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The History of Books, Libraries and Reading in West Africa

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Since Mali, and particularly northern Mali where Timbuktu is situated, has been and remains in the international news let me briefly talk about the situation there, as best as I have been able to gather information from there, before presenting you with a book collector from Timbuktu.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* “word of the year” for 2012 was “omnishambles;” and it could have been coined with Mali 2012 in mind for through last year and into 2013 it has been a period of persistent military disruptions, deep political confusion in the capital, Bamako, and continued hardship for the majority of the population. From virtually every perspective it has been a mess: from the massacre in Aguelhok at the start of 2012 through a coup d’etat, the changes in government, a military without a vision and soldiers without a sense of service, small bands of rebels able to take more and more territory, destruction of historic monuments, moving around of manuscript collections, and then urgently calling on the ex-colonial power to save the country from further shambles.

Most of my friends and colleagues are usually based in Timbuktu, about 800km or 500 miles away from the capital. Some may not originally come from Timbuktu but have found themselves there because of language and research skills that allow them to work in the libraries that have emerged in that town. When a group of rebels called Ansar Dine took over the town in the first half of 2012 there was an exodus from the town by bus and boat and my colleagues left with their families to Bamako and from there to their original villages or hometowns. But other colleagues stayed on. There were a few who managed to go in and out and brought out parts of their manuscript collections and external hard-drives to the relative safety and security of the capital.

We stayed in touch with those who had relocated to Bamako. Communication lines with Timbuktu soon broke down. But we were able

to put together stories from people in Bamako who got news intermittently from within Timbuktu. We managed to bring to Cape Town one colleague who spent a few weeks with us. In this age of hyper-fast information flows the slow and complicated routes to get a hint of news gave us a sobering perspective on connectivity when mobile phones and the Internet are no longer viable means of communication.

The Ansar Dine's early campaign of tomb destruction clearly highlighted their specific theo-ideological tendency. We did sense over the past few years that there was a growing presence of these Wahhabi/Salafi types in the town. But they kept to themselves. A few of them may have joined the invading victorious Ansar Dine when they arrived in town. Marching to knock down the tombs of the holymen of Timbuktu was probably what they had wanted to do for a long time. But when they started they made themselves immensely unpopular. They had to go on showing that they were serious about destroying these structures because people must have continued with their ways, visiting the saints and visiting the cemeteries, possibly as ways of resisting the imposition of the new strictures by men with guns but no religious, spiritual or moral authority among them.

There was no immediate threat to the storerooms of the libraries. Yet the owners locked up, hid their materials and left town with some of their most valuable manuscripts. They informed us to stop communicating with the international media about the libraries and remove articles dealing with this issue from our website. Our fear initially was not about book destruction. We were worried about neglect and mishandling. The Ansar Dine was trying to establish a little state in Timbuktu so their concerns were defending the town against counter-attack and capture by the government. Of course, despite a coup d'état to protect the territorial integrity of the Malian state, for ten months the Malian army never engaged militarily with the rebels. So Timbuktu was left alone and the rebels went about attempting to establish their dream shariah city-state. Deciding on the lawful and the prohibited status of manuscripts held in the libraries was never going to be a priority even though many items among the collections are anathema to the views of the Ansar Dine; there are texts of sufi poetry, liturgies, and prose by leading sufi masters from the region.

In this context, attacking a tomb with hoes is a much more public and spectacular act than tearing-up or burning a text in a library. We hoped that they were illiterate and uninterested in books, as they seem to have been. But we have been told that materials did disappear and were probably stolen from the major state archive, the Ahmad Baba Institute. We are waiting for details about the estimated number of items that were taken or destroyed. However, no library or archive was attacked and razed to the ground as the French marched into Timbuktu and the rebels fled, as was reported by Sky and Reuters and other news sources. There was a need for a compelling story to broadcast to the world, a bonfire of

manuscripts was to be it. But it did not happen. The locals had taken some precautions. Hiding materials and moving them elsewhere were possibly ways of preservation from earlier episodes of conflict and trouble in Timbuktu. They appreciate a solid building to house their texts – an archive in the conventional sense - but they appear to have remembered alternatives, which included the mobility of manuscripts in metal cases: it has made me think that through the history of the wider region there is a long history of the “mobile archive.” The wooden box or metal case as an archival repository offers security and is movable.

