



The City of Tadjoura Collection

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Introduction

The mission in Tadjoura is the second part of larger project of inquiry about the Islamic manuscript tradition in Djibouti, started in 2016 in the framework of the *Islam in the Horn of Africa project: A Comparative Literary Approach*.

This mission has been carried out by Sara Fani and Michele Petrone, with the participation of Dr. Aramis Soulé and prof. Eloi Fiquet (EHES). Thanks to the latter's efforts, together with the help of the Institut des recherches archéologiques et historiques (IRAH) and the Centre d'étude et de recherche de Djibouti (CERD), we have been granted access to the collection of the manuscripts of the city of Tadjoura.

The collection is the result of the efforts of the Sultan of Tadjoura, 'Abdulkâdir ('Abdo) b. Húmméd b. Mahámmad. B. Arbahim, in retrieving the remains of the local patrimony after the revolution and the independence (1976) and the civil war (1992-96). The historic boundaries of the Sultanate are quite similar to the ones of the actual Region of Tadjoura, confining at West with Ethiopia (Awsa region), at North with Eritrea, at East with the region of Obock and at South-South East there is the Gulf of Tadjoura. Didier Morin reports that the frontiers of the sultanate are proclaimed during the enthronement:

“Apprenez que son domain va de Fūdusà-dā au col de Sebbā'ò”¹

This indicates that the boundaries of the Sultan's domain virtually goes from lake Assal² to Assab (Sebbā'ò), extending its influence beyond its actual geographic limits.

Almost all the population of Tadjoura belongs to the Afar ethnic group, present in the rest of Djibouti and in the Afar region of Ethiopia³. Islam was introduced in the area relatively early, at least from the 13th century, with the constitution of the Sultanate of Ifat.

We have very few information for the history of Tadjoura before the 19th century. The list of sultans given by Morin goes back to the 15th century.⁴ But the presence of settlements in the area can be dated back to the 13th century at least. There are different accounts about this period, some

¹ Didier Morin, *Dictionnaire Historique afar. (1288-1982)*. Nouvelle édition augmentée, Paris : Karthala, [2014], p. 343.

² The reference here is to the siffling stone of the salt lake of Assal, in Dabrima.

³ People speaking Afar are found also in other areas of Ethiopia, due to migrations along trade routes or to

⁴ Morin, *cit.*, pp. 345-48.

connecting the Afar to the mythical ancestor Hadal-Māhis⁵, from whom the tribe of the present sultan of Tadjoura claims its descent.

In the 16th century the sultanate was under the control of Zayla, both being the main port outlets of Harar at the time. Despite the decline of the political and commercial role of Harar, the sultanate kept its political power until the arrival of the Europeans in the 19th century, starting with the event that marked the end of the relative independence of Tadjoura is Menelik's victory at 'Arradò (1896), as the territory became part of the Wallo province. But the Egyptian occupation of the Gulf of Tadjoura in 1884 and establishing of a French administration in the new city of Djibouti by Léonce Lagarde in 1894 had already marked a sensible reduction of the role of the sultanate in the region.

Both during French domination and after the independence, the sultan of Tadjoura kept his role of representative of traditional power.

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Description of the collection

The manuscripts preserved in the Collection of Tadjoura represent what remains of the tradition of Islamic learning in the Region. With the progressive secularization of the institutions, starting with the colonial period (1894-1977), the role of local 'ulamā' as transmitters of knowledge declined. After their death the descendants decided to donate the books to local mosques, hoping that other people would use them for their study, making them public *de facto*.⁶ Tadjoura's reduced importance as a commercial hub led locals to move to Djibouti city and local mosques saw their role as social and religious centers in the region furthermore diminished. The Sultan of Tadjoura, who kept his role as representative of traditional power, decided to collect all the manuscripts

⁵ See Morin, *cit.*, p. 242-43; M. Lucas, *Reinsegnements ethnographiques et linguistiques sur les Danakils de Tadjourah*, in *Journal de la Société des Africanistes*, 5/2 (1935), pp. 181-184.

⁶ This means that in some cases there was not even a formal *waqf* written on the manuscripts.

scattered in the area in a single place to preserve them and make them available to local and foreign scholars.

The task of keeping them has been given to one of the most eclectic personalities of Tadjoura Haj Houmed Gaba, a man in his early eighties with the spirit and the enthusiasm of a boy. He is author of several local publications about Arabic and Afar languages and a well known folklorist, being probably among the best informed people about traditions of the region (from oral poetry to the meanings of the different ways to carry a walking stick).

Manuscripts are kept in four metal boxes internally padded with plastic. Naphthalene has been put at the bottom of the boxes to keep insects away. These elements result in an overall good condition of preservation of the manuscripts. The presence of naphthalene did not cause particular damage to the materials, with the exception of a light oily film on some covers or pages.

Materials have been roughly grouped by topic and kept together with raffia thread. A piece of white paper with the indication of the topic (*Qur'ān*, *ḥadīth*, *fiqh* etc) has been stapled to the manuscript on the top of each pile. We have removed the staples where it would not cause further damage to the pages.

