that will oversee the administration of the NHRS, as well as public awareness about its repositories.

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