II

I want to turn now to look at how handwritten books and other written matter moved across the southern shores of the Mediterranean Sea and the Sahel with Timbuktu one among many points of book composition and collection along the way.

I have been reflecting for some years now on how Timbuktu came to have so many manuscript collections. There are many myths about the place. Is the steady appearance of manuscripts over, say, the last two decades another mirage? Timbuktu is correctly associated with the great 16th century scholar Ahmad Baba, a prolific author, and with the 17th century large *Tarikhs* (Chronicles) of Sa’adi and Ka’ti or Ibn al-Mukhtar. But how did libraries and such substantial manuscript collections come to be constituted? There are some external remarks about books and libraries since the observations of Leo Africanus (Hasan bin Muhammad al-Wazzan) in his *Descrizione dell’Africa* (completed by 1520 but only published in 1550)¹ that books were more valuable than gold in Timbuktu; but there are no known records which directly reflect the making of a family or local book collection.

I stumbled upon the name of Ahmad Bul’araf in almost every conversation with researchers at the main state archive in the town, the Ahmad Baba Institute library, and many of the custodians of the smaller family collections, which now number around two dozen.

Bul’araf died in September 1955 in Tombouctou when Mali was not yet independent but part of French West Africa. A major part of the legacy left to his family was his large library of manuscript-books, letters, and printed works. Could the passion for collecting of this twentieth-century figure offer a way to imagine at least elements of earlier traditions of collecting in the region? Whatever the case, his story is worth telling for its own sake.

Aḥmad bin Mbarak bin Barka bin Muḥammad Bul’arāf al-Taknī² was born in 1884 at Guelmīm in the Sūs region in southwestern Morocco. Around the time he was thirty years old he left his birthplace and moved further southward. He went first to a location in Senegal then to the learned town of Shinqīt in present-day Mauritania.

When exactly he left Guelmīm, where and for how long he lived in “Senegal” and when or why he moved on from there are all still unclear.³ We know that there was a general economic decline in the Sus region, and in Guelmim in particular, from the last quarter of the nineteenth century, which drove its inhabitants out.

Shinqīt was a town recognized for its many distinguished scholars and he met many learned men there. Here he sat with them and, it would appear, in these scholarly circles he was initiated into the more advanced aspects of Mālikī fiqh (jurisprudence) and other disciplines. It is still unclear at whose feet he sat, whose homes he frequented or how much time he spent in sessions listening to teachers.

Trading opportunities led him further South to Timbuktu. The routes between the Sūs and Timbuktu via settlements in-between were among the established trans-Saharan trade routes. Camel caravans would over a matter of weeks or months transport various items of trade, traders and also scholars over these vast spaces. His migration southward reflects a larger migration in the last quarter of the nineteenth-century by people from various parts of the Maghrib to the French-controlled territories of West Africa.

Timbuktu had been taken by the French in 1893. Bul’araf arrived there around a decade later, in 1904. This is where he started his book collecting and trading about three years later. It appears that he would never return even to visit his birthplace in the Maghrib. I assume that he travelled out of the town as a trader but I have nothing to show how far out of the town or where he went. From what I have read he appears to have been rather immobile and yet at the same time impressively well-connected to people thousands of Kilometres away in every direction of the compass. He maintained contact with merchants, scholars, and book collectors or dealers he had met or heard about and made new contacts through writing letters. Over the years he kept up a regular correspondence with growing numbers of businesses and scholarly contacts in distant places, as I shall show below. His capacity to reach scholars and scribes and then enter into a correspondence with them was a great and enduring skill. This was an important means of developing his book collection. This was necessary for his business but I would argue that it was his passion for books that led him to develop his network of contacts.

His life in Timbuktu is a story of the making of a manuscript-book collector. He was of course part of a family, a clan, and ethnic networks such as the ‘ulamā’ (learned) networks.

