The Cluster of Excellence
Understanding Written Artifacts
cordially invites you to the workshop

Touching, Seeing, Hearing, Reading:
Voyage into Islamic Manuscripts of West Africa

Thursday, 16 November 2023, 9:45 am – 7:30 pm CEST
Friday, 17 November 2023, 9:30 am – 5:30 pm CEST
Saturday, 18 November 2023, 10:00 am – 11:30 am CEST

Warburgstraße 26, 20354 Hamburg

Hybrid Event

Organisers: Dmitry Bondarev (Universität Hamburg),
Mauro Nobili (University of Illinois),
Darya Ogorodnikova (Universität Hamburg)

Registration:
https://www.csmc.uni-hamburg.de/en/register/workshop45.html
The time when Africa south of the desert was considered to be a region bereft of any written culture is now over. Several publications, including the multivolume *Arabic Literature of Africa* (1993-present), do justice to the intellectual vibrancy of African Muslim intellectuals. However, West African Islamic manuscripts have mainly been studied as containers of texts, neglecting their material aspect as artefacts.

This workshop approaches the study of these manuscripts from a holistic perspective as both containers and content, artefacts and texts, bringing together scholars from three continents who specialize in different aspects of manuscript studies. The workshop comprises introductory lectures on each of the macro themes: (1) manuscript as an object; (2) content of manuscripts; (3) languages of manuscripts. The lectures are followed by specific presentations on ongoing research, hands-on manuscript sessions, a roundtable, and a public lecture.
Programme

Thursday, 16 November 2023, 9:45 am – 7:30 pm

Session 1: Manuscripts as objects

9:45 – 10:00 Zekeria Ahmed Salem (Northwestern University) and Konrad Hirschler (Universität Hamburg)
Welcome and opening

10:00 – 10:30 Susana Molins-Lliteras (University of Cape Town)
Introduction to the session: The West African manuscript as an object: historical artefact, collectable and archive subject

10:30 – 11:15 Michaelle Biddle (Wesleyan University/Universität Hamburg)
The trans-Saharan paper trade to Borno and Hausaland 1550 – How to load a camel

11:15 – 11:30 Coffee Break

11:30 – 12:15 Dmitry Bondarev (Universität Hamburg)
Codicological features of Islamic manuscripts of West Africa

12:15 – 1:00 Mauro Nobili (University of Illinois)
Revisiting West African script styles

1:00 – 2:30 Lunch Break

2:30 – 3:15 Bruce Hall (University of California, Berkley)
Making history out of the commercial letters of nineteenth-century Timbuktu

Session 2: Hands-on session / presentation (tbc)

3:15 – 4:00 Dmitry Bondarev (Universität Hamburg)
Hands-on session: Northwestern University, Melville J. Herskovits Library of African Studies, Paden 417
Keynote lecture
6:00 – 7:30  Charles Stewart (University of Illinois)
If 2023 were 1963: Mapping my research agenda. Reflections on manuscripts and Arabic-script writing in Africa

20:00  Conference Dinner

Friday, 17 November 2023, 09:30 am–5:30 pm

Session 3: Content of manuscripts
9:30 – 10:00  Ali Diakite (Hill Museum and Manuscript Library)
Introduction to the session: How HMML catalogues West African manuscripts, and what we found inside

10:00 – 10:45  David K Owen (Harvard University)
Ghadīja Mint al-ʿĀqil and the logic manuscripts of Islamicate West Africa

10:45 – 11:30  Ariela Marcus-Sells (Elon University)
The cosmology of sorcery and science from ʿAbdallah al-ʿAlawi to Mūsā Kamara

11:30 – 11:45  Coffee Break

11:45 – 12:30  TBA

Session 4: Case study
12:30 – 1:15  Jannis Kostelnik (Universität Hamburg), Darya Ogorodnikova (Universität Hamburg), Khaoula Trad (Universität Hamburg)
A case study: Universität Hamburg, Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg Carl von Ossietzky, Cod Scrin. 227a

1:15 – 2:30  Lunch Break
Session 5: Languages of manuscripts

2:30 – 3:00  Ismaila Zangou Barazi (University of Bamako), Hamadou Boly (University of Sahel, Bamako), Sambi Khalil Magassouba (University of Bamako), Aguibou Sako (Bamako), Misbahou Traoré (Bamako), Abduolkarim Touré (IHERI-AB, Timbuktu/Bamako)

Introduction to the session: Where are we at with studying languages and manuscripts?

