

A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY OF THE PLATFORM OF ALGERIAN MANUSCRIPTS

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Manuscripts represent a vital cultural and intellectual heritage, with Algeria recognized as a key custodian due to its numerous Libraries (traditional libraries) dispersed nationwide. This study presents the establishment of the Platform of the Algerian Manuscripts, designed to centralize and facilitate access to this rich heritage. The article outlines the Platform's objectives, introduces the dedicated research team responsible for cataloguing and digitizing manuscript data, and provides statistical information on the Platform's contents, including thematic coverage, authorship, and the traditional libraries surveyed. Furthermore, it highlights several rare manuscripts featured on the Platform. The discussion emphasizes the Platform's significance for researchers, illustrating its potential to advance manuscript-related scholarship and preservation efforts in Algeria.

Keywords: manuscripts, Algerian Manuscripts Platform, manuscript cataloguing, libraries, cultural heritage, Algeria

Introduction

The platform of Algerian manuscripts is a leading project in the field of manuscripts. It was initiated by the Laboratory of Algerian Manuscripts in Africa (LAMA) at the University of Adrar and is supervised by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research. This three-year project numbers amongst the measures taken by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research to encourage and support researchers in this field according to the available means for an effective contribution to the preservation of the heritage of the nation from loss. The main objective of the project is to index 30,000 manuscripts within three years. This task is assigned to a ten-member working team led by Professor A.

Djaafri. In this article, we show the benefits of this project for students and researchers in the field of manuscripts. The working team has so far indexed 15,643 manuscripts, covering 22 themes, including logic, jurisprudence, exegesis, language, legal policy, astronomy, mathematics, medicine, geography, history, and others, located in 89 traditional libraries.

Background to the Creation of the PAM

Algeria, particularly its southern regions, is rich in its number of manuscripts, which, according to Said Bouterfa, developed through three stages. The first stage spans the 10th century to the mid-13th century, during which period manuscripts arrived from various parts of the world. These manuscripts were characterized by the use of Chinese paper and predominantly black ink, followed by red and green ink. They were also noted for their marginalia and annotations. The second stage, beginning in the early 13th century, continued to show an influx of manuscripts from outside the region and marked the establishment of manuscript copying centres and the development of calligraphy schools. During this period, the profession of copyist flourished, which contributed to a significant increase in the number of manuscripts in the region. The third stage extended from the 15th century to the 19th century and was known for manuscript production, as the Tuat region experienced a remarkable scientific movement during this time, leading to the production of a considerable number of manuscripts in various fields ranging from religious to secular sciences (Bouterfa, 2005, p. 38).

A field study conducted by the researcher Ahmed Djaafri in 2002, covering the geographical area from Tabelkoza in the north to Ain Salah in the south — which includes the regions of Gurara, Tuat, and Tidikelt — documented 50 libraries, each containing between 200 and 2,000 manuscripts in various fields of science and knowledge. In this context, Said Bouterfa states that the latest estimates indicate approximately 12,000 manuscripts, of which 3,000 are catalogued. There are also estimates suggesting the existence of an additional 10,000 to 12,000 manuscripts that have not yet been inventoried or their locations identified (Bouterfa, 2005). Bouterfa's estimates appear to be largely in accord with the results of the field survey conducted by Djaafri, which encompassed 50 libraries, as has already been mentioned. "It is worth noting that the eighteenth century represents the peak of the third stage and is known as the golden age in the history of Tuat with regard to the important number of scholars, on the one hand, and the number of manuscripts in the libraries of the region which was estimated at 25,000, on the other. In fact, the libraries differ in their importance and in the contents of manuscripts. They also differ from each other in their historical value and the importance of their contents." (Djaafri, 2009, p. 17)

Why are the Manuscripts Important?