As a bibliophile he accumulated works from great distances away from Timbuktu. He bought works and commissioned copies. He had to concern

himself with prices – of paper, of copying, of the postal service. For instance, he wrote to booksellers located along the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean: as far apart as Fes and Tangier, in the distant West, through to Cairo and Beirut, in the East, to acquire works.

His network included writers of works, owners of texts, copyists of books, intermediaries between authors and copyists, middlemen in the movement of the objects from point of origin to him; from point of production to consumption and ultimately conservation. When he encountered the printed book his network embraced booksellers and printers. I cannot say when he first handled printed texts and whether it struck him as very different to manuscript books but for the moment I shall keep this distinction between the handwritten and the printed work. In this extensive bibliophilic network he was a generator of material and a medium for their circulation.

When Bul'araf arrived in Timbuktu it was under a relatively new French administration. *Le Tricolore* was raised there at the end of 1893, making it part of the *Soudan Français* (later to be declared part of *l'Afrique Occidentale Française* which was the same administration but under a different name). There appears to be little impact or encroachment of the colonial presence on his activity. It may even have enabled his correspondence and network especially through the operation of the colonial postal service. The postal service in West Africa and across North Africa connected the cosmopolitan centres of the southern shores of the Mediterranean, with many booksellers and printers, and outposts like Timbuktu. By the time Timbuktu was conquered the French had 14 Post Offices scattered across the vast space of its Soudan colony. (This grew to 30 by the 1920s, according to one source.) But there were also what the French journalist Felix Dubois called “second-hand” ones in various places, by which he meant a Petty Officer who ensured the departure and delivery of letters in every town with a French presence. Dubois observed that once a fortnight the French mail is meant to arrive and depart. It apparently travelled at a rate of 35 miles per day.⁴

The postal service was crucial to the movement of correspondence and objects such as Bul'araf's books. Transport of the books could still have been with the camel caravans but there is evidence to show him concerned with postal rates and especially with the length of time it took for items to move between two points. According to a rather optimistic view, in theory it took a week within West Africa and two weeks to or from Cairo; although the mail between the latter and Timbuktu entailed long delays. Apparently, the post first went to Paris then back into Africa. In any case, consideration of the UPS of the day – the colonial postal services - is crucial in an exploration of the movement of books that I am considering. There was always the possibility of attacks by bandits in the vast desert – a concern which is expressed in letters from the period - and the colonial military presence ensured the relative safety of the movement of mail. As

a merchant he had many reasons to be concerned about the safety of the region because his goods – such as tea, sugar, leather goods, and perhaps paper - had to come and go.

Another indicator of his acceptance of the reality of political power in his world was his adoption of the western dating system, alongside the *hijri*, in many of his letters at least those from the later period that I have seen. He did interact with the colonial administration and they came to recognize him as a man of substance and potential ally. Among his own papers there only remains correspondence between him and the secretary of the Governor in the 1950s when the colonial administration was about to withdraw from the region.

How much did Aḥmad Bul'arāf himself write? He is the author of at least 27 works according to Mahmoud M. Dedeb, the leading contemporary scholar of Timbuktu.⁵ In John Hunwick's major compilation of West African Arabic writing, *Arabic Literature of Arabic* (volume four), he is identified as the author of 39 works.⁶ According to the index to the five volumes that partly catalogues the manuscript holdings of the *Centre de documentation et de recherches historiques Ahmad Baba* (Cedrab) in Timbuktu around 150 written items are attributed to him.⁷ However, on working through the volumes one discovers that this includes a number of letters, some copies of the same items, apart from what would be considered his own works of scholarship. This figure is therefore an overestimate; although more material may appear in the catalogues now in preparation. Handlists in preparation from other libraries may also have copies or original works by him. For instance, the Mamma Haidara Library catalogue of its 8000 items has a few items under his name.⁸ The major absence is a cumulative catalogue that incorporates all the Bul'arāf material including those that remain at the family home and those taken by his descendants to Niamey in Niger.