3:00 – 3:45  Dmitry Bondarev (Universität Hamburg)

Ajami as a “teaching tool”: A case of Old Kanembu

3:45 – 4:00  Coffee Break

4:00 – 4:45  Mustapha Kurfi (Bayero University, Kano)

Full Ajami texts: Reflecting on English translations of Hausa Ajami texts in the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) project at Boston University

4:45 – 5:30  Lameen Souag (Centre national de la recherche scientifique)

TBA

Saturday, 18 November 2023, 10:00–11:30

Session 6: Round table

10:00 – 11:30  Wrap-up discussion

With the participation of Xena Amro (Northwestern University), Mohamed Diagayeté (IHERI-AB, Timbuktu/Bamako), Djibril Dramé (British Library), Imam Shettima Habib (), Shamil Jeppie (University of Cape Town), Esmeralda Kale (Northwestern University), Rebecca Shereikis (Northwestern University), Saadou Traoré (Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes/University of Hamburg/Timbuktu), Ousmane Yaro (Manuscript Library of Jenne)
Abstracts & Contributors

Michaelle Biddle (Wesleyan University/Universität Hamburg)
The trans-Saharan paper trade to Borno and Hausaland 1550 – How to load a camel
Thursday, 16 November, 10:30 – 11:15 am

My examination, and ongoing research of the paper watermarks in tens of thousands of manuscript folios written in the ancient African polities of Borno and Hausaland, between the mid-sixteenth and the early twentieth century, has led to the identification of numerous Italian paper mills that produced this paper. Several of these mills specialized in paper for the wider Islamic market – Ottoman chanceries, the Levant, the Balkans and Malaysia – as well as south of the Sahara Desert. Until the twentieth century all but a handful of the paper used in these manuscripts was produced in Italy. This paper deals with the specifics of the trans-Saharan paper trade that existed for centuries and connected Italian paper production with African paper usages.

Ali Diakite (Hill Museum and Manuscript Library)
How HMML catalogues West African Manuscripts, and what we found inside
Friday, 17 November, 9:30 – 10:00 am

Through collaboration between the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library (HMML), CSMC, and local partners (SAVAMA etc.), 36 family libraries from Timbuktu and the surrounding region have been fully digitized. We are now doing the necessary cataloguing work to make these manuscripts fully accessible online for scholars, students and the general public. In this presentation we will highlight the most important aspects of the project thus far, including our approach and the methodology we use. Most of our work is focused on cataloguing, creating stable authorities for authors, titles, and West African languages, ensuring these are represented in global metadata. But we also share unexplored aspects of Timbuktu’s written heritage unearthed during our time with the manuscripts -- from new genres of poetry, popular stories and works on theology, to discoveries about intellectual and commercial networks, and insights into private spiritual and esoteric practices.
Thousands of commercial letters survive in different Malian collections of Arabic manuscripts, yet almost nothing has been done with them by researchers. Insofar as they are mentioned in discussions of manuscript history in the region, it is assumed that they are the surviving fragment of a very old practice of writing by traders in the region, the traces of which have otherwise disappeared. They are likewise assumed to provide evidence for how literacy in Arabic and Islamic legal institutions gave Muslim merchants advantages in efficiency and in mitigating risk, which is also assumed to go back to medieval times, even if those older letters are no longer extant. In this paper, I contend that we have misunderstood the ‘modernity’ of letter-writing in the Sahara and West Africa. The apparent ubiquity of letters from the nineteenth century reflects the fact that after 1800 European paper became much more widely available and cheaper on the southern side of the Sahara. If letters were a relatively recent innovation for trans-Saharan traders, what does it say about the role of Islamic legal institutions in organizing trade? I will provide some provisional answers to these questions using a nineteenth-century corpus of commercial letters exchanged along an axis connecting the Niger River Valley, in what is today Mali, with the Mediterranean coast at Tripoli, in what is today Libya.

Mustapha Hashim Kurfi (Bayero University, Kano)

Full Ajami texts: Reflecting on English translations of Hausa Ajami texts in the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) project at Boston University

Friday, 17 November, 4:00 – 4:45 pm

In this presentation, I discuss the Hausa Ajami texts that our team translated as part of the NEH project at Boston University. I briefly discuss the team members, the sources of the Ajami texts and their diverse forms and contents. Then, focusing on two Ajami texts, *The Harlot’s Song (Waƙar Karuwa)* and *The Human Being Is an Incurable Disease (Mutum Cuta Ne Marar Magani)*, I show the wealth of local knowledge contained in these Ajami texts and how their translations in major European languages can enrich our understanding of Hausa society and knowledge production about Africa at large. Finally, I reflect on the challenges we encountered in the translations and how working with local
scholars and practitioners enabled us to produce English translations that do justice to the preoccupations and worldviews of the Hausa people.

