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FEATURED REVIEWS

Beyond Historiography: Innovative Approaches to the West African Book

Shamil Jeppie. *Writing Timbuktu: The Book in West African History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2026. Pp. 240. $27.95, hardcover (ISBN: 9780691273853).

Wendell Marsh. *Textual Life: Islam, Africa, and the Fate of the Humanities*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2025. Pp. 288. $145.00, hardcover (ISBN: 9780231210706); $37.00, paperback (ISBN: 9780231210713); $36.99, ebook (ISBN: 9780231558556).

Mauro Nobili, Zachary V. Wright, and H. Ali Diakite, eds. *The Chronicles of Two West African Kingdoms: The Tārīkh Ibn Al-Mukhtār of the Songhay Empire and the Tārīkh Al-Fattāsh of the Caliphate of Ḥamdallāhi*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2025. Pp. 410. $170.00, hardcover (ISBN: 9781836245698).

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The past decade has seen numerous projects to catalog, digitize, and curate West Africa's cultural heritage. This includes handwritten texts, newspapers, radio broadcasts, and photographs.[1] They provide additional, unassailable proof of West Africa's deep commitment to writing, literacy, and scholarship over the centuries. Like these archival projects, three new titles help in largely complementary ways to move beyond historiographical uses of West Africa's literary heritage toward a wider engagement with the history of the book, philology, and manuscript studies.

[1]On manuscripts, see: Hill Museum and Manuscript Library, https://hmml.org/about/global-operations/mali/; the British Library's Endangered Archives Programme, for example Northern Nigeria: Precolonial documents preservation scheme—major project, https://eap.bl.uk/project/EAP535. For print, see: Islam West Africa Collection (IWAC), https://islam.zmo.de/s/westafrica/page/home; for audio, see: The Sound Archives of Radio Rurale de Kayes, https://meap.library.ucla.edu/projects/the-sound-archives-of-radio-rurale-de-kayes-mali/; and, for the history of this project, Aïssatou Mbodj-Pouye, "Radio and the Road: Infrastructure, Mobility, and Political Change in the Beginnings of Radio Rurale de Kayes (1980–Early 2000s)," *The Journal of African History* 62, no. 1 (2021): 125–49. On Muslim portraiture in Mali see, for example, Hamdia Traoré's "Des marabouts de Djenné," https://www.blockmuseum.northwestern.edu/exhibitions/2026/hamdia-traor%C3%A9.html. For Malian photography more broadly, see: the Archive of Malian Photography, https://amp.matrix.msu.edu/.

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The "Timbuktu" in Shamil Jeppie's eminently readable, passionate, and engaging *Writing Timbuktu: The Book in West African History* acts as a symbol for the wider writing culture of the Sahel-Sahara, though the majority of the book's chapters focus on the town and its residents. Three chapters are dedicated to the life and career of Ahmad Baba (1556–91), arguably Timbuktu's most famous inhabitant, another to the Kunta family of traders and scholars—notably al-Mukhtar ibn Ahmad (1729–1811) and his son, Muhammad ibn al-Mukhtar (1765–1826)—who used the town as an important hub for their trading and spiritual networks, and one to the comparatively less well-known twentieth-century bibliophile and scholar Ahmad Boularaf (d. 1955), who took up residence in 1904.

Though the portraits of these individuals are carefully crafted, Jeppie's primary focus is on books and the "book worlds" of their authors. It is the first popular account that I know of to engage in a deep analysis of Islamic and specifically West African Muslim scholarship. This includes a discussion of the writing styles, motivations, and methodologies of the authors, as well as the mechanics of the writing process itself, such as the use of extensive quotations from earlier sources and the reworking, abridging, and commenting on earlier works. Jeppie uses this information to build a picture of Timbuktu's historical libraries and raise important but rarely asked questions about copying, distribution, and readership of books across the region, in both the pre-print age and more modern times.