(In the absence of a catalogue for his own library as it was at the time or immediately after his death we have to therefore rely on other catalogues and descriptions of this collection. Despite numerous efforts since Unesco's intervention, as part of the *General History of Africa* project, in the 1960s, existing catalogues barely touch the surface of the many layers of written materials. (For instance, existing catalogues sponsored by the Al-Furqan Foundation in London on the whole is meant to only include scholarly manuscripts (*makhtutāt*) not other documentary materials such as letters, receipts (*wathāiq*); where the latter appear in catalogues they are there not by design but co-incidence). There has been a burst of activity in the past decade or so in Timbuktu to establish private libraries and there are now at least two initiatives to organize the various private libraries.⁹ The focus of all these efforts at establishing libraries has been on the manuscript collections i.e. handwritten texts, their cataloguing and basic conservation.)

The manuscript tradition has come to be considered the pride of the town's intellectual legacy. Bul'arāf was the modern pioneer in this. His labours, of course, coincide broadly with the coming of print to the Sahel. (Fas already had a lithograph press in 1865.) The overwhelming weight of handwritten books and other materials in the region easily lead one to forget the more than century of printing in the region, which came with the French colonial presence. There appears to have been no aversion to print; no fatwa against its use has been found.

Bul'arāf's manuscript copying project was not a reaction against technological innovation and modernity. We have yet to find a text questioning the permissibility of printing, or on the other hand, a text promoting its uses. We have a record of Bul'arāf's library holding printed books; among them was the major work of Arabic grammatical theory, *Kitāb al-Sībawayhi*, two volumes, published in Paris in 1885.¹⁰

He also arranged for the printing of local works.¹¹ He went way beyond the confines of Timbuktu in this pursuit. There is evidence of at least ten such works printed under the patronage of his library.¹² Tunis is the only place of publication given. The apparent local preference for the manuscript form, until very recently and even today, deserves further reflection.¹³

In what could be considered his major work of scholarship, the biographical dictionary, a kind of scholarly *Who's who?* - *Izālat al-rayb wa shakk wa al-tafrīt* - he makes a place for himself. Under, "Aḥmad bin Bul'arāf al-Mūsū Alī al-Taknī" he is, at the time of the composition of the dictionary, 1359 *Hijri* (1940 AD), the compiler of 12 works.¹⁴ He was then around 76 years old. It seems highly unlikely that the rest of his writing came after this – whether we number them at 150 or in the 30s. But when describing his own scholarly efforts in his own *tarjamah* (biographical dictionary) he limits his contribution to scholarship as a *compiler*. He lists his 10 compilations of fatwas of local scholars. He gathered the legal opinions (*fatāwa*, *nawāzil*, *ajwiba*) on numerous matters from a host of scholars. He also mentions two commentaries by himself, one on abrogated ḥadīth by Ibn Jawzī, and another on a work by Ibn Ḥajar. He confidently includes himself among the greats of his era and region, but then modestly writes of himself as only a compiler. The entry on himself is of average length (14 lines of printed text), not the shortest but neither long. A number of entries are merely one line noting, for instance, that someone was a writer of poetry or legal opinions. There are around 30 entries that are extensive and one covering twelve pages.¹⁵

The biographical dictionary at one level may be his only "original" work but how should we read the copies of works he composed, or even those he commissioned for copying by other copyists? I can foresee a good deal of his hand and mind intervening in the copying process. There is some evidence for this. In a massive text – more than 800 pages - he himself

finished copying in August 1937 on the last page he essentially claims that his completed version is superior to the copy that he had copied! He writes that he had looked far and wide for the original but when he could look no further he fell upon a copy and proceeded himself to work with it to produce a second copy. He says that his passion for rare *nawāzil* (juristic opinions) led him to busy himself with copying it despite his initial reluctance because the copy he used was so poor – the writing was filled with errors (*fasād*). He writes that his copy is “more correct of the two copies as I carefully searched and reflected on it.” Yet he goes on hope that he may still find the original.¹⁶

