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### **Arabic Manuscript: The Hidden Treasure of Ilorin - Nigeria**

A Literature Review by: Moshood Mahmood Jimba, Kwara State University, Ilorin, Nigeria.

#### **Preamble**

Though Ilorin Emirate, in the north central zone of Nigeria, is part and parcel of the north and a frontier state of the Sokoto Caliphate, little or no mention is made of it when Arabic manuscript of northern Nigeria is discussed. Several conferences have been organized on Arabic manuscript in northern Nigeria at Arewa House, Kaduna, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, University of Maiduguri etc without a single paper presented on Ilorin. Similarly, a good number of Western scholars of manuscript such as John Hunwick, Michaelle Biddle, Dmitry Bondarev etc have carried out several researches on Nigerian manuscripts without referring to Ilorin. But for Stefan Reichmuth, who did an extensive work on Ilorin manuscripts, they would have remained anonymous to the academic world. In this short piece, attempt shall be made to discuss, in brief, the position and status of Arabic manuscript in Ilorin Emirate and the efforts that have been made to preserve it.

#### **Ilorin Emirate in Brief**

Ilorin emirate, established c.1823-4, is an exclusive Muslim learning community with a unique history, culture and dynamic Islamic tradition. Its uniqueness and dynamic Islamic tradition derived from the fact that it is home to Muslims from different ethnic, linguistic, cultural backgrounds. These groups include Yoruba, Hausa, Kanuri, Fulani, Nupe, Bariba, Mali, Sudan, Dendi, etc.

Before the advent of colonial rule, Ilorin had become a Muslim city where Islam remained the main religion professed by the overwhelming majority of the people of the emirate and a citadel of Islamic knowledge recognized across the West African sub-region. Ilorin has been a fountain of Arabic literacy for centuries where many, from far and near, flocked to sip Islamic knowledge, in particular. The fame and flame of Ilorin, as a human settlement therefore began following the spread of Islam by many Islamic scholars who came to Ilorin from other parts of Nigeria over the years (Abdulmumini and Abubakar, 2018: 10).

#### **Arabic Manuscripts in Ilorin**

Arabic manuscripts, their production, usage, preservation and transmission over time and space have been major aspects and sources of Islamic scholarship in Muslim societies throughout history. This is also true of Ilorin, which is widely acknowledged as

‘a regional centre of Islamic learning and Arabic manuscripts production’ in Nigeria. Scholarly learning was originally part of the tradition in the region prior to the establishment of the emirate in the early 1820s. It later became a major aspect of Ilorin’s tradition of Islamic scholarship following the Islamic movement led by Shaykh Alimi in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Since then, the manuscript culture in Ilorin Emirate has been a tradition in which every family took part directly or indirectly such that virtually ‘every house in Ilorin has its own family manuscript repository.

Like typical Arabic manuscripts from other parts of West Africa, the Ilorin Arabic manuscripts were usually written in Arabic language or *Ajami*. The contents of such manuscripts are, however, not limited to Arabic and Islamic education alone. They covered such various fields as the text and exegesis of the Qur’an, sciences of Arabic language, philology, theology, numerology, astrology, local history, culture, politics, inter-groups relations, Islamic legal system, mysticism, conflict and conflict resolution, biographical information, etc. There are also Arabic or *Ajami* manuscripts that served other purposes like prayer books and pamphlets for personal and congregational supplications, ‘magical and therapeutic recipes’ popularly known as “*Nakali*” or *Kundi* among the Ilorin and covering therapeutic treatments or spiritual solutions to various problems or issues including childlessness or barrenness, quick comprehension of knowledge, love, prosperity and success in businesses, protection against evils, etc. (Jimba, 2008; Jimba, forthcoming). The Arabic manuscripts have also been used as primary sources for the history and culture of the emirate. For instance, an Arabic manuscript on the Emirs of Ilorin titled *Ta’lif Akhbar al-Qurun min Umara’ Bilad Ilurin* compiled by an indigenous scholar named Ahmad Abi Bakr Ikororo in 1912 has been found to be of immense value in the reconstruction of Ilorin history from foundation up to the first decade of colonial rule.

Described as the ‘invisible library of Ilorin’ and the ‘hidden treasure of Ilorin’, Arabic manuscripts of Ilorin scholars, therefore, cut across various fields of human endeavour and have thus been used for various purposes. These include serving as instructional materials covering various branches of knowledge at different levels of traditional Arabic and Islamic education in the Ilorin emirate, recipes for medicinal and therapeutic treatments, primary sources for the history and culture of the emirate as well as resource materials for research in various fields and at various levels of academic pursuits. Various scholars have attested to the variety and significance of Ilorin’s Arabic manuscripts (Jimba, 2008; Smith, 1983; Reichmuth and Abubakre, 1995; Reichmuth, 1995, 2010; Otukoko, 2016; Jimba forthcoming). However, not much has been done to collect and preserve this ‘hidden treasure of Ilorin’ and to encourage the establishment of local repository for their documentation and easy access for consultation and research purposes.