The richest chapters of *Writing Timbuktu* concern Ahmad Baba and Boularaf. Ahmad Baba was born and raised in Timbuktu but forcibly exiled to Marrakesh for much of his adult life (from 1595 until 1608), and Ahmad Boularaf, a transplant from Guelmim, Morocco, adopted the town as his own after his arrival in 1904. The clear attachments of these two men to Timbuktu—which, in both cases, was in a period of literary and commercial decline—are the most touching passages of the book.

Jeppie's account of the history of Timbuktu in the time of Ahmad Baba is based on a close reading of the Timbuktu Chronicles, discussed below, in tandem with the geopolitical context of the late-medieval period and what we know of Ahmad Baba's life and works. Where historical evidence does not exist, Jeppie boldly and convincingly extemporizes to explain aspects of Baba's life and motivations. This wide-ranging biography allows us to see that Baba's work on slavery, *Miʿrāj al-suʿūd*, the most studied and cited work in academic circles, was in fact "brief, and a product of the end of his career" (91)—a corrective that should urge more investigation of Baba's earlier writings, most of which remain unedited and in manuscript form.[2]

The following chapter deals with the *Bilād al-Shinqiṭ*, a reference to a wide area of the western Sahara which, in Jeppie's telling, rises to eclipse Timbuktu from the 1650s onward as a center of Islamic scholarship and, in particular, Islamic education through the *mahdara* system. Lacking comparable source material and a central figure around which to base his narrative, the chapter is less compelling but is nevertheless a useful introduction to this region's history and scholarship for a wider audience. It remains to be seen whether the large volume of Timbuktu's manuscripts now being made available for online consultation will confirm or complicate the standard narrative of the city's decline after the 1650s and whether Jeppie is correct in saying that the town had "no outstanding local writers to recall from the later seventeenth century" (98).

The book returns to firmer footing with Ahmad Boularaf, whose book collecting, archiving, and conservation practices can be documented in a fuller way than is possible for Ahmad Baba's time.

[2] Academic studies of *Miʿrāj al-suʿūd* include Bernard Barbour and Michelle Jacobs, "The Miʿraj: A Legal Treatise on Slavery by Ahmad Baba," in *Slaves and Slavery in Africa*, ed. John Willis (London: Frank Cass, 1985), 125–59; John Hunwick, "Aḥmad Bābā on Slavery," *Sudanic Africa* 11 (2000): 131–39; Chris Gratien, "Race, Slavery, and Islamic Law in the Early Modern Atlantic: Ahmad Baba al-Tinbukti's Treatise on Enslavement," *The Journal of North African Studies* 18, no. 3 (2013): 454–68; Timothy Cleaveland, "Ahmad Baba al-Timbukti and his Islamic Critique of Racial Slavery in the Maghrib," in *The Southern Shores of the Mediterranean and its Networks*, ed. Patricia Lorcin (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 42–64; for a full edition and translation of the text, see John Hunwick and Fatima Harrak, *Miʿrāj al-suʿūd: Aḥmad Bāba's Replies on Slavery* (Rabat: Publications of the Institute of African Studies, 2000).

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Here Jeppie takes us into the fertile writing and reading culture of 1920s Timbuktu and the various figures that made it "work," from book collectors, copyists, printing presses, and their agents, to the new transport networks afforded by the colonial postal system. Particularly illuminating are the passages where Jeppie makes clear the difficulties faced by Boularaf—an outsider who did not come from one of Timbuktu's established scholarly families—in building his own manuscript collection from fragmentary or disarranged texts, new copies commissioned locally, and those acquired further afield. One of the recently digitized Timbuktu libraries, amounting to some 3,400 items, is named for Ahmad Boularaf. Though the library was assembled after his death, it may also yield new information on his life and the Timbuktu of his days.