To be engaged in copying was therefore a way of producing a new work; it was a creative act despite the intention of the copyist. A new “original” was made in the process of making a copy. “The implications for reversing the relationship between original and copy. . . are far reaching.”¹⁷ Copying implies both imitation and plenitude, it is the one and the many, replication and profusion, argues Nick Groom.¹⁸ We can therefore understand the confusion by catalogers trying to classify his materials. This way of working may not have been unfamiliar in Timbuktu. Copies fill many catalogues and we may be missing originality by passing over them because we spot yet another copy! (To dismiss Timbuktu as having been merely a massive Xerox machine, as one western scholar was reported in the South Africa media is not to understand all the things a photocopier can do! These days there are 3D ones.). Moreover, from a art history perspective, every copy in a collection is a unique manuscript. Copying was also an act of conserving a work; the spirit, apart from most or much of its primary content, lives in the copy.

Copying a work of 800 pages also raises a whole stream of questions relating to the craft of writing and book production: how long did it take to make this work? How many hours a day did he sit down (not at a desk, I presume) to write? Did he divide the work up by chapter or number of pages when timing his rate of composition? Did he set aside a stack of paper aimed for this copy only?

The Bul‘arāf library has been reduced to a modest family collection hardly recognized as a library of significance and barely able to keep going. One estimate is that in 1945 it held 2,076 manuscripts, which had dwindled down to 680 by 2002. Many of the items were donated by his descendants to the state-run archive in Timbuktu and to the university library in Niamey, Niger.¹⁹

When his library was still functioning it was a solid structure and reportedly had a manuscript conservation unit, a place for copyists and for checking copies, and a unit for making covers for the loose leaves of writing (sewn bindings have never been used in Timbuktu).²⁰ It is remembered as an inspiration for other archival ventures including as an example of an indigenous initiative when the Unesco *General history of*

Africa experts visited Timbuktu in the late 1960s.²¹ His activities in the first half of the twentieth century is possibly the best recorded in their own terms as to how an archive came to be constituted in the region. It points to a precedent for the recent archival work in Timbuktu and perhaps to its past.

Many of the writers of the town are well-known but those devoted to reproducing the works of these famous writers have played an important role in bringing attention to their authors. Even today one could be referred to a local copyist when requesting a copy of a *ms*. We have the names of a number of the copyists in his network.²² Ahmad Bul'araf would himself get down to copying a text when he was particularly concerned with the subject of the manuscript, as is clear by now. This seems to have been the exception however. He most often employed others to copy for him. We know of the following men whom he commissioned to copy works: Abdurahman bin Sidi Uthman, Muḥammad al-Amīn bin Sidi Muḥammad bin Barik, Muḥammad al-Qununi, and Abdullah bin Aḥmad, Jadn bin al-Murābit. In 1929 Muḥammad al-Amīn bin Sidi Muḥammad bin Barik copied a large work on Islamic law numbering 400 folios. Three years later he completed a copy of a work on grammar. In 1942 Abdurahman bin Sidi 'Uthman copied a classical work of fiqh for him while in 1950 the same copyist sent him as a gift a copy he had made of an index to a long didactic poem.

In a letter dated September 1945 to Sayyid Muḥammad, a descendant of the great Mukhtār al-Kuntī (d.1811), he requests a copy of a work by another descendant in the family line, Ahmad al-Bakkā'i (d.1865). He believes that his honourable correspondent has a copy of the work because it is cited in a text by the latter's now deceased father. The owner of the work is located somewhere in a desert settlement called Tāku. In the work by Bakkā'i he responds to another scholar's promulgation of the views of the Tijaniyya sufi order. Bul'araf was not a Tijani; indeed from this correspondence he was interested in literature that refuted their views. Bul'araf seems to have been more sympathetic to the Qadiriyyah order. Bul'araf says that there used to be copies of this work in the area but they were all consciously destroyed. In his inquiry about this work he asks about the possibility of having it copied and sent to him. He inquires about the cost of copying. He is prepared to pay for the copying and for the paper to be used. It turns out that he has 100 folios of the work but he cannot fathom where they fit; they are random folios. A good part of the letter is his citations of the beginnings and endings of the various sections he owns. Right at the end of the letter he mentions the title: *Fath al-quddūs fi jawāb ibn Abdullah Muḥammad Akansūs*.²³ An intermediary is mentioned, a tailor, who would assist with transferring the completed copy to him. We do not know whether he was successful in this request and got to add this work to his collection. This is however an example of Bul'araf's work on his copying network: owner of a work in another location, request for a copy, offer to pay for copying and paper, identifying

intermediaries to transfer item or make sure it enters the postal system then operating in the region, take possession and add to collection.

