


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Africa and African languages in the SOAS Library's Special Collections

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Abstract

SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London) Library is one of only five National Research Libraries in the UK and one of the most important academic libraries for the study of Asia, Africa and the Middle East. The African Language Collection at SOAS is unique in the UK and Europe in terms of its linguistic span and significance. The Library seeks to acquire material in and on all languages present on the African continent, not just those taught and researched at SOAS. The range of material within the Main Library collection and the history of the collection will be briefly evoked, before I bring the focus back to the items about African studies and/or from Africa that are held in the Special Collections of the Library. Those collections include archival collections, rare books collections (including discrete sub-collections of published material such as libraries from missionaries' societies and/or academic scholars) and manuscripts in African languages. After briefly describing those collections, I point to ways of accessing them. I conclude this short overview by highlighting a few of the challenges of curating publications and manuscripts in African languages.

Résumé

La bibliothèque SOAS (École des études orientales et africaines, Université de Londres) est l'une des cinq bibliothèques nationales de recherche du Royaume-Uni et une des plus importantes bibliothèques universitaires pour l'étude de l'Asie, de l'Afrique et du Moyen-Orient. La collection de langues africaines de la SOAS est une collection unique au Royaume-Uni et en Europe tant en termes de diversité linguistique que de singularité. Au delà des langues enseignées et étudiées à la SOAS, la bibliothèque cherche en effet à consolider ses collections dans toutes les langues du continent africain. L'éventail et l'histoire des collections de la bibliothèque seront brièvement évoqués, avant que je ne me concentre sur les documents relatifs aux études africaines et/ou provenant d'Afrique conservés dans les collections spéciales de la bibliothèque de la SOAS. Ces collections spéciales comprennent des fonds d'archives, des collections de livres rares (y compris des sous-collections distinctes de matériel publié, telles les bibliothèques des sociétés missionnaires ou de chercheurs universitaires) ainsi que des manuscrits en langues africaines. Après avoir brièvement décrit ces collections, j'indiquerai les moyens d'y accéder. Je clôturerai ce rapide aperçu en évoquant certains défis liés à la curation et la gestion des fonds imprimés et des manuscrits en langues africaines.

Introduction

The SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London) research collection of published material on Africa and in African languages probably does not need much introduction: it remains one of the most distinctive collections of its kind in Europe. SOAS Library is one of only five national research libraries in the UK, which include the British Library of Political and Economic Science (LSE Library), Cambridge University Library, the University of Manchester John Rylands Library, and the University of Oxford Bodleian Library. Compared with those other massive and venerable institutions, SOAS Library appears small and young, but this only serves to emphasize the actual significance of its collections.

When referring to SOAS Africa collections, one very often thinks about the extraordinarily rich and varied print holdings of its Main Library. The range extends from linguistic studies through creative literature to works of scholarship in African languages. More than 700 African languages and dialects are represented in the Main Library's holdings, albeit deficient language coding means that this may actually be a rather conservative number. This estimate is indeed based on a listing of the records bearing a language code in the SOAS Library catalogue. Unfortunately many bibliographic records lack such language codes, and some may have been incorrectly coded. Multilingual works were particularly disserved by previous cataloguing rules and library systems limitations that meant that only one language code could be recorded. On the other hand, the level of representation of these 700+ languages varies greatly: some languages heavily feature, with thousands or hundreds of titles on the shelves (such as Swahili/Kiswahili, Hausa, Somali, Yoruba, Shona (chiShona), Sotho (Sesotho), Zulu, Igbo, etc.), while others may only claim as few as a couple of titles to their name.

This article shifts the focus to the slightly lesser known but equally substantial collection of primary source materials relating to the history, culture and languages of Africa to be found in the SOAS Special Collections. In line with the theme of the SCOLMA 2021 conference, which focused on publishing, collecting and accessing African-language materials, this presentation highlights more specifically the archives, rare books and manuscripts collected in and about African languages in the SOAS Special Collections.

In the light of my limited knowledge of African scholarship and librarianship, coupled with my fairly short experience as Curator, I think a warning is due: this article does not claim to any great depths of research. Rather, it is a brief presentation revealing the contours and depths of the collections of African-language rare prints and manuscripts held in SOAS Special Collections, with a view to raising their profile and encouraging students, researchers and experts in the field to take a closer look at these fascinating and unique holdings.

A large portion of the Asian and African manuscripts and rare books that first constituted the Special Collections came into SOAS holding shortly after the creation of the School of Oriental Studies (SOS) in 1916. The Library itself was established in 1917 around the oriental section of the London Institution Library located in Finsbury Circus (itself founded in 1805). This latter was subjected to an exchange of collections: the library traded its Western language materials for books and journals about Oriental subjects held by the libraries of the University College of London, King's

College and the University of London General Library. Donations were also received from the British Library, the India Office Library and a number of private benefactors, including many scholars from the British Colonial Office. African studies were embedded in the School's curriculum in 1938 and finally put the 'A' in 'SOAS', and from then on acquisition of African material accelerated (Philips 1967; Lodge and Saunders 2003).