The final chapters take us further into the twentieth century and the region's struggle for independence, introducing Amadou Hampâté Bâ, Boubou Hama, and Musa Kamara, three figures in West African political and intellectual life whose "writing lives and modes of literary communication crisscrossed manuscript and print technologies" (159). Though their interests and their approaches differed—Hampâté Bâ was primarily interested in oral sources and was more comfortable writing in French and Fulfulde than in Arabic; Boubou Hama was an avid collector of Arabic manuscripts for what would become Niger's national archives; and Musa Kamara tried and failed to have his many Arabic compositions appear in print—writing was central to all of these men's lives. The book concludes with a summary of some recent changes in the academic study of manuscripts, from a focus on single texts to one encompassing wider "manuscript cultures," allowing for new philological approaches (177).

This brings us to Wendell Marsh's *Textual Life: Islam, Africa, and the Fate of the Humanities*, which focuses on the last of these figures, Musa Kamara (1864–1945). Marsh uses the career of Musa Kamara and the afterlife of his writings as a "prism" through which to examine changing contexts in the relations of knowledge and power (212).

The early twentieth century was a time of colonial interest in translation and philological engagement with African texts. The first editions and French translations of what are known as the Timbuktu Chronicles—al-Sa'di's *Tārīkh al-Sūdān* and the problematic *Tārīkh al-Fattāsh*—were both produced during this period.[3] French administrator-historians, not finding a comparable chronicle for the Senegambian region, engaged Kamara to write one. The result, a 1,700-page *opus* entitled *Flowers From Among the Gardens in the History of the Blacks*, was never published in Kamara's lifetime. According to Marsh, the reason was that by the time that Kamara had submitted his complete text, this "orientalist season" had come to an end (33–4). Kamara's erstwhile supporters—Octave Houdas, Maurice Delafosse, and Henri Gaden—were dead, and the colonial administration had turned to ethnography and orality as the primary means to "know" and manage the colonial subject. An earlier generation of colonial humanists had sought out a chronicle in the classical model, but Kamara's text did not meet the new standards for knowledge characterized by an "extractive" approach to reading that demanded use value above all else (145).

In the 1970s, Senegalese intellectuals, such as Amar Samb, led an attempt to resurrect Kamara and his works, as part of a wider "African historiographical project" (142) that sought to construct a new national literature out of an Arabo-Islamic written heritage. But *History of the Blacks* became entangled in arguments about creating African humanism in the postcolonial period and may have ultimately been too unwieldy a tome. While there was a flurry of editions and translations of Kamara's shorter works in the 2010s, emphasizing his quietism and religious tolerance in the context of increased Islamist violence and the Global War on Terror, the humanities themselves—in Senegal as well as elsewhere—faced a crisis of meaning in an increasingly technocratic world that forestalled a wider engagement with Kamara and his works. Rather than lamenting these developments, Marsh

[3]Octave Houdas, *Tarikh es-Soudan par Abderrahman ben Abdallah ben ʿImran ben ʿAmir es-Saʿdi* (Paris: E. Leroux, 1898); Octave Houdas and Maurice Delafosse, *Tarikh el-fettach fi akhbâr el-bouldân oua -l- djouyouch oua-akâbir en-nâs, ou Chronique du chercheur pour servir à l'histoire des villes, des armées et des principaux personnages du Tekrour par Mahmoûd Kâti nen el-Hâdj el-Motaouakkel Kâti et l'un de ses petits-fils* (Paris: E. Leroux, 1913).

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argues that Kamara's writings, unburdened by any particular intellectual project, are now free to be enjoyed in their own right. Their author, Musa Kamara, can be appreciated as a philologist and lover of study rather than a colonial informant or an African humanist.

In the book's first chapter, Marsh seeks to reframe our engagement with Kamara's oeuvre. Using the introduction to Kamara's autobiography, *The Announcement of the Good News*, he models a re-reading of Kamara that primarily considers his text as literature rather than source material. Marsh draws our attention to the literary qualities of passages that might otherwise be regarded as rather formulaic within this genre of autobiographical writing, while raising important questions about the limits of translation and the influence of imposed Western genre boundaries. This exercise furthers Marsh's plea to view texts as opportunities for contemplation rather than purely as stores of information. Indeed, Chapter Two focuses on the miraculous qualities that, in Kamara's words, signposted his own life and affirmed his identity as a "friend of God" (51–3). In this telling, dreams and spiritual experiences are the primary motivators for Kamara's writings, subjects not generally validated in academic approaches to biography.