His interest in the written word went seamlessly from manuscript to the printed text. He wrote to Fas, Rabat, Marrakech, Tunis, Oran, Constantine, Algiers, and Cairo for copies of printed books and magazines. In an undated letter he writes to a Fes bookseller requesting a list with prices of the books he sells and asking especially for four titles including “the *Tarīkh* of Ibn Khaldūn.”²⁴ His first letters to booksellers and merchants date to 1911 when his correspondence shows him working with a merchant and bookseller in St Louis. In 1922 Bul’araf writes to a merchant in Kano, in the then British-ruled territories of Northern Nigeria seeking some titles. He wrote to Muḥammad al-Sayyid al-Zāhiri al-Wahrānī thanking him for a magazine (*al-Wifāq*) and asking about some books. Another Algerian he wrote to, in 1922, was the editor of the magazine *al-Shihāb* seeking the exchange of books. For 1926 and 1927 there is an exchange with Dār al-Hilāl publishers in Cairo.

Bul’arāf’s network could be reconstructed in fair amount of detail because the names of the people with whom he corresponded are available to us. The vast majority of the correspondence is with men involved in some aspect of the book: writing, copying, selling, and reading it. Among them were Muhammad Yahya bin Muhammad Salim al-Walātī (a friend, possibly from his days in Shinqīt), Tahir Tunisī, Zayn bin Abd al-Azīz, Alī bin Bashīr, Salīm bin Ibrahim Samadar, Abd al-Qadir, Muh. Al-Amīn, Al-Mustafa bin Abd Allah al-Ribātī, Ahmad Salīm bin Muḥammad, Shaykh Muh. Al-Mukhtar bin Ahmad bin Anbal al-Tshiti, Shaykh Bay bin A’mar, Muḥammad Mahmud bin Shaykh, Idrīs bin al-Mahdi, and Muḥammad bin Umar Dukuri. They are meaningless as such but as work on Bul’araf’s network continues more detail will be added.

Conclusion

I

Bul’araf’s activity as a collector connected him to men of similar pursuits in Timbuktu and great distances from it. This may not have been unique in the broader region or the longer narrative of Islamic intellectual or material history but from our perspective today it was significant work over many decades to resuscitate and conserve a way of doing scholarship. There was originality and authenticity in it even as it was explicitly concerned with the supposedly unoriginal task of reproduction or copying. To make copies or collect them were acts of imitation and transformation, it entailed replication and proliferation.

Jurisprudence was the field he was keen on, not abstract or classical theories about the subject but the living jurisprudence of Timbuktu and the wider region. Thus he personally copied the huge work of local juristic opinions cited above and there are other examples of his engagement in

this field. This type of jurisprudence was like a living record his contemporary society. His biographical dictionary was another kind of record of his time and place. They are inestimable sources for writing the social history of the region.

The distances his original manuscripts or copies and new books had to move were enormous. The objects of his passion literally had to travel from point to point, through a network of post offices and/or personal contacts. The postal service and the movement of men on camelback and the first generation automobile (and possibly the first aeroplanes) were the technical machinery that animated this network. These machines of networking and mobility have been neglected but they were indispensable tools of communication especially over the distances we are considering.

For Africa, studies of book history and the formation of archives hardly exist. Yet, there is ample material in a number of places on the continent – especially across the Sahel, from Senegal to Ethiopia, and down the East African coast - to look at the contexts and long history of writing and reading into which men like Bul’arāf entered or which they animated and revitalised. The world and network of the writer, collector, copyist – often the same person – and his handwritten, handmade books have a very long history in many parts of the continent and continues in various ways even into the digital age.