It was only after 1973 – with the construction of the Brutalist building that houses the SOAS library today in Russell Square – that the School began to take in deposits of modern archives and to build up its collections of manuscripts relating to Africa and Asia (Arnold and Shackle 2003; Brown 2016).

Nowadays, within the remit of Special Collections, SOAS Library holds nearly 1,500 linear shelf metres of rare books, journals and other printed materials (including lithographs and xylographs), regarded as special because of their age, rarity, fragility, provenance or their financial value. Spanning in date from the fifteenth century to the present, these range from luxury books printed on vellum and beautifully illustrated, to ephemera, cheap broadsides and other forms of street-literature.

Besides this holding of rare printed material, the Special Collections house nearly 3,000 linear shelf metres of archives and manuscripts. Manuscripts are presented in a variety of formats including codices (volumes), scrolls and single-sheet material, and on various types of support including paper, parchment, cloth, bark and palm leaf. To this variety of format corresponds a great linguistic diversity: more than 130 different languages, with significant holdings in Arabic, Persian, Swahili, South, South-East and East Asian languages, are represented in those manuscript collections.

The 500 original collections of archives and personal papers present a more homogeneous profile in terms of format, as they are largely paper-based mixed media. However, significant collections of photographic material (prints, negatives, glass plates, lantern slides, slide collections, film strips), audio-visual materials (cassette tapes, reels, gramophone records), maps (pre-nineteenth century), posters, blueprints, engravings, paintings and other visual/art materials, as well as digital media are also conserved in the SOAS Special Collections.

Africana archives

Since [1973], the Special Collections have developed considerably, the principal focus being upon the records of missionaries and missionary organizations, of humanitarian groups and non-governmental organizations and those who worked with them, and business records and the papers of those involved in business. At the same time, the archive has continued to collect more general sets of papers from individuals whose life work was of special relevance to the study of Asia or Africa, such as missionaries, linguists, anthropologists, as well as a smaller number of administrators, merchants, travellers and writers. (Anderson and Seton 1995: 45–60)

SOAS has remained a major centre for the study of the Western missionary movement and its interaction with the peoples of Africa, Asia, the Pacific and the West Indies. Its archival collections (including the long-term deposited collections from large

organizations such as the Council for World Mission (CWM) and the Methodist Missionary Society) hold at present about 750,000 original documents, some 70,000 photographs and many thousands of published works comprising histories, memoirs, annual reports, missionary magazines, bible translations and hymnals.

Missionary collections provide some of the earliest documentation of contact with overseas communities, their first recorded histories and often the first forms of written language as they strove to translate the Bible and other works into the local vernacular. These missionary archives are indeed a rich source for the social, medical, educational and political history of these regions, but most particularly for the early linguistic documentation of African languages, especially in Southern and Central Africa.

In all, there are now fifty-six collections of direct interest to Africanist scholars, with new material being added each year. Although the collections are diverse, missionary and related materials account for about 70% of the total holdings, and missionary societies with an African connection are strongly represented.

Two missionary society archives are particularly prominent: the CWM (which includes the papers of the London Missionary Society), of particular interest to historians of Southern and Central Africa and Madagascar, and the Methodist Missionary Society, best known for its work in Southern Africa, but also very active in West Africa.

I do not expand on the various other archives related to Africa, be they archives from charities, businesses or political organizations (such as the Movement for Colonial Freedom) or political campaigners, for the simple reason that most of them are in English. This said, such archives are of course often interspersed with material in the languages of the countries and regions they are related to, such as for example the typescript of various speeches¹ given by Chief Mangosuthu Gatsha Buthelezi in Zulu between June 1970 and October 1976. Another example is the personal archive of Frederick William Migeod (1872–1952), a botanist who also collected language material in West Africa. Some of his notebooks dated 1901 include manuscript Hausa texts in Arabic script, transliterated and translated into English.

While it would be a worthwhile – albeit mammoth – project to finely index the African languages contained in these archives, we shall confine ourselves here to highlighting the collections specifically and consistently dedicated to the literary and/or linguistic study of African languages. Among those we can cite:

- The archive of the Heinemann African Writers' Series,² which comprises manuscripts, typescripts, and proof copies of fifty-nine books published in this distinguished series, including works by Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Stanlake Samkange.
- The archive of the International Committee on Christian Literature for Africa,³ founded in 1929, which forms part of the Conference of British Missionary Societies/International Missionary Council Archive.