Marsh describes *Textual Life* as being primarily a work of comparative literature (27). But, somewhat surprisingly, it does not engage in a further reading of Kamara's "textual life." Instead, the remainder of the book does the work of explaining why Kamara's texts were read so differently at different times (summarized in the preceding paragraphs). Marsh, perhaps overly wary of an extractive reading of Kamara's oeuvre, does not rely on Kamara for any of the historical information he conveys. And by the end of the book, we have very little idea of what the content of Kamara's *Flowers From Among the Gardens in the History of the Blacks* is and what, if any, impact it has had on the historiography of the region. We also learn about Kamara's writings in a non-sequential manner, leading to some jolts in the narrative. While the introduction to Kamara's autobiography, *The Announcement*, is closely read in Chapter One, we have to wait until Chapter Four for the context in which Kamara wrote it—frustration with his lack of recognition and the need to write himself into the region's memory and religious elite.

While Kamara was in some ways a product of a brief period of accommodation between Muslim religious figures and French colonial authorities (so brief in fact that his works were never published), Marsh is also at pains to point out the ways in which, through his various peculiarities and idiosyncrasies, Kamara was "respected but unrepresentative" (14) of the area's religious tradition, and an outsider to its elites. From his self-directed reading and questions over *tariqa* affiliation to his penchant for intellectual controversies and his supposed servile status and unorthodox lifestyle, Kamara was very clearly—employing a term from codicology—a *unicum*. But perhaps this is the point. If the text of the *History of the Blacks* has stayed the same but its readings have changed, why not engage with the text itself, not its various readings? And if the author is an outsider who cannot be bracketed into a neat and coherent identity, why not study him as a complicated individual? As Marsh suggests, "his singularity makes him all the more worthy of being read" (219).

On the topic of reading, Mauro Nobili, Zachary Wright, and Ali Diakite's *The Chronicles of Two West African Kingdoms* presents for the first time the opportunity to read two important pieces of historical literature: the *Tārīkh ibn al-Mukhtār* and the *Tārīkh al-Fattāsh.* The first is a chronicle recording the events of the Songhai Empire up to 1599 but written sometime after 1664 by Mahmud ibn al-Mukhtar. The second is a faux-chronicle produced in the 1830s by the Masina scholar Nuh ibn al-Tahir, based on the *Tārīkh ibn al-Mukhtār* but deceptively attributed to Ibn al-Mukhtar's maternal grandfather, the well-known scholar and judge of Timbuktu Mahmud Ka'ti (d. 1593).

More than a decade of work has revealed that these two chronicles were "trapped" within the *Chronique du chercheur,* an Arabic edition and French translation by Houdas and Delafosse that was published in 1913.[4] The book's introduction presents a historiographical overview of how the chronicles were "discovered," amalgamated, and finally disentangled. Then follow two essays that situate each

[4]See Houdas, *Tarikh es-Soudan,* and Houdas and Delafosse, *Chronique du chercheur.*

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chronicle in its historical context and, drawing heavily from the work of the late Paulo Farias, highlight their respective intellectual projects.[5] In the case of the *Tārīkh ibn al-Mukhtār*, the chronicle served as an implicit warning to the Arma regime (Sanhaja descendants of the 1591 Moroccan conquest who administered Timbuktu and maintained Songhai's *Askiya*s as puppet rulers) that their success was "dependent on its proper treatment of the (indigenous) scholarly establishment" (43). As for the *Tārīkh al-Fattāsh*, its primary purpose was to legitimize Ahmad Lobbo, founder and first ruler of the Caliphate of Hamdallahi, in the eyes of the region's established scholarly elites by inserting a prophecy that would have named Lobbo as the successor of the celebrated Songhai ruler Askiya Muhammad. But it also contributed to a "racialized project" (46) to turn mostly independent autochthonous groups in the Middle Niger into slaves or vassals of the new state by falsely claiming that they had been customarily bound to Askiya Muhammad, and hence now to Ahmad Lobbo.