Bul’arāf’s biography presents us with an opportunity to work in some detail on this style of intellectual work, collecting and the formation of an archive. We can pay some detailed attention to his books as artefact for we have around 150 items of his collection in one archive and another uncatalogued body with his descendants in addition to a trunk of envelopes and price lists from publishers in North African cities. Even though the data is most often fragmentary and partial - chronological gaps and missing materials - many material aspects of manuscript and printed book cultures could be studied: costs of paper, size of paper, handwriting styles used, ink colours, which ones had leather covers, signatures, copying costs and the politics of the colonial postal service and so on. Walter Benjamin reflected on unpacking his own library and his enchantment as a collector of books. The serious collector is obsessive and hard for non-collectors to understand, says Benjamin. We cannot really grasp the meaning of collecting when the personal owner of a collection is no longer around because there is so much individual history and memory in each item of a collection. Yet, adds Benjamin: “ Only in extinction is the collector comprehended.”²⁵

(Conclusion)

II

I want to bring in that very powerful philosopher, G.W.F. Hegel, who used the terms “Mediterranean Africa” and “European Africa” in his *Lectures on the philosophy of world history*. While Hegel’s “world history” is really

a concept and another way for him to write about Reason, he does bring in empirical detail to make his case. The shoreline region of North Africa until the Sahara does not belong to Africa but is part of Europe, says Hegel. The further away from the shore the more into “Africa proper” one moves and away from culture and civilization. The rest of the continent, the large mass of land from the Sahara to the Cape of Good Hope, has no history; it is an “unhistorical continent, with no movement of development of its own.”²⁶ It is not part of World History, does not share in universal Reason, in other words.

This “inaugural thinker of the contemporary world,” (Jean-Luc Nancy) presented his first series of lectures on a “philosophical history of the world” in late 1822. In these lectures, repeated and expanded in 1828 and again just before his death in 1831, he summarized major aspects of his philosophical system and its unfolding in time and space.²⁷ He classifies ways of approaching the past, gives further elaboration to his idea of the state as the “realisation of spirit in history,” and offers a periodization and a schema of the world’s geography in relation to historical development. For Hegel history arises in the East and moves westward and in this passage across time and space it passes over Africa. Hegel easily dismisses Africa because he says that it demonstrates no movement and therefore experiences no temporal change. It is the “unhistorical continent.”

Almost two decades before Hegel offered his philosophy of world history and dismissed the regions beyond the southern shores of the Mediterranean an English traveller, James Grey Jackson, wrote an account of his long travels in Morocco and has a concluding chapter on the “city of Timbuctoo,” which he never visited but he had heard about it and seen caravans leaving for it and coming from there.²⁸ Jackson appears to be quite meticulous in noting items of trade, coming into the port of Mogador and leaving it; and also leaving for Timbuktu. Paper is among the items imported into this region but he does not mention it among the items leaving for Timbuktu. At the end of the century Dubois mentions paper as commodity imported into the French Soudan.

But Jackson has two rather intriguing lines about libraries. He writes: “It has been said there is an extensive library at Timbuctoo, consisting of manuscripts in a character differing from Arabic. . . .” But he dismisses this report only to add, as if to contradict this sentence: that there is a “state library” with Arabic, Hebrew, perhaps Chaldic books and probably some translations of works originally in Greek and Latin! It is revealing that he used the term library consciously twice here which is rarely used among travellers.

Other travellers discovered a few manuscript books and met key scholars but did not use the word library. Leo Africanus was, of course, the most glowing in his report about the status of books in Timbuktu. Ahmad Baba’s collection of works numbered around 1600 when he was captured

and taken from Timbuktu to Marrakech in 1593. Between the time of Ahmad Baba and Ahmad Bul'araf can we discern some patterns, points of familiarity – local and regional – in the formation of book collections and libraries? Scholars and collectors like Baba and Bul'araf are the heroes in the region's long and layered history of handwritten books; a history which is too often overlooked and neglected. In this quiet, persistent, and deliberate activity they forged ties across the vast space between the Mediterranean and the Sahel.