¹ Shelfmarks MS 380143 and MS 361019.

² Various manuscript shelfmarks.

³ Shelfmark ICCLA (45 boxes).

- The papers of Dr Charles Granston Richards,⁴ which record his work with the East African Literature Bureau.
- John Allen's deposit,⁵ which includes tape recordings of literary performances by a number of East African writers, and reflects the library's important holdings of Swahili poetic manuscripts held by the University of Dar es Salaam.
- The fascinating and immensely valuable collection deposited by Jean Boyd,⁶ which contains materials relating to the nineteenth-century West African poet, Nana Asma'u (1793–1865). Among the papers are manuscript copies of poems by Asma'u in Fulfulde (Fula), Hausa, and Arabic, along with other materials on more recent women's organizations in northern Nigeria.
- The Hichens Collection,⁷ which includes the collected papers of William Hichens of the Kenya Administration. While based there, Hichens began collecting Swahili manuscripts, and he edited many of them. Hichens' interests included the history of the Swahili poetry. His collection of manuscripts, dating 1792–1943 (some undated), was gathered thanks to his collaboration with scholars like Sir Mbarak Ali Hinawy, Liwali of the Coast, Muhammad bin Abu Bakr Kijumwa of Lamu, and Alice Werner, herself a Swahili manuscripts collector.
- The Alice Werner Collection,⁸ which contains manuscripts on Swahili history and poetry, especially poems associated with the legendary Fumo Liyongo.
- Among the most recently deposited is the Yahya Ali Omar Collection,⁹ centred around the preservation of Swahili language and literature with emphasis on the Islamic character of its people and culture. His collection includes audio recordings of his reading of Swahili poems. Omar contributed significantly to the development of Swahili studies in Europe.¹⁰

Some dozen smaller collections relate to the work of Africanist linguists. The most important are the Malcolm Guthrie papers¹¹ on comparative Bantu; the W. H. Whiteley papers¹² also on comparative Bantu, but containing a substantial section on the socio-political aspects of the adoption of Swahili as a national language in Tanzania; the Archibald N. Tucker papers¹³ on East African languages; the Margaret Mackeson Green papers¹⁴ on the Igbo language; the Frederick William Parsons papers¹⁵ and the George Percival Bargery papers,¹⁶ both on Hausa; and the Jan Knappert Collection¹⁷ on Bantu languages.

⁴ Shelfmark PP MS 12.

⁵ Shelfmark PP MS 20.

⁶ Shelfmark PP MS 36.

⁷ Various manuscript shelfmarks.

⁸ Shelfmark MS 380393.

⁹ Various manuscript shelfmarks.

¹⁰ See SOAS University of London Library (2022).

¹¹ Shelfmark PP MS 27.

¹² Shelfmark PP MS 42.

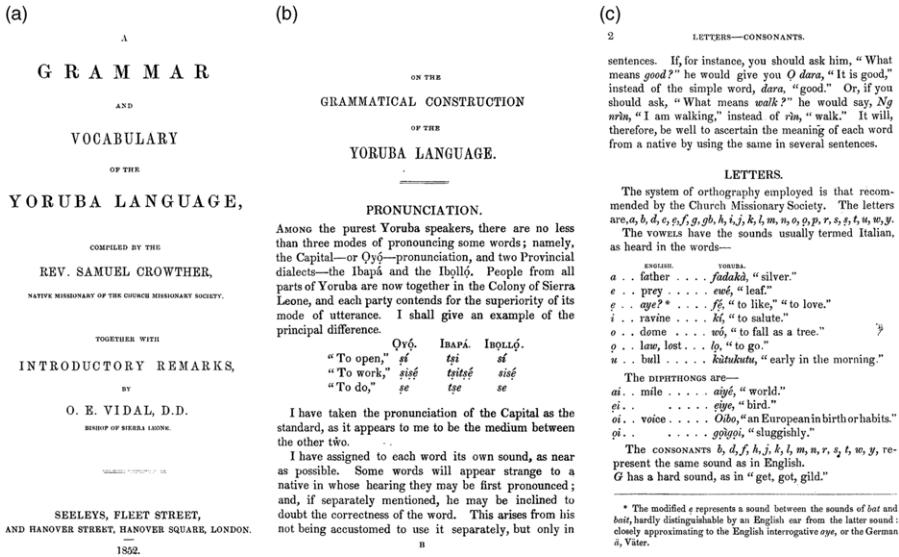
¹³ Shelfmark PP MS 43.

¹⁴ Shelfmark PP MS 15.

¹⁵ Shelfmark PP MS 50.

¹⁶ Shelfmark MS 380516.

¹⁷ Various manuscript shelfmarks.