The essays are followed by Nobili and Wright's accessible English translation of the texts and then the Arabic edition prepared by Diakite and Nobili. In both the English and Arabic translations, the two chronicles appear side by side, each paragraph is assigned a number, and each chronicle has a separate numbering and footnoting system. This complex and painstaking bit of typesetting is minimally intrusive when reading the text and shows at a glance exactly where the two texts diverge and where they meet again. As well as fully substantiating the authors' claims, this presentation serves to highlight that each chronicle should be viewed as a separate composition, written at different times of revolutionary upheaval and for different audiences.

The authors' major contribution, in my mind, is to demonstrate that the *Tārīkh al-Fattāsh* was not simply a crude insertion of a prophecy about Ahmad Lobbo and some information on servile and vassal groups of the Middle Niger into an existing chronicle. Minor extensions, substitutions, and removals demonstrate how closely Nuh ibn al-Tahir engaged with Ibn al-Mukhtar's original chronicle and how his careful textual manipulations made its fraudulent attribution to Mahmud Ka'ti plausible. But while the authors more than adequately explain the pragmatic reasons for the chronicle, it is worth pointing out the significant portions that appear only in the *Tārīkh al-Fattāsh* which have no discernible political purpose.

There is humor. For example, the chronicle relates that Mahmud 'Aqit, judge of Timbuktu, had a vision of Prophet Muhammad in a dream that was abruptly cut short by the barking of a dog. Upon waking, the judge's first order was for all the dogs in the city to be killed. There are numerous remarks on agriculture, such as an extended account of the cultivation, irrigation, and trade of *silq*, a kind of chard. And there are observations on child rearing. When Soni Ali—Askiya Muhammad's predecessor and the villain of both chronicles—enters Timbuktu with his army, the scholars of the city arrange for camels on which to flee. But, being confined indoors from an early age, they have no idea how to ride a camel. After the scholars return to the city, they allow their children to play outdoors since "it is play that makes a child smart and gives him insight into many things" (119).

These passages, among many others, are surely written to delight, entertain, and inform. And we come away fully convinced of the "brilliant literary mind" (68) of its author. The evident pleasure Nuh ibn al-Tahir derived in producing the chronicle was perhaps all the more elevated since he was writing it pseudonymously in the guise of Mahmud Ka'ti. *The Chronicles of Two West African Kingdoms* concludes a long line of corrective scholarship around these two chronicles but should also be a starting point for a re-engagement with these texts as literature.

To conclude, all these titles, in their own way, move us beyond a way of thinking that considers historical writings from West Africa as mere tools for historiography. Like the Western classics, they of course contain information that can add to our understanding of past events, especially if they are rescued from a misreading, as Nobili, Wright, and Diakite's work has done. But, as Marsh has it, texts

[5] Paulo Fernando de Moraes Farias, "Intellectual innovation and reinvention of the Sahel: the seventeenth-century Timbuktu chronicles," in *The Meanings of Timbuktu*, ed. Shamil Jeppie and Souleymane Bachir Diagne (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2008), 95–107.

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are also imbued with a "permanent possibility" that allows for multiple readings, whether as a window into the "writing lives" of their authors, as Jeppie demonstrates, or as literature to be appreciated in its own right. In his 1968 historical fantasy, *Le devoir de violence,* Yambo Ouologuem replicates and mercilessly satirizes the language of Houdas and Delafosse's *Chronique du chercheur*.[6] Who can tell what uses Nobili and Wright's English translation will have outside of the academic sphere.

[6]Yambo Ouologuem, *Le devoir de violence* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1968); The book was later translated and published in English as *Bound to Violence*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1971).

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