

## Book Review

*The writings of Mauritania and the western Sahara*, compiled by **Charles C. Stewart** with **Sidi Ahmed Wuld Ahmed Salim**, *Arabic Literature of Africa* vol. 5, (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2016), 2 vols.

This was worth the wait. It is like a vast and deep sea of scholars and texts holding a dynamic history of learned discourse and disputation over a 350-year period. It is a tradition of scholarship that continues and the two parts that make up this work have entries on scholars who wrote in the early seventeenth century through to scholars who wrote well into the twentieth century, and even a few in the present century. The *Arabic Literature of Africa* (ALA) series gave us its first volume in 1994, on eastern Sudanic Africa. The ALA volume 4 which appeared in 2003, on western Sudanic Africa, covers a space adjoining the area covered here. The two volumes together provide an impressive perspective on Islamic scholarship on a vast swath of West African geography and history. There are points of connection and ‘conversation,’ so to speak, between ALA 4 and this ALA 5. However, these two volumes (the work is divided into two parts and totals a staggering two thousand pages) have benefitted from arriving later because they have improved upon the earlier ones in the series, as a research tool. For instance, the indices are over three hundred pages long, giving the researcher an Index of Authors of Derivative Works, Authors, Subjects, and finally a General Index. The index of “Authors of Derivative Works” is the first of its kind for the region; it is an important indicator of the place of the classical works of Islamic learning within the scholarship of the western Sahara. It is a tremendously useful way to sample those classical texts which the writers of the region were reading and commenting on. For classical ‘Islamic studies’ philologists, it is also a valuable resource for it points to which works travelled into the Sahara and were closely studied and commented upon. Other features also

distinguish it from the earlier works in the series. In its own terms, it is simply outstanding and an excellent instrument for advanced research. Teaching students about the region's intellectual history and practices is helped immeasurably by the appearance of this work.

An introduction and a background essay set the political and intellectual context for the scholars and their works in the bibliography. It is a concise and informative statement covering numerous topics such as the earliest writings in the region, the rise of Arabophone literacy and scholarship, the wars or skirmishes known as "Shurr Bubba" in the sixteenseventies, a turning-point in the region's history, and the development of education in a nomadic society without a central authority or state. This is followed by a survey of the educational system, the *Mahazra* and its curriculum, in which generations of students were schooled and the tradition of learning captured in this bibliography was reproduced.

The authors are referenced in most instances by their so-called "tribal" grouping, which makes the contents pages rather slim: three pages giving 77 groupings. It might be hard for scholars to access a title or scholar if they do not know this affiliation but it makes for a less unwieldy listing. Thus, the importance of the extensive indices that follow in part II. At one stage, I felt that those indices deserved their own volume and I became stuck on that tail-end for a long time. The work is thoroughly cross-referenced; thus, it cross-references within the work and also to other, previous catalogues and the AMMS (West African Arabic Manuscript Project) online database.

In order to test the quality of a bibliography, one has to use it. I looked at a number of entries in some detail. For example, one finds Shaykh Sidiyya 'al-Kabir' (d.1867/68) under the 'tribal' name Abyayri where he is scholar number 70 in the work (pp. 133-145). Not knowing his 'tribal' grouping, I encountered him there as I worked through volume 1 alphabetically. If I had been looking for him, in particular, then the index at the back of part II gives his name as I know him. All entries follow a standard format which is very clearly laid-out. The entry itself gives the alternative names under which he was known. It also gives the names of his teachers and his students. Following this is a substantial biographical

paragraph about him. It then notes the other catalogues in which he appears. All of this information is really helpful even before one reaches his works. Finally, the entries of his works follow: Title, and if there is, an alternative Title (all in italics), the subject covered by the work, the various libraries in which the particular ms is located, and size of the ms in folios. In the case of this author, 67 works are listed. However, we are informed that these are only works longer than three folios. The reader is referred to the AMMS database for a listing that contains all the works including those shorter than three folios. If any future researcher plans work on this figure, then this would be the indispensable starting-point to see the extant primary sources and where they could be found.

I then looked for another famous scholar, (Muhammad b. Abi Bakr as-Siddiq b. Abd Abdallah b. Muhammad b. at-Talib ali Bannan)al-Bartili, who is named here as Bartayli and enjoys a complete section as a tribal grouping. Only his name appears here but we are directed to another section, placing him among the Walati (a place not a 'tribe') scholars, no. 1678. He was also known as al-Bartili al-Walati after his birthplace. I found him and the details about him and his works all there. We are given entries no. 1663 to 1685 for Walata. In some instances, there are only one or two scholars such as for Tikni and Tinbukti. Given the challenges when dealing with similar names, the entries serve to clarify wherever confusion might exist. Thus, I found a long entry on Muhammad Yahya b. Muhammad al-Mukhtar ad-Dawudi al-Allushi (1843-1913) [entry 1679 under Walati group]. However, he was not the person for whom I was looking although his name was strikingly similar to that of Muhammad Yahya b. Sidi Muhammad b. Muhammad b. Salima al-Yunusi al-Walati al-Dawudi (d.1935) whom I was tracking down [entry 1846; under the Yunusi group]. I was directed there.

There are bound to be flaws in a work of this size. However, on my numerous long dips into the two volumes looking for scholars, texts, and subjects and just leafing through both volumes multiple times, I hardly found much to report on. All I have found so far are a wrong death date for Ahmad Bularaf, a few incomplete titles in the Index of Authors of Derivative Works – perhaps a conscious decision given that some of these

works are really well-known – and a missing ‘h’ in one spelling of the name Nahwi. But otherwise the attention to detail was most thorough and impressive. The reader comes away feeling confident that care was taken and that the information is reliable.

This is a model work for advanced students and experienced researchers. It was initiated and completed by a highly experienced expert with a team of eminent specialist collaborators. It brings ten thousand manuscripts and over eighteen hundred authors, spread over more than three centuries, to the scholarly community and in the most accessible way possible.

This is a model of bibliographical scholarship bearing in mind the depth of labour that it took to produce. Most importantly, it gives the user numerous options to access the huge amount of data it provides. The West Africanist with Arabist interests, the Saharan specialist, the Islamic studies scholar, and researchers in cognate fields will all find the bibliography of enormous value for decades to come. There is now no excuse for failing to go into the field to study these materials. They are there, while the tool needed to identify and locate them is the best one yet produced.

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