Figures 1a, 1b, 1c. Crowther, Samuel (1852) *Grammar and Vocabulary of the Yoruba Language*. [London]: Church Missionary Society, 1852. EB85.252/20857. Courtesy of SOAS Library, Special Collections.

Africana rare books

In addition to the primary documents, more than 23,000 bound books have been deposited as parts of these archival collections, notably the substantial libraries attached to the London Missionary Society and the Methodist Missionary Society papers. These libraries contain rare sets of missionary pamphlets and other Christian literature, including many missionary society serials. They are particularly rich in material in African languages.

The Wesleyan Methodist Mission Press published hymns in various African languages, such as Fante (Fanti) hymns, published in Cape Coast Castle, Ghana, in 1890. We can also find, in the same Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society archive, the first Ila (Chiila) hymn book in the notebook entitled 'Ibuka Dia Inyimbo' by Edwin W. Smith, who carried on publishing in 1907 a *Handbook of the Ila Language*.

Also to be found in the SOAS Special Collections are the grammars and glossaries of the Yoruba and Igbo languages (see Figures 1a–c) compiled by Rev. Samuel Crowther, native missionary and first African bishop of the Church Missionary Society, who introduced the Romanized Yoruba orthography in the mid-nineteenth century. Until then, Yoruba had been written in Ajami (Arabic) script.

Beyond the missionaries' libraries, the SOAS Special Collections own a vast amount of early prints and rare books related to Africa. Four collections distinguish themselves in particular.

The Hardyman Collection (Figure 2), comprising about 2,800 books,¹⁸ was presented to SOAS Library in 1992 by the retired missionary, Rev. James Hardyman and his wife, Marjorie T. Hardyman. It includes publications in English,

¹⁸ Shelfmarks WYM and E WYM.



Figure 2. View of a shelf of the Hardyman Collection in the SOAS Special Collections' stores. Courtesy of SOAS Library, Special Collections.

French, Norwegian, Welsh and other European languages as well as a large number of works in the Malagasy language.

This represents the largest personal collection on Madagascar in existence and reflects Hardyman's life and work as a missionary in Madagascar, encompassing a fairly broad subject range: principally church and mission history in Madagascar, history, anthropology and Malagasy language. Smaller sections cover geography, geology, flora and fauna, law, music and hymnology, arts and crafts, medicine, numismatics and philately. Concurrently to this collection, the SOAS Special Collections hold James Hardyman's private papers¹⁹ containing his correspondence, manuscripts, research notes and photographs.

Another significant sub-collection is the Hausa Popular Fiction Collection,²⁰ comprising over 2,000 volumes of popular fiction written in Hausa and collected by SOAS Professor Graham Furniss. It was acquired by SOAS Library in 2008. The first 731 titles of this collection are indexed online on the Hausa Popular Literature Database. This collection provides us with an amazing aperçu of the ebullient contemporary history of book publishing and printing in Nigeria. A detailed description and history of this collection by Graham Furniss had been made available online as a background paper on the Hausa Popular Literature Project website (Furniss 2000; Wright 2018). Due to the vagaries of servers' maintenance, this resource is currently inaccessible, but access should hopefully be restored shortly.

¹⁹ Archived under shelfmark PP MS 63.

²⁰ Shelfmark E Coll 7.

The Onitsha Market Literature Collection,²¹ which consists of c. 140 Nigerian popular pamphlets from the 1960s, is another notable collection of popular literature published in Hausa.

Finally, the bequest of Cyril John Gadd (1893–1969), SOAS Emeritus Professor of Ancient Semitic Languages and Civilizations, includes some early printed Ethiopian works in Amharic, several adorned with the bookplate of Ras Tafari (afterwards Emperor Haile Selassie I).

African manuscripts

African manuscripts represent one of the four largest holdings of manuscripts in the SOAS Special Collections, together with the Middle Eastern, South Asian and South East Asian manuscripts collections. SOAS Library holds about 3,000 manuscripts in total, of which the African ones account for about 600.

There are nearly forty African languages represented in that collection from Amharic to Zulu. The largest collections are those in Swahili followed by Fula, Hausa and Ge'ez. The other African languages represented in the SOAS manuscript collections are Amharic; Bantu; Kiga; Chokwe; Igede; Fante; Fur; Ganda (luGanda); Gusii; Harari; Idoma; Igara (Igalá); Luo; Makonde; Makua (Makhua); Mambwe; Mandingo (Mandinka); Maasai; Mende; Nilamba; Nyanja (Chewa); Nyoro; Rungu (Lungu); Shilluk; Somali; Suk; Sukuma; Tswana (Setswana); Xhosa (isiXhosa); Yoruba and Zulu.

