

Conference reports

Sacred Word: Changing Meanings in Textual Cultures of Islamic Africa

Evanston, IL, April 21–22, 2016

The symposium ‘Sacred Word: Changing Meanings in Textual Cultures of Islamic Africa’, dedicated to the memory of John O. Hunwick (1936–2015), was held at Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, from 21 to 22 April, 2016. It was co-organized by the Northwestern University’s Institute for the Study of Islamic Thought in Africa (ISITA) and the Program of African Studies (PAS), as well as the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign’s Center for African Studies, and the American Islamic College, Chicago.

The symposium, convened by Rebecca Shereikis, Associate Director of ISITA, was organized into four panels. The first panel dealt with calligraphy and illuminations as local ways of expressing Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa. Sub-panel 1A, ‘Manuscript Aesthetics: The Arts of Scribes & Calligraphers’, was probably the most codicologically oriented. Following Hunwick’s article ‘West African Arabic Manuscript Colophons’, Bernard Salvaing and Mamadou Diallo analyzed and compared the colophons of manuscripts copied in Fuuta Toro and Fuuta Jalloo regions. Mustapha Hashim Kurfi emphasized the need to study the material aspects of manuscripts, and in particular decoration, colours, and calligraphy. Sara Fani presented a first approach to the special features of the Ethiopian Arabic script, opening up a new research field in relation to Ethiopian Islamic studies. In sub-panel 1B, ‘Manuscript Aesthetics: The significance of Ajami’, Fallou Ngom introduced the debate on the concept of ‘Ajamization’ of the African Islamic communities as a counterpart to the concepts of ‘Islamization’ and ‘Arabization’. In its wider sense, this term reflects the enrichment of Islam with vernacular aesthetics, traditions, and forms of religiosity, far beyond the existence of *‘aḡamī* texts. Yet, it is the *‘aḡamī* material that constitutes the main source of information about local peculiarities, as Dimitry Bondarev and Darya Ogorodnikova pointed out in their talk on *‘aḡamī* paratexts in manuscripts from Sudan. The spiritual value of *‘aḡamī* manuscripts was additionally highlighted by Amidu Sanni. The post-manuscript tradition was explored by Nikolai Dobronravin, who described the ‘Market Literature’ of northern Nigeria as ‘a sort of half-way production between the manuscripts and ‘modern’ publishing’. Scott Reese

further highlighted the relevance of printed matter for the development of the modern community of believers in which the use of the same works in distant places and the spread of local texts is more pronounced than in the manuscript production.

The second panel, ‘Homage to John Owen Hunwick’ focused on Hunwick’s contribution to scholarship and manuscript preservation and his legacy. The presenters included Abdel Wedoud Ould Cheikh, Scott Reese, and Mauro Nobili—who was surprisingly the only lecturer who spoke about Timbuktu.

The third panel, ‘Engaging with Texts: the Page and Beyond’, hosted two papers dealing with the literature of the Sokoto Caliphate. Paul Naylor spoke about the younger brother of Usman dan Fodio—Abdullahi (d. 1346/1828)—and the way in which he tried to immerse himself in the Arabic literary tradition in order to get in closer touch with his Islamic faith. The paper showed the lack of homogeneity in this kind of cultural processes, even among members of the same community, and how Abdullahi’s adherence to a ‘fully Arabic’ model of Islam could have had an adverse effect on his aspirations to become the leader of the Dawla ‘Uṡmāniyya. Stephanie Zehnle presented her ongoing work on the geographical representations produced in Sokoto—which were influenced by ‘the Arabic heritage of the geography-writing genre’—and how they were employed as a tool for political purposes by the rulers. Finally, Amir Syed presented his work on a poem in praise of the Prophet composed by the Tiġānī al-Hāġġ ‘Umar Fūṡi ṡa’l (d. 1280/1864).

The theme of Sufi spirituality, and in particular the Tiġānī brotherhood, was further developed during the fourth panel, which was dedicated to the transmission of knowledge. In fact, sub-panel 4A, ‘Transmitting Knowledge, Finding Meanings: From Sufism to Salafism’, focused on the spiritual trends in the African Islamic literatures. Abdalla Uba Adamu spoke of the dichotomy between the sacred and the profane in Sufi performances in northern Nigeria, where the lyrics written by certain Tiġānī singers have provoked controversies, because they were said to glorify Shaikh Ibrahim Niasse (d. 1394/1975) over God, recalling the old debate on the poetry of al-Hallāġ (d. 309/922). Some privately kept manuscripts presented by Zachary Wright could serve as historical sources for the origins of the Tiġānī brotherhood. Jeremy Dell (in panel 4B) examined a *tafsīr* written in Wólof by Muhammadu Dem, a twentieth-century Tiġānī cleric from Senegal. While traditionally Sufism has played a major role, according to Noah Salomon, more recently, the Salafi trend has found its place in Sub-Saharan Islam.

Sub-panel 4B, ‘Transmitting Knowledge, Finding Meanings: The Holy Qur’an’, with talks by Corinne Fortier, Afis Ayinde, and Jeremy Dell, addressed the acquisition of a physical and supernatural power through the writ-

ten word in the Qur'ān, due to the esoteric meaning that the holy text conceals. This perception led to the texts be employed for the performance of certain devotional—and also magical—rituals, not only by reading and reciting them, but also eating them or hanging them in trees, houses, or carrying them on one's neck, among other practices.

The geographic scope of the symposium was very wide: while, honouring John Hunwick, the majority of papers focused on western Africa, the literary production of some areas in East Africa was also well represented: Kenneth Inyani Simala read a paper on calligraphy in classical Swahili poetry; Noah Salomon, Amidu Sanni, Dimitry Bondarev and Darya Ogorodnikova presented their research on Sudan; Sara Fani and Adday Hernández spoke on the visual expression of *fushā*, *aḡamī*, and esoteric textual manifestations in Ethiopian Islamic manuscripts. The global nature of Islamic tradition was made evident. The magic-related material from Ethiopia that Hernández analyzed is not different from what can be found in other parts of the Islamic world, especially in Africa, and this globalization is also present in other genres such as grammar, jurisprudence and devotional literature. The pervasive works by al-Suyūṭī (d. 910/1505) constitute a good example of such globalization. But those works, read by local scholars, also inspired the composition of localized texts, as Abdel Wedoud Ould Cheikh, based on an earlier article by Hunwick, explained in his paper. Al-Ġazūlī's (d. ca. 869/1465) *Dalā'il al-ḥayrāt*, the subject of the talk by Afis Ayinde Oladosu, is another example of these widespread texts all throughout eastern and western African Islamic communities. This global character was also emphasized in the contribution by Scott Reese.

The symposium provided an opportunity for young researchers to meet established scholars, and witnessed an increasing global interest in the study of Islam in Africa. The full programme is available at <<http://www.african-studies.northwestern.edu/publications-research/ISITA/ISITA%20symposium.html>>, and the papers are being prepared for publication in the conference proceedings.

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