**Ariela Marcus-Sells (Elon University)**

*The cosmology of sorcery and science from ʿAbdallah al-ʿAlawi to Mūsā Kamara*

Friday, 17 November, 10:45 – 11:30 am

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, Muslim scholars of the Western Sahara Desert debated the legitimacy and legality of a set of practices called the “sciences of the unseen” (ʿulūm al-ghayb). One scholar, Muḥammad al-Kunti, became known for his support of these sciences and his willingness to discuss, describe, and defend them in Arabic manuscripts texts. A contemporary of Muḥammad al-Kunti, ʿAbdallah ibn al-Hajj Ibrāhīm al-ʿAlawī adopted the opposing position, composing a sixty-four-line poem entitled Rushd al-ghāfil (The Guide for the Heedless) that condemned the sciences of the unseen as “the sciences of evil” (ʿulūm al-shirr). This paper begins by locating the debate between these two scholars within the context of larger eighteenth century discussions about Sufism and learning and within the larger cosmological framework that they both shared. This paper then offers a preliminary analysis of the debate between al-Kunti and al-ʿAlawī as it re-emerges in an unstudied work by the twentieth-century Senegalese Sufi Mūsā Kamara, entitled Sharḥ al-ṣadr fī kalām ʿalāʾ-ṣihr. Held in the Fond Musa Kamara at the Institut Fondamental d’Afrique Noir (IFAN) at the Université Cheikh Anta Diop (UCAD) in Dakar, the Sharḥ al-ṣadr is a short work of twenty-four folios that purports to respond to a Frenchman’s questions about sorcery. In this work, Mūsā Kamara refers back repeatedly to the debate between al-Kunti and al-ʿAlawī a century prior. The Sharḥ al-ṣadr thus allows us to follow this West African debate on the sciences of the unseen as it moved from a precolonial to a colonial-era episteme.
The West African manuscript as an object: historical artefact, collectable and archive subject

Thursday, 16 November, 10:00 – 10:30 am

West African Islamic manuscripts have mostly been studied as containers of texts, neglecting their material aspects as artefacts. However, a manuscript is a preservable object with an individual history, as a single text can be changed and altered, by production processes, marginalia, and paratexts, among others. What makes a manuscript copy unique? Its embodiment: the use of specific materials (paper, inks, pigments etc.), techniques (ruling, sewing) and skills (calligraphy), as well as the know-how necessary for each production aspect and stage (Krätli). Thus, each manuscript copy is a unique historical artefact. Understanding a manuscript culture therefore requires the consideration of the material, technological, economic, cultural, and intellectual aspects of book production, circulation, consumption, and preservation. Moreover, manuscripts, as part of collections or libraries also become collectables, responding to a need for classification and preservation, to the urge to erect a permanent and complete system against the destructiveness of time. Sometimes, these collections or libraries become archives, which themselves need to be treated as historical subjects, examining both their conditions of production and the effects of their existence on their context. Manuscript archives should be analysed in terms of the production, motivations, circulation, and reception of the archival collection; an archival biography of this kind is more than just an examination of an individual case, it points to the modalities of knowledge production at a certain time and juncture (Hamilton).

A recurrent indictment against the Timbuktu manuscripts in particular, and West African manuscripts more generally, is the prevalence of copies in the archive, and thus it has often been denigrated as a “derivative” archive, containing “mere” copies of original works composed elsewhere or multiple copies of the same manuscripts. An approach which highlights the manuscript as an object allows for a more profound understanding of West African manuscript culture and the complexity of copying as a generative practice.
Mauro Nobili (University of Illinois)

*Revisiting West African script styles*

Thursday, 16 November, 12:15 – 1:00 pm

This paper provides an in-depth exploration of paleographic features of West African Islamic manuscripts, expanding on relatively scarce previous research. Relying on existing scholarship and an extensive investigation of unpublished manuscripts, the paper will suggest a taxonomy of West African script styles and outline a broad theory on their development over time. Three scripts will be presented as clearly distinguishable macro-regional styles (Sahrawi, Suqi, Barnawi). The fourth style, representative of the western part of Middle Niger and Senegambia, will also be analysed, identifying its two main subvariants.

David K Owen (Harvard University)

*Ghadīja Mint al-‘Āqil and the logic manuscripts of Islamicate West Africa*

Friday, 17 November, 10:00 – 10:45 am

Ghadīja (Khadija) Mint (Bint) al-‘Āqil al-Daymāniya (d. ca. 1835) flourished at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th century in the southwestern Sahara, in the Gebla region of today’s Mauritania. A brief review of women’s contributions to the history of logic underscores Ghadija’s historical importance, as one of only two women authors on logic prior to Frege whose work is still extant. In fact, Ghadija’s *Ṭurra ʿalā l-Sullam* is the best known, and most reliably preserved, textual record of her teaching across the intellectual sciences of the Core Curriculum of Islamic West Africa (Hall and Stewart, 2010). Her *Ṭurra*, still being glossed and reproduced for study in Mauritania, is a commentary on a 16th century *arjūza* of Avicennan logic, the *Sullam al-murawnaq*. The *Sullam* was composed by the Algerian scholar ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Akhḍarī, and is arguably the most widely studied work of Arabic logic in the world today. In this talk, I introduce the audience to what is known about Ghadija’s life, teaching, and legacy. I compare Ghadija’s treatment in the sources to that of her brother and student Aḥmad, and unveil a digital archive for Arabic logic texts, with the work of al-Akhḍarī and Ghadija as its centerpiece. The research results herein show the relevance of gender to, as well as the utility of text-editing, digital archiving, and comparative scholasticism for, the field of Arabic logic.