Swahili

SOAS archives house about 450 Swahili manuscripts held in eight separate collections named after those who collected them. These Swahili manuscripts originate from the Swahili coast and island archipelagos, in particular from Kilwa, Lamu, Mombasa, Pate, Siu and Zanzibar, regions that now comprise Kenya and Tanzania. Their dates range from 1790 to the late twentieth century.

The approximate dates of manuscripts in the Taylor Papers being 1810–1899; the Werner Collection 1906–1934; the Hichens Collection 1792–1943; the Allen Collection 1898–1977; the Whiteley Collection 1950–1969; the Knappert Collection 1929–1972; and the YA Omar Collection 1960–1973. These ranges represent the dates of the creation of manuscripts and in many instances, of course, differ from the dates when the contents of manuscripts were composed. (Omar and Drury 2002)

The earliest manuscripts were collected in nineteenth-century Mombasa by the scholar and member of the Church Missionary Society, William E. Taylor, and subsequently by scholars, editors and academics (John W. T. Allen, William Hichens, Jan Knappert, Alice Werner, Wilfred H. Whiteley and Sheikh Yahya Ali Omar). The latter collection holds a particular symbolic value, as it is the only one within the SOAS Swahili holdings to have been collected and named after an East African scholar.

²¹ Shelfmark E Coll 5.

Sheikh Yahya Ali Omar was a Swahili scholar from Mombasa, but based in the UK from the 1970s to his death in 2008. He was known as a ‘walking encyclopedia’ because of his knowledge of Swahili language, Swahili Islamic literature and history, and having the rare expertise to read the Arabic scripts of the northern Swahili dialects. (Baschiera 2005)

SOAS Library acquired its first Swahili manuscript in 1920 and has continued to acquire manuscripts whenever possible since then. Many of the manuscripts in the collection are written in Arabic script and many contain Islamic and secular poetry composed in northern Swahili dialects, including transcribed oral literature.

One fine example of such poetry is the manuscript copy of *Al-Inkishafi* poem (*utenzi*). This seventy-nine-stanza-long poem, translated as *The Soul’s Awakening* by Hitchens in 1972, is attributed to Sayyid ibn ‘Alī ibn Nāṣir, who is thought to have composed it in the Lamu Archipelago on the northern Kenyan coast between 1810 and 1820 AD (Figure 3). The author was the great grandson of Sheikh Abubakar bin Salim, mentioned in a version of the Pate Chronicle as a Sharif (descendant of the Prophet) from Arabia. This copy of *Al-Inkishafi* was possibly written in Ajami (African language in Arabic script) by Muhammad Abubakar Kijuma ‘lBakarriyyi in 1930 and collected by Hitchens.²²

The collection also includes letters, stories, notes, essays on history and culture, linguistic material about the Swahili language, chronicles and historical documents as well as drafts of published and unpublished books. The majority of SOAS Swahili manuscripts have been catalogued and details of the holdings are available through an electronic Swahili manuscripts database created as part of a thirty-one-month Leverhulme-funded project in 2004, now mounted on the SOAS Digital Library portal.

Those Swahili manuscripts were microfilmed by Adam Matthews Publications and a digital guide to those collections is also available on their website.²³

Arabic and Ajami

Many of SOAS African manuscripts are in Ajami but some are in Arabic, such as the exemplars of the *Dalā’il al-Khayrāt*, the famous and much revered *Proofs of Good Deeds*, a devotional book of prayers upon the Prophet. Their place of origin has often to be determined, albeit most of SOAS exemplars seem to come either from Nigeria or North Africa. Figure 4 shows a recently donated manuscript exemplar of the *Dalā’il al-Khayrāt* in a blend of Arabic and Ajami languages including Hausa and Fula, originating from the traditional Bauchi Emirate in northeast Nigeria.

Hausa

SOAS holds about eighty Hausa manuscripts, most of them in Ajami (Arabic script).

Many of those poems are of religious nature, such as the anonymous nineteenth-century Hausa poem entitled *Lament on the Death of Malum Abdu* (Figure 5). This three-folio-long poem is part of an eighty-eight-folio-long manuscript regrouping nine other works in Hausa.²⁴

²² See also Kithaka wa Mberia (2015).

²³ See Adam Matthews Publications (2023).

²⁴ Shelfmark MS 380271.