The grouping has not been always flawless. In many cases parts of the same manuscript have been split in different piles. This can be the result of the lack of collation of the materials or be the consequence of a pre-existent subdivision of the same manuscript among the heirs of the previous owner. As there is no exact information about the provenance of every manuscript, only a thorough analysis of the *waqf* and ownership statements can shed some light on the history of these materials. This implies that the number of manuscripts identified up to now (120, including miscellanea) can be reduced by some units after collation. There are also two printed books. One of these is the *Fayḍ al-Mannān bi-ṣarḥ Faḥ al-Raḥmān* by Muḥammad Sulaymān Ḥasab Allāh al-Makkī al-Šāfi, which reports a *waqf* made by a woman.

A very quick overview of the contents of the manuscripts shows that it contains the largest number of copies (partial or complete) of the Qur'ān digitized by the IslHornAfr Project up to now. Some copies are also dated as early as 4 Raḡab 1233 / 10 may 1818, putting local scribal tradition to a very early stage for the area. Other *muṣḥafs* are beautifully decorated, in a style that resembles the one found in Harari copies of the Qur'ān.



Final page of the Qur'an, DJTJ00044, ff. 13v-14r.

The Holy Book was object of specific scholarly attention in Tadjoura, as there are some books about the rules of its recitation and writing.⁷ It is noteworthy that books about these topics which are not found elsewhere in the Horn of Africa. On the other hand Quranic commentaries seems limited to the *Tafsīr al-Ġalālayn*.

The books of *fiqh* belong all to the Šāfi'ī school. There is an unusual presence of the works of Ibn Raslān (d. 884/1440), with some commentaries⁸, making him the primary source for the instruction of local *fuqahā'*. The manuscripts are mostly dated and in one case there are also reading annotations, dated 1227/1814. This attests the early diffusion of Islamic scholarship in the area and denotes also a certain degree of structuring in the traces of a curriculum of jurisprudence (or at least

⁷ Kursiyya min Kitāb 'Aqliyyat Atrāb al-Qaṣā'id fī 'Ilm Rasm al-Maṣāḥif, by Abū Muḥammad al-Qāsim b. Fīrūh b. Ḥalaf b. Aḥmad al-Šāṭibī al-Ru'aynī al-Andalusī (d. 590/1193), with several annotations; Kitāb al-Hidāya ilā Taḥqīq al-Riwāya 'an Imām al-Taḥqīq wa al-Dirāya Nafī' b. 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Madanī wa Ibn 'Amr b. Al-'Alā al-Baṣrī riwāyat 'Isā b. Mīnā Qālūn 'an Nāfi' wa riwāyat Abī 'Amr al-Dūrī 'an Abī Muḥammad al-Yazīdī 'an Abī 'Amr by 'Uṭmān b. 'Umar al-Nāširī, incomplete, not dated.

⁸ Ġāyat al-Bayān fī ṣarḥ zubdat Ibn Raslān; Ġāyat al-Bayān fī Ṣarḥ Zubdat Ibn Raslān, by Šams al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Ramlī al-Anṣārī al-Šāfi'ī (d. 1004/1595); Matn Zubd of Ibn Raslān; Šafwat al-Zubd by Aḥmad b. Al-Ḥusayn b. 'Alī b. Arslān al-Ramlī. The latter work includes also a section on *taṣawwuf*.

a number of preferred textbooks) and in the fact that readers felt compelled to annotate their activities.

Theological issues seem to have been a favorite topic among the *'ulamā'* of Tadjoura. There are the *Īdāḥ asrār 'ulūm al-muqarrabīn* of Ğamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad b. 'Abd Allāh b. Al-'Aydārūs al-Bā'alawī (d. 1031/1621, ms. dated 13 Rabī' al-Ṭānī 1252/28 July 1836), the *Kitāb faḥ al-Raḥmān fīmā yaḥşil bihi hiya al-īmān wa al-islām* by Muḥammad b. Ziyād al-Waḍḍāḥī, with an addition by Aḥmad b. 'Umar b. Idrīs b. Sumayṭ 'Alawī and by 'Abd Aḥmad Bā Sūdān and the *Īdā'a al-dağna fī 'aqā'id ahl al-sunna* of Şihāb al-Dīn Abī al-'Abbās Aḥmad Muḥammad al-Muqrī (d. 1041/1631). The latter is of particular interest, as it has been written for interlinear annotations and the manuscript is effectively heavily annotated in Arabic. To these should be added two classics like the *al-Şawāḥiq al-Muḥriqa 'alā Ahl al-Rafḍ wal-Ḍalāl wa al-Zandaqa* of Ibn Ḥağar al-Haytamī (d. 1566) and an anonymous commentary on *al-'Aqīda al-Sanusiyya*.

The number of devotional texts is surprisingly low. Together with the omnipresent *Tanbīh al-Anām* of Ibn 'Azzūm al-Qayrawānī (d. 1565), there is an anonymous *mawlid* with the refrain “*aṭṭir Allahumma qabrahu al-karīm bi-'urf şaddī min şalāt wa taslīm*”, of possible local production.

The texts listed above represent only part of the collection, as further inquiry is still necessary to identify all of them. Nonetheless they give a clear idea of a developed scholarship tradition, focused on jurisprudence, theology and the recitation of the *Qur'ān*. The absence of texts related to Sufism could lead to think that this aspect of Islam was weak in the area. But, as the history of the collection suggests, it is possible that the books brought to the mosques represented only part of the original textual landscape. It could be argued that books on *taşawwuf* were perceived as too esoteric (or at least private) to be left in a mosque without any guide to their reading.