### **Production of Arabic Manuscripts in Ilorin**

Traditionally, the production of Arabic manuscripts in Ilorin was through individual scholar’s authorship as well as manual copying of imported Arabic/Islamic literature by scholars, their students as well as professional copyists and indigenous calligraphers. The production of Arabic manuscripts was an integral part of the traditional Arabic and

Islamic education in Ilorin particularly the higher\advanced level known as the '*Ilimi* stage. Even before the '*Ilimi* stage at *Makarantar Allo/ Ile-kewu Wala*, pupils at the tender age of between seven and ten are used to trying their hands on the wooden slate from where they show further interest in the art of copying texts and later on becoming regular or professional copiers. Indeed, until the use of modern printing press and photocopying technology became the order of the day in the emirate, the art of manual copying of Arabic and Islamic literature was widespread and represented a major occupation and additional source of livelihood to several Ilorin families that have become renowned for the copying of manuscripts until very recent times. Among the families were: Katibi, Oloyin, Alakuko, Kakadika, Kijan, Oke - Afa, Isale- Ajasa, Maimasa, Soro, Oniwiridi, etc. Given Ilorin's multi-ethnic composition, its Arabic manuscripts shared some key elements with ancient Arabic literary and calligraphic traditions of many places including Kanem-Borno, Hausa land, Mali and the Maghreb among others.

### **Perception/Attitude of the people to the Manuscripts**

Today, the copying and transmission of Arabic manuscripts is a tradition that is fast going into extinction as very few people engage in it either for instructional, personal or commercial purposes. Among the reasons for the disappearance of this tradition are the modernization of Arabic and Islamic education systems in the city (as elsewhere in Muslim communities) and the spread of modern technology (printing press, personal computers and photocopying). Thus, while the art of copying manuscripts is on the decline, very old and relatively modern Arabic manuscripts are now being gradually lost due to several factors including a widespread ignorance of the value and huge potentials of the manuscripts thereby leading to wilful destruction (through burning or burying) by owners and custodians (private collectors); destruction by termites, fire outbreak, theft, improper handling or poor storage facilities and practices among others.

### **Efforts on Collection and Preservation**

In the past, precisely in the 1980s, efforts were made by Stefan Reichmuth, a German national, to collect some of the manuscripts albeit for academic research purposes. However, the efforts were apparently limited to the collection and analysis of 19th century Arabic manuscripts of Ilorin while their collections are today deposited in archives and university libraries in Europe, which are beyond the reach of ordinary local researchers and other users that might want to make use of them. Some Ilorin manuscripts are also deposited in national archives in Nigeria including Ibadan and Kaduna where they exist in original, photographs, photocopy and microfilms while many still remain in private repositories where they are continuously endangered and on the verge of total loss. There is, therefore, the urgent need to create local repository of the manuscripts.

The first attempt ever made locally to collect the Ilorin manuscript for the purpose of preservation started in the year 2010, following a fact- finding trip I made to Timbuktu in 2008. I started with the formation of Ilorin Manuscript Group (IMG) which comprises about 12 young graduates of Arabic language. A bout 20 Arabic manuscripts were

initially collected and kept in a room on the upstairs of of Jimba mosque at Ile-Jimba quarters, Ilorin, leased to us for free by the community.

In the year 2012, Kwara State University, (KWASU) Malete, established Centre for Ilorin Manuscripts and Culture (CIMAC) with the aim of collecting and preserving the MSS and making them accessible to researchers across the globe. A total of about 346 MSS have so far been collected and kept in the centre's archive. This was made done in collaboration with the IMG and Ilorin History and Culture Bureau (IHCB) which I co-founded with AbdulRasheed Na'Allah and Isiaka Aliagan in 2004.

The mechanism used for the collection exercise is of four options, namely (i) free-will donation from the custodian (ii) lending out of MS for the purpose of hand-copying, photocopying or scanning (iii) release of MS for keeping on the condition of making it available to the owner any time he/she requests for it, and (iv) purchase with money. The second and third options are the most applicable.

Centre for Ilorin Manuscripts and Culture was well represented and applauded at the "Working With Arabic Script Manuscripts in Africa Workshop" held at Northwestern University, USA, in August, 2017. It has also attracted a few grants from within and outside Nigeria, including the national research grant of the Tertiary Education Fund (TETfund) of the Federal Government of Nigeria.

Finally, the centre seeks partnership with researchers, research centres and donor agencies around the world, to further explore this hidden treasure of the Islamic city of Ilorin, for the benefit of research and humanity.

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