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ وَنَا
 لِسْمِ اللَّهِ تَأْفِئِدِيْم ۵ خَالِكُكَ هُنَّ أَنْظَم
 نَا الرَّحْمَنُ كِ اِرْسِيْم ۵ بِاسِ الرَّحْمِيْم نِيْم اِكَاي
 نَتَك جِد نِيْتَعْلَاي ۵ الْمُدْرَسُ سُو لِيْر
 اَكْبَ حَمْدُ اِبْتَسَلِيْر ۵ كِيْكَرُ اِلَا اِسِي رِي
 نِيْم اِسُوْنِيْم اِنُو نِيْتَعْلَاي
 اِكِيْن جَمَلُ كِتَابِي ۵ اِكْتِيْفَا ۵ كَمَسْرَا
 صَلِّ وَسَلَامٌ يَا اَزِيْر ۵ نِيْم ۵ مُحَمَّدٌ مُصَابِي
 تَقْدِيْرُ اُوْر
 نَا اَلرَّحْمَنُ نِيْمُ كِنَان ۵ نِيْمِيْمُ وَاِنِ وِي مَايْن
 نِيْمِيْمُ وَاِنِ اَجْمَعِيْن ۵ صَلِي نِيْوَارِي رُو اِلِي
 اَللّٰهُمَّ رَسِيْمِيْمُ حَاج ۵ مُصَلِي يَم اِل كُوْج
 تُوْجِيْدِيْم اِل وَاِنِ ۵ اَلشَّمْسِيْمُ نِيْمِيْمُ
 كِيْمَا اَل كِيْمُ كِيْمُ ۵ جِيْرُ نِيْمُ اَل كِيْمُ
 نِيْمُ اَل كِيْمُ ۵ اِيْمُ نِيْمُ اَل كِيْمُ
 مَقْصِدِيْمُ نِيْمُ اَل كِيْمُ ۵ اَل كِيْمُ
 مَقْصِدِيْمُ نِيْمُ اَل كِيْمُ ۵ اَل كِيْمُ
 نِيْمُ اَل كِيْمُ ۵ اَل كِيْمُ ۵ اَل كِيْمُ

Figure 3. ‘Abdallah ibn ‘Ali ibn Nāšir (1930) *Al-Inkishafi* Poem (*utenzi*) (The Soul’s Awakening). In Swahili. MS 47770a. Courtesy of SOAS Library, Special Collections.

Others are autographs from Nana Asma’u, a princess and multilingual writer, and altogether a striking figure of the nineteenth-century Sokoto Empire. SOAS holds a few of her manuscripts in Hausa in the Jane Boyd Archives.²⁵

Boyd’s research has focused on the compilation, translation and contextual annotation of the works of the Nigerian woman poet Nana Asma’u. Nana

²⁵ Shelfmark PP MS 36.



Figure 4. Anonymous (eighteenth century) *Dalā'il al-Khayrāt*. Bauchi, Nigeria. In Arabic and Hausa. MS 380454. Courtesy of SOAS Library, Special Collections.

Asma'u (1793–1865), was the daughter of Usman (Shehu) dan Fodio (1754–1817), a Fulani and Muslim, who began a holy war to reform the practice of Islam in northern Nigeria, conquering the Hausa city-states. In 1817 his son, Muhammad Bello (d 1837), established a state centred at Sokoto. Under these two rulers Muslim culture and trade flourished. Sokoto controlled most of northern Nigeria until British forces under Frederick Lugard began to conquer the area, taking Sokoto in 1903. Nana Asma'u's poems, 65 in number, constitute an important literary legacy of this period. She wrote in Arabic for formal pieces, Hausa for didactic verse, and Fulfulde when addressing her contemporaries within the ruling circle. (SOAS Archives 1992)

A Hausa-specialist cataloguer was hired in 2021 to create and enrich the records of Hausa manuscripts with cataloguing in original script, along a description and cataloguing grid that I developed from the tags used in the TEI Schema for describing Arabic-script manuscripts in the database Fihrist: The UK Union Catalogue of Manuscripts from the Islamicate World,²⁶ enriched with the descriptive elements developed by the research unit, Ajami Lab (Ajami Lab 2023), in their cataloguing project of West African manuscripts.

This grid includes the 'usual' intellectual, palaeographical and codicological elements of manuscripts description, but was enlarged to include some specificities of African Ajami manuscripts. It records, for example, any multiple script situations; the

²⁶ Fihrist: The UK Union Catalogue of Manuscripts from the Islamicate World, <https://www.fihrist.org.uk>, accessed 18 July 2023.



Figure 5. Anonymous (nineteenth century) Lament on the Death of Malum Abdu. In Hausa. MS 380271/04. Courtesy of SOAS Library, Special Collections.

position of the Ajami text within the corpus (forming the main body of the text, in the margins or between the lines of the main text); the proportion of Ajami text in relation to the main text (often in Arabic); the type of commentary in Ajami such as: individual words (كلمة); a short group of words (verbal group, or nominal group (بضعة كلمات)); a sentence/statement/proposition (جملة واحدة) or a sequence of sentences/several sentences (سلسلة جمل); or, if relevant and available, the textual relationship of those Ajami texts to others (presence of other extant manuscripts, commentary, recension, supplement, etc.).