Some manuscripts are valuable by virtue of their contents, which cover different themes, including astronomy, medicine, mathematics, chemistry, logic, religion, and others. In astronomy, for instance, a manuscript titled *'Asma' al Manāzil 'ala al-Tawāli* (the names of zodiacs, respectively) is indexed on the Platform under number 732. Its author is unknown, and it consists of 12 pages written in Maghribi scripts. Moreover, it is found in the library of Shaykh Mulay 'Abdelhakem ben Mulay Abdel'ali, in al-Mansur, Kali, the Municipality of Ulad S'id, Department of Timimoun. There are also medical manuscripts that include a wealth of medicinal knowledge, documenting various diseases and epidemics along with their treatments. Notable examples include the manuscript titled *Shi-fa' al-Asqām al- 'ārida fi eḏāhir wal-Bāṭin* (The Cure of Apparent and Hidden Diseases) by Shaykh Aḥmad ibn Umar Er-Raggadi Al-Kunti (d. 1096 HA/ 1685 AD), which is of the utmost importance and one of the major medical texts in the Sahara. This manuscript consists of 260 pages written in Maghribi font, and it is preserved in the library of Mulay al-'Abbas bin Mulay 'Abdullah bin Mulay 'Abdelmalik al-Reggani, in Buda, Department of Adrar, and it is indexed on the Platform under number 7145. In logic, 184 manuscripts are indexed on the Platform by different authors, including al-Maghīlī and al-Sanūsī. These manuscripts represent a treasure and also prove that Africans left their mark in the history of humanity and that their past did not rely on the oral tradition as is often portrayed in Western literature but also relied on a tradition of writing. The substantial number of manuscripts, some of which date back seven centuries or more, provides clear evidence of this.

The idea of preserving manuscripts came about after a warning from scholars and academics in the south of Algeria that the manuscripts are becoming worn out, and that they are undergoing severe damage because of the poor conditions in which they are conserved. Most of this human material heritage is kept in wooden crates, metal boxes, and skin bags exposed to natural threats such as rain, high temperatures, sunshine, fire, and termites (Abbou, 2013). This situation challenges us all to take urgent action to save what remains of this scientific and cultural heritage.

Given the significant importance of manuscripts on the one hand and their disastrous state of preservation in various libraries across different regions of Algeria on the other, the idea of creating this digital platform was conceived. This project will serve as a database; in its first phase, it will include technical cards detailing the contents of these libraries, providing precise information about each manuscript and its exact location to facilitate access for students and researchers. In the second phase of the project, the working team intends to digitize the contents of these libraries, converting them into non-perishable digital formats.

Indexing Manuscripts

Indexing (cataloguing) is a crucial and fundamental part of codicology, providing data about the content of the manuscript and its physical form and referencing it as an entity in itself. This requires the researcher to have a broad cultural background and knowledge of paleography and bibliography to identify writing materials (papyrus, parchment, paper), types of ink, different scripts (Maghribi, Sudani, Mashriqi, and others), determine the date of the copy, verify the title of the manuscript, document the author's name, and know whether it has been edited and printed or not (2014 مولاي).

Some Arab cataloguers did not consider indexing to be a standalone science with its own rules, requiring special skills for its application. Each one catalogued as they wished, believing their method to be correct, even if it was inconsistent. Some imitated modern orientalists, while others followed ancient catalogues, disregarding modern scientific data closely related to this science. As a result, Arabic manuscript catalogues come in various forms and methods, differing from one country to another and from one library to another within the same country (2014 مولاي). The working team faced this problem in filling in the identification cards of the manuscripts before transporting them to the PAM.

To address this complex issue, the proposal has been made to institutionalize the field of manuscript studies by integrating it as a dedicated programme within library and information science schools with a particular emphasis on developing cataloguing standards for manuscripts in the broader context of information cataloguing. Furthermore, the establishment of a specialized institute for research and text dating across the Islamic world has been recommended, to be supervised by the Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ICESCO). This institute would include a department focused on the study of Arabic manuscripts, known as manuscript science or codicology (2014 مولاي).

