

African Qur'an Manuscript and Shoulder Bag

African Qur'an Manuscript
after 1869

Title Statement

African Qur'an Manuscript and Shoulder BagGuide to the African Qur'an Manuscript MS 00093

Publication Statement

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Descriptive Summary

Unit ID

MS 00093

Unit ID

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Unit Date

after 1869

Language

Arabic

Extent

2.00 Linear Feet

Repository

Special Collections Research Center

Administrative Information

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Scope and Contents

Unbound manuscript of the Qur'an (after 1869) with a leather shoulder bag (undated). Consists of about 700 pages with each page containing about 12 lines of script. Written in Arabic with African decorations throughout. The number of "ayahs" in this volume is a variant from Eastern or Ottoman contemporary Qur'ans. All of the verses are separated by three small circles in the form of a pyramid and every tenth verse is separated by two concentric circles.

The manuscript is written Left to Right (LTR) and reads front to back. The page numbers in pencil indicate correct reading order. ***[The following information was compiled by William & Mary students Alex Wingate, James Sylvester and Professor George Greenia, spring semester 2017]***

Nigerian Qur'an

The volume is comprised of a stack of loose sheets, still pristine for their age, never intended to be bound into a book block. The covers are stiff paste board without writing or decoration, the first ("title") sheet composed of two sheets pasted together for rigidity and strength. Loose sheets would allow for easy sharing among a group memorizing and chanting a given passage or *sura*, one of the 114 chapters of the standard Qur'an whose text was already stabilized within a few decades of the death of the Prophet. The format suggests that this Qur'an was prepared to travel, but in the end was preserved more as a private cultic object than put into service as a study or recitation text in a mosque or *madrasa* (school). There is little sign of normal reader's use or deterioration from travel despite its sturdy goat skin tote bag with decorative stitching and dyed panels and shoulder strap. The muted decoration is non-representational and leans toward the geometric in accordance with Islamic tradition.

The handmade paper was leaf cast in sheets probably four times the size of the current leaves and cut in quarters. The paper molds incorporated two wire watermarks straddling the eventual cut lines so that a portion of each design is visible on each leaf. The watermarks present a curious and decidedly Western intrusion for a sacred Qur'an which avoids imagery other than highly stylized floral or star motifs. The sheets were created extra thick which makes them durable as singlets if less accommodating to repeated folding or sewing into a normal book block. The writing support is dense and opaque, an advantage for bold script with a deep ink bite and destined for bold illuminations on both sides.

The first watermark, common among British papermakers, offers an image of a seated Britannia with a spear and a shield bearing a 'cross ordinary.' The second is the coat of arms of the Church Missionary Society Bookshop, a shield quartered with a star in the center. The first quarter (top left) has a dove, the second (top right) an open book, the third (bottom left) an elephant, and the fourth (bottom right) a palm tree. A scroll underneath the shield reads "C.M.S. BOOKSHOP LAGOS." The Lagos bookshop was founded in 1869 so the paper which ended up in this Qur'an was made no earlier than that date. According to Terence Walz, the writing support might be better dated to 1900 or later: "Paper made by Waterlow & Sons Limited, John Dent & Co., T.H. Saunders, and C.M.S. Bookshop (Lagos), all British firms, probably dates from the time of formal British occupation (1900) and after" (in *The Trans-Saharan Book Trade: Manuscript Culture, Arabic Literacy and Intellectual History in Muslim Africa* [Eds. Graziano Kra?tli, Ghislaine Lydon. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2011], 102). The paper is made to British standards and the good quality black and red inks are as likely imported from England as not. There is perhaps a gentle irony in the fact that a Christian missionary enterprise supplied the writing supports for a foreign Muslim community to produce a Qur'an.

The scribal hand is uniform throughout, probably written with reeds, the traditional tool of Islamic scribes; by the turn of the twentieth century steel nib pens were becoming common and might have been used for the red vocalization marks. The Arabic alphabet does not include short vowels which are cued for readers through a corrector's second pass – a practice which guarantees the oversight of two knowledgeable scribes and therefore a more reliable and accurate text. The decorative touches are traditional designs conforming to Islamic delight in colorful geometric patterns as navigational aids meant to help a reader find his way through the *suras*.

Hand copying Qur'ans is a highly significant cultic practice among Muslims. Paul L. Hovav notes that "Printing was forbidden in the Middle East soon after its invention, and Islamic societies resisted the printing press for several centuries. The most powerful Muslim ruler of the time, the Turkish Sultan Bayazid II, banned the possession of printed matter as early as 1485, and his decision was enforced in 1515 by Selim I. (J. Pedersen, *The Arabic book*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1984). The earliest printing press located in the Arab world was established in North Lebanon in 1610 at the Maronite monastery of St. Anthony. ... Abandoning manuscripts would be cultural treason, for copying is considered a kind of prayer. Every manuscript was a link in the

chain of authority with the past, an assurance that one would not be drawn far from the source of truth. Printing would not only be a gesture of impiety, but rather an act of infidelity that strikes at the heart of Islamic civilization." ("Islamic Book and Information Culture: An Overview." *Webology* 4.1 (2007).

Keywords

Muslims

Quran--Manuscripts, Arabic

Religion and culture

Description of Subordinate Components

African Qur'an

Unit ID id307717

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/156883

Mixed materials 1 (Box)

Leather Shoulder Bag

Unit ID id307719

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/156884

Mixed materials 2 (Box)