Many of those Hausa manuscripts were left unidentified and not properly described due to the lack of linguistic skills. This project should make them more visible, more accessible and also more adequately described for the purpose of scientific research. It has however also highlighted a number of challenges, such as the lack of international standards for transliteration of Ajami languages.

Ge'ez

In medieval times, Ge'ez was part of a vast, multilingual network of religious and scholarly exchanges in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East, together with Syriac, Coptic, Greek and Arabic. Today, Ge'ez is used mainly as a liturgical language.

SOAS Library holds an Ethiopic manuscript²⁷ featuring the *Mazmura Dāwit* (Psalms of David) and the *Wəddāse Māryām* (Praises of Mary), which are devotional texts learned and memorized in traditional Ethiopian Church schools.

Figures 6a and 6b show pages of a seventeenth-century composite manuscript in Ge'ez, including a variety of religious texts, passages from Scripture and the Ethiopian calendar known as the *Book of Abu Shaker*, originally written in Arabic by a thirteenth-century Coptic deacon.

It preserves much otherwise unknown information on the Alexandrian Jewish and Christian ecclesiastical calendars of the 3rd and 4th centuries CE. It gives intervals between the events of sacred history from the Creation on, and dates events in the life of Christ according to various calendars. In Ethiopia it is known also as Bahra Hassab ('The Sea of Reckoning'), and is considered extremely difficult to master. A genealogy of Ethiopian kings included in this manuscript states that it was written in the 31st year of King Fasiledas' reign (1663 CE). (SOAS Archives 2017)

Old Kanembu

SOAS Digital Portal also holds digital surrogates of manuscripts that SOAS helped to digitize but does not physically host, such as manuscripts from Nigeria in Old Kanembu, an archaic variety of Kanuri-Kanembu.

Ancient manuscripts written in local languages are very rare in sub-Saharan Africa. However, in the late 1950s, sixteenth and seventeenth-century copies of the Qur'an were discovered in northern Nigeria, written in Arabic, with commentaries in Old Kanembu. These all tell tales of intense linguistic-cultural migration, exchange, assimilation and integration in the Lake Chad Basin and provide us with a rare insight in archaic African languages (Bondarev 2006).

Among such Borno Qur'anic copies with Old Kanembu commentaries feature the following three manuscripts cited here for their particularly striking visual features. Their digitized images, as well as more information about them, can be found on the SOAS digital library platform.

1. The *Yerima Mustafa Qur'an* or *Geidam Quran* comprises a considerable number of archaic Kanembu glosses and as such the manuscript has been the primary source of linguistic analysis of Old Kanembu. Glosses in Old Kanembu are usually positioned interlineally, parallel to the main text. They are typically written above the corresponding Qur'anic text, but not necessarily aligned with it. This manuscript belongs to Yerima Mustafa Mukhtar, the current Waziri of Borno.

²⁷ Shelfmark MS 44494.

(a)



(b)



Figures 6a, 6b. Anonymous (seventeenth century) Scripture and *Book of Abu Shaker*. In Ge'ez. MS 41383. Courtesy of SOAS Library, Special Collections.

2. The *Malam Muhammadu Qur'an* has been in the possession of the family of Alhaji Abdullahi Umar, the Wazir of Gwandu, a traditional Hausa-speaking emirate in north-east Nigeria. It is incomplete and in poor condition, perhaps on account of its many travels. Each page contains many Old Kanembu glosses. The Arabic commentaries on the Qur'anic text are extensive and taken from various *tafsir* (Qur'anic commentaries) books.

3. The *Konduga Qur'an* is presumed to have been written in the Borno Sultanate in the eighteenth century. It is now owned by an Islamic scholarly family in Konduga, North-East Nigeria. The manuscript has many quotations from various Arabic commentaries in different hands in brown and black ink. Old Kanembu annotations are mostly written interlineally in an ink brighter than the main Qur'an text. This exemplar also contains particularly interesting and colourful irregular geometric *sura* headings and medallions.

Searching for and accessing African language material in SOAS Library Special Collections

As a National Research Library, SOAS Library provides access to its research collections to the public: anyone is welcome to visit and access its Special Collections. Before the Covid-19 pandemic enforced various restrictions on physical on-site access in 2020, its Special Collections were attracting more than 3,000 visitors each year from all over the world. Remote access has taken on heightened importance and people can interact with our materials at distance in various ways, including our online catalogues and digital platforms.

The main Library Catalogue is the primary discovery tool for all published materials including rare books, special collections of printed works and theses. Catalogue records for archives are now also available on this catalogue.

If you are searching across a range of source materials you might want to start here, and perhaps then apply filters if you want to narrow your search to archives only. If you are interested specifically in archives you may wish to use the separate Archive Catalogue.