The Creation of the PAM

PAM (Platform of Algerian Manuscripts) was established in 2018 through an agreement between the General Directorate of Scientific Research and Technological Development and the University of Adrar, under contract No. 33 dated February 1st, 2018, within the framework of the Fund for Scientific Research and Technological Development. Accessible online, PAM offers services similar to the West African Arabic Manuscripts Database (WAAMD) by Charles Stewart and Bruce Hall, assisting students and researchers in locating Arabic manuscripts preserved in libraries across North and West Africa. While both platforms share the mission of cataloguing and providing access to Arabic manuscript heritage, PAM focuses

on Algeria's manuscript legacy, supporting academic research and publication, whereas WAAMD serves as a bilingual, digitally integrated union catalogue for West African manuscripts, emphasizing international collaboration and broader access and standardization. The two differ in their geographical scope, institutional structure, digitization levels, and extent of international partnerships.

The Objectives of the PAM

- Establishing a digital platform concerned with tracking Algerian manuscripts in Algeria and the world, their inventorying, indexation and digitization.
- Developing a bibliographical map of the locations of the manuscripts inside and outside Algeria.
- Locating the scientific activities of Algerian scholars inside and outside Algeria.
- Introducing the legacy of Algerian manuscripts preserved in different parts of the world,
- Facilitating accessibility to the platform for students and researchers to study and edit manuscripts.
- Introducing Algerians' efforts and their role in transmitting science and knowledge to different urban centres.
- Strengthening the historical ties between Algeria and its neighbours, particularly West Africa and Hausaland.

The working team of the PAM consists of ten members, including professors and Ph.D. students, whose profiles meet the requirements for inventorying and indexing manuscripts. Below is a unified and systematized presentation of the staff members:

Professors:

Professor A. Djaafri, head of the project, holds Ph.D. degrees in Arabic literature and history. He has edited several manuscripts, including *Riḥlati 'ilā Qabri Wālidī* (My Journey to the Tomb of my Father) by Dayf Allah ibn Muḥammad ibn Ubba al-Muzammiri, and authored numerous articles on manuscripts.

Professor M. Djaafri holds a Ph.D. in history and a certificate of advanced studies specialized in manuscripts (DPGS). He has edited *Tāj al-dīn fī mā yajib 'alā al-mulūk* (The Crown of Judgment: On the Obligations of Kings) by Imām Abū 'Abdullah Muḥammad b. 'Abdul Karīm al-Maghīlī, and written articles including *Shifa' al-Asqām al-'āriḍa fī eḍāhir wal-Bāṭin* (The Cure of Apparent and Hidden Diseases) by Shaykh Aḥmad ibn Umar Er-Raggadi Al-Kunti.

Professor I. Benkhoaia holds a Ph.D. in semantics and linguistics. He has authored books on semantics and worked on the works of Imām al-Maghīlī.

Professor A. Baothman holds a Ph.D. in history. He has authored articles on manuscripts, including *An Introduction to Er-Rihla ilā Bayti Allāh l-Harām – Kamila l-Murām Bijāhi Khayri l-Anām* by Shaykh Muḥammad ‘Abdulaḥfidh bin Sāliḥ al-Mahdāwī al-Tinilāni.

Professor T. Abbou holds a Ph.D. in African civilization and has authored many articles in fields such as sacred journeys (pilgrimage), history, and Berber studies. His manuscript-related articles include *Timbuktu: A Paramount Centre of Trade and Knowledge* (published in the journal RUFUF) and *The Manuscripts of Timbuktu* (published in Al-Lissan, Journal of the Academic Society for Arabic Language and Literature in Nigeria).