¹ See L.P. Harvey, “Leo Africanus and his Descrizione dell’Africa,” unpublished ms., n.d.

² “Aḥmad Bul‘arāf” is the shortest form of a name that can extend in length and vary in different writings by and on him.

³ See Tahia Abou el-Farah, *La présence Marocaine en Afrique de l’Ouest: cas du Sénégal, du Mali, et de la Côte d’Ivoire* (Rabat, Instiut des Etudes Africaines, 1997), 163 - 169

⁴ Felix Dubois, *Timbuctoo the mysterious*, translated by Diana White (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co. 1896), 70.

⁵ Dedeb, “Ma‘alumāt”, 4 – 6.

⁶ John Hunwick. *Arabic literature of Africa*, vol. 4: *The writings of western Sudanic Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 53 – 57.

⁷ Librarians of the Centre, *Handlist of manuscripts in the Centre de documentation et de recherches historiques Ahmed Baba, Timbuktu* (London: Al-Furqan Islamic heritage foundation, 1998), Vol. 5 & indexes.

⁸ Abdelkader Mamma Haidara, (edited by Dr. Ayman Fuad Sayyid), *Catalogue of manuscripts in the Mamma Haidara library* (London: Al-Furqan Islamic heritage foundation, 2000), Four volumes.

⁹ Savama-DCI was founded about five years ago and is led by Abdel Kader Haidara, the founder of the highly organized and most successful private library in Timbuktu. See Abdel Kader Haidara, “The state of manuscripts in Mali and efforts to preserve them,” in Jeppie & Diagne (eds.), *The meanings of Timbuktu*, 265 – 269.

¹⁰ Dālī, Introduction, ‘*Izalat al-rayb*, 14 (Are these from the standard European edition of Sibawyihi, *Le live de Sibawaihi* edited by H. Derenbourg, Paris 1881–9?)

¹¹ According to one source, his library in fact had 6,039 printed items in 1945 and only 900 by the time Ould Youbba, wrote his “Bibliothèque de Bula‘araf,” 3.

¹² Dedeb, “Ma‘alumāt,” 6.

¹³ The scholar who wrote in praise of Bul‘arāf, Mahmoud Dedeb, has yet to convert to print. All his works are handwritten and circulated in this form. His most recent work in our possession is a 355-page handwritten work, *Kashf al-hā’il*. He had it digitally scanned for us.

¹⁴ Bul‘araf, ‘*Izalat al-rayb*, 81

¹⁵ On Muḥammad Yahya Salīm (1936), ‘*Izalat*, pp131 - 141

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- ¹⁶ ms 1031 *Al-‘amal al-mashkūr fi jam’ nawāzil al-Takrūr*.
- ¹⁷ See Nick Groom, *The forger’s shadow: How forgery changed the course of literature* (London: Picador, 2002), 21 – 25.
- ¹⁸ Groom, *Forger’s shadow*, citing Terence Cave, 22.
- ¹⁹ Ismael Diadie Haidara and Haoua Taore, “The private libraries of Timbuktu,” in Jeppie & Bachir, *The meanings of Timbuktu*, 271 – 275.
- ²⁰ Dedeḅ, “Ma‘alumāt” 12 – 13.
- ²¹ Ould Youbba, “Bibliothèque de Bula‘araf,” 1.
- ²² I am calling them copyists although “scribe” may be equally descriptive. The Arabic word used is *nāsikh* in the materials and the catalogues.
- ²³ See Hunwick, *Arabic Literature of Africa*, vol 4, p120, item 6.
- ²⁴ Ms 8195 Ahmad Baba Institute
- ²⁵ Walter Benjamin, “Unpacking my library: a talk about book collecting,” *Illuminations: essay and reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 67.
- ²⁶ Hegel, *Lectures on the philosophy of world history*, Appendix, 190.
- ²⁷ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the philosophy of world history. Introduction: reason in history*, translated from German by H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).
- ²⁸ James Grey Jackson, *An account of the empire of Maroco and the district of Suse* (London: 1809), 257.