Printed catalogues, hand-lists, and the Online Card Catalogue are the main options for finding a large proportion of the manuscripts and some of the rare books at SOAS Library. Some of these printed catalogues and hand-lists have been digitized and can be consulted remotely on SOAS Digital Collections portal. Further information on SOAS Library collections have also been gathered in various subject guides freely available online.²⁸

Over a third of SOAS manuscripts (1,000+), specifically those in Arabic script (all the Arabic, Persian, Ottoman Turkish, but also some Swahili and Hausa manuscripts), are discoverable in the Fihrist online catalogue. The SOAS entries in Fihrist are also accessible through the SOAS Library Catalogue.

The SOAS Digital Collections portal has almost a million pages digitized so far. This represents, however, only a very small fraction of the Special Collections holdings. The digital collections are searchable and can also be browsed by disciplines, geographic areas, languages, format (archives, newspapers ...). The full records include zoomable images that in most cases can be downloaded into PDF format whenever their copyright status allows it.

²⁸ See SOAS University of London Library (n.d.a; n.d.b; n.d.c).

Challenges and ways forward

Mention of the descriptive cataloguing of African manuscripts naturally leads us to the thorny issue of the norms and standards of description and cataloguing of documents (print and manuscript) in non-Latin scripts. Those are in various state of development depending on the language, script and support concerned. While the cataloguing and description of Arabic manuscripts, for example, has progressed in leaps and bounds these last decades, resulting in the development of huge national databases with an international orientation (such as Fihrist in the UK, or Qalamos²⁹ in Germany), this is not yet the case for all non-Latin script manuscripts.

Another hurdle in the way of the cataloguing of these works in non-Latin script is the lack of international norms for their transliteration. Works in Ge'ez script for example do not yet benefit from any standard transliteration into the Latin alphabet. The lack of transliteration norms however may well be compensated in the future with the systematic direct cataloguing in the original script since many non-Latin scripts have their own Unicode block. This cataloguing in original script, however, relies heavily on library systems' compliance and, of course, on the linguistic abilities of the cataloguers.

For African Ajami languages and scripts, while great progress has been made towards trying to establish standards of transliteration, especially under the spur of cooperative projects between African and European research units such as the Ajami Lab, norms of manuscripts description have not yet been established, impeding the discovery and sharing of the large amount of locally digitized collections.

The digitization of these manuscripts, albeit a monumental task which goes a long way in the preservation of this cultural heritage, is only a first and very limited step in making those items truly accessible and usable in a scientific way. The proper description and cataloguing of these manuscripts entail varied resources such as specialist linguistic skills and subject knowledge, and the financial patronage to provide those. We can only hope that the current various decolonization efforts across Global North libraries might stimulate more research funding in that direction, and for libraries in the Global South to prioritize such cultural projects.

Two other important tasks that would enable us to gauge the true proportion of the material in African languages in the SOAS Library Special Collections would be, on the one hand, to fine-comb the archives relating to Africa in order to identify and catalogue all the material in African languages they contain and, on the other hand, to introduce more rigorous codification of the languages represented in those archives and special collections.

Conclusion

This short article does not claim to establish an exhaustive reference list of SOAS holdings, nor represent the richness and diversity of material relating to Africa in the SOAS Special Collections, even when restricting ourselves to material exclusively in African languages. Rather, this sneak view is aimed at triggering readers' curiosity and appetite to discover for themselves this material in the SOAS Library Special Collections, whether on-site or online.

²⁹ <https://www.qalamos.net/>

As more material is being catalogued and digitized every day in a bid to decolonize those collections by making them as accessible as possible,³⁰ they are catching the eye of various new research projects' stakeholders across the globe and the SOAS Special Collections are keen to foster such cooperation with researchers worldwide and support their scientific endeavours.

Acknowledgments. I owe a huge debt of gratitude to my former colleague of many years, Dawn Wright, the librarian currently in charge of the Africa Collections at SOAS Library and a long-term member of SCOLMA – UK Libraries and Archives Group on Africa. We were due to present together at the 2021 SCOLMA conference but could not, following unforeseen circumstances. This resulted in this 'truncated' version focusing only on the Special Collections. Dawn Wright has been managing and developing the incredibly rich SOAS Main Library collections for Africa for many years and her range of expertise extends also to the rare works kept in the Special Collections. Her work and our continued collaboration have provided the sound basis on which I could expand my own curatorial explorations of the SOAS African rare books and manuscripts. Any errors or misrepresentations of the collections she manages are only mine to bear.

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Cite this article: Akhoun-Schwarb, D. (2023). 'Africa and African languages in the SOAS Library's Special Collections'. *Africa Bibliography, Research and Documentation* 2, 32–49. <https://doi.org/10.1017/abd.2023.12>