Ph.D. Students:

R. Benabid, S. Bouznina, A. Abekhti, S. Ben Othman and U. Benabid are Ph.D. students in Arabic language and literature or sociology. All have participated in a training course in codicology and Arabic calligraphy organized by LAMA, the National Centre for Manuscripts, and Amjād Centre for Manuscripts in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

Though the profiles of most of the working team members meet, to some extent, the requirements of the project, some mistakes in classifying the manuscripts under the appropriate themes can be noticed on the platform. For instance, most of the manuscripts dealing with *al-‘Aqīda* (creed) are classified under *fiqh* (jurisprudence). A lack of experience among the Ph.D. students may explain this.

Statistics about the PAM

During the first year of the project, the members of the working team indexed and introduced 15,643 manuscripts on the PAM, held in 89 libraries. These manuscripts are classified under 22 themes, as shown in the table below.

Themes

	Themes	Number	الموضوعات	
01	Islamic jurisprudence	4744	فقه	01
02	Letters, Treaties and Contracts	2278	رسائل وعقود	02
03	Literature	1488	أدب	03
04	Language	1456	لغة	04
05	Sufism	1324	تصوف	05
06	Sciences of the Qur'an	887	علوم القرآن	06
07	Prophetic tradition	779	حديث شريف	07
08	Holy Qur'an	426	قرآن كريم	08
09	Biographies	364	تراجم وسير	09
10	Prophetic biography	354	سيرة نبوية	10
11	History	280	تاريخ	11
12	Legal policy	265	سياسة شرعية	12
13	Talisman	249	طلاسـم	13
14	Astronomy	220	فلك	14
15	Medicine	199	طب	15
16	Logic	184	منطق	16
17	Mathematics	77	رياضيات	17
18	Geography	23	لجغرافيا	18
19	Holy Books	15	كتب مقدسة	19
20	Agriculture	12	علوم الزراعة	20
21	Chemistry	08	كيمياء	21
22	Creed	07	عقيدة	22

Examples of Manuscripts indexed on the PAM

Sufism (تصوف):

Dala'il al-Khayrāt (Waymarks of Benefits) written by Muḥammad bin Suleymān al-Jazūli (d. 870 AH). The manuscript is made up of 144 pages, and it is well kept in good conditions at the Library of Mulay Mhammad ben Mulay Sherif ben 'Abed e-Shahid, in Ulad 'Ali, Adrar, recorded on the PAM under No. 44. (See Figure 1)

Legal Policy (سياسة شرعية):

As'ilat al-Askiya Muhammad wa Ajwibat al-Maghili (Askiyah's Questions and al-Maghili's Answers) written by Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Karīm al-Maghilī. The manuscript consists of 24 pages, and it is well kept in good conditions at the Libraries of Shaykh Hajj 'Abdul Qadir ben Sidī Salem al-Maghilī, in al-ḥayy al-Gharbi, Adrar, recorded on the PAM under No. 79. (See Figure 2)

Holy Books (كتب مقدسة):

The book of Zabur (Psalms) which was revealed to the Prophet David (Peace Be Upon Him). The manuscript consists of 14 pages, and it is truncated at the beginning and the end. The manuscript is found at the Libraries of Mulāy Suleymān bin 'Ali, in Adgha, Adrar and it is recorded on the PAM under No. 1816. (See Figure 3)

Creed عقيدة :

al-'Aqida as-Sughrā 'the Small creed' (= Umm al-Barāhīn) by Muḥammad b. Yūsuf al-Sanūsī (d. 895 AH/1490 CE), the manuscript consists of 22 pages, the copy is complete, but in poor condition. The pages are sticky with traces of moisture. The manuscript is held at the Libraries of Sidī Brahīm, Qasr Ulād Bekqasem, 'Ain Sāleḥ, Tamenrasset, and it is recorded on the PAM under No. 1178. (See Figure 4)

Libraries

The manuscripts inventoried and indexed on the PAM come from 89 libraries scattered across Algeria and abroad. These libraries are located on a map that provides an identification card bearing the name of its owner, the date of its establishment, and its contents, in addition to its address, so that the researcher can access it easily and conveniently. It should be noted that access to the libraries by the members of the working team is not easy in most cases. Most of the owners of the libraries are reluctant and sometimes unwilling to open the doors of their libraries, and even if they allow the researchers to conduct the inventorying and indexing process, they sometimes do not give them access to all the contents of the library. See for example <https://pam.univ-adrar.edu.dz/googlemap/>.

Authors

The number of authors whose manuscripts are indexed on the PAM is 6,650, including anonymous authors. The list of authors includes prominent scholars, to name but a few: Muḥammad B. 'Abd al-Karīm al-Maghilī (d. 1505), al-Mukhtār al-Kuntī (d. 1811), Muḥammad b. Yūsuf al-Sanūsī (d. 1490), Abū l-'Abbās Aḥmad ibn Yaḥyā ibn Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Wāḥid ibn 'Alī al-Wansharīsī (d. 1508),

Aḥmad al-Bakkāy b. Muḥammad b. al-Mukhtār al-Kuntī al-Wāfi (d. 1865), Abū Madyan Shu‘ayb ibn al-Husayn al-Ansāri al-Andalusi (1126 – 1198 CE), Sidi Muḥammad b. Ubba al-Muzammiri, Sidi Abd al-Rahman al-Tha‘ālibi, and many others.

The Benefits of the PAM

The PAM provides valuable services for researchers from all over the world. Researchers can search for the manuscript they need by entering the title or the name of the author of the manuscript and clicking on a search to be given the technical card of the manuscript with the necessary information to access it. It includes the title of the manuscript, their author, the number of pages, and the address of the library where the manuscript is preserved. The Platform also provides other services, such as links to many useful websites related to the field of manuscripts, for example: the Jum‘a Al-Majid Centre for Culture and Heritage, the Centre of Islamic Studies and Manuscripts, Wadud Centre for Manuscripts, ‘Abdul‘aziz S‘aud Al-Babtain Cultural Foundation, *Makhtūtāt* Mali مخطوطات مالي, and others.

Conclusion

It is worth noting that the Platform of Algerian Manuscripts has made significant efforts to make manuscripts scattered across libraries in Algeria and elsewhere and their whereabouts known to researchers. It should also be noted that the project was halted after its first year because of financial issues. However, the working team has recently been enabled to resume its task of inventorying and indexing 30,000 manuscripts after the problem was resolved. As a member of the working team and through our experience with the libraries and the work on the PAM, some concluding remarks can be made. Firstly, there is the difficulty of accessing most of the libraries, and mediation is often required in order to solve the problem. Secondly, the way manuscripts are kept in most of the libraries is not satisfactory as they are poorly preserved, which makes them vulnerable to damage and loss. Thirdly, some deficiencies can be noticed in the PAM due to a lack of experience and coordination among the members of the working team. The most common of these deficiencies and those which have a negative impact on the statistics are in the first instance that some manuscripts are classified under inappropriate themes and in the second instance that the names of the authors and the libraries are not written uniformly, so that they appear on the PAM repeatedly. The members of the working team hope to overcome the shortcomings recorded on the PAM in the rest of the project and to develop a better version to provide better services to students and researchers.



Figure1: *Dala'il al-Khayrat* (Waymarks of Benefits)

Source: <https://archive.org/details/dalailalkhayratprayermanuscriptsfromthe16th19thcenturies/page/n25/mode/2up>



Figure 2: *As'ilat al-Askiya Muḥammad wa Ajwibat al-Maghilī* (The Questions of Askiya Muḥammad and the Answers of al-Maghilī)

Source: https://tile.loc.gov/storage/services/service/gdc/gdcwdl/wdl_00036/wdl_00036/wdl_00036/wdl_00036



Figure 3: The Book of Zabur (Psalms)

Source: <https://pam.univ-adrar.edu.dz/>



Figure 4: *al-'Aqīda as-Suġhrā* 'the Small creed' (= Umm al-Barāhīn) by Muḥammad b. Yūsuf al-Sanūsī (d. 895)

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