

# THE MAKING, PRESERVATION AND STUDY OF SOUTH AFRICAN *AJAMI* MSS AND TEXTS

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## *Introduction*

South Africa has for geo-political reasons generally been regarded as a strategic half-way station between Europe and Asia. However, South Africa also became a half-way station where diverse cultures met and gave rise to a fairly rich and dynamic cultural basin for the indigenous and immigrants over the centuries. It moreover provided a platform for the use of various languages as well as for the emergence of the Afrikaans language. In addition to this, offspring of slave immigrants from the east creatively employed the Arabic script to preserve their religious tradition and heritage. Indeed, it is this innovative spirit which led to the production of a fair number of unique South African *ajami*<sup>1</sup> manuscripts and texts; some of which are extant, others have been ruined because measures were not taken by their owners and possessors to look after them, and many others disappeared because their value and importance was overlooked.

These extant manuscripts and texts need to be preserved because they act as clear proof regarding the production of (religious) knowledge in South Africa particularly at the Cape during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Preserving them will also help to provide answers to questions pertaining to the religio-cultural development of the

1 The term *ajami* has been used to denote a 'foreign' manuscript. It is a term which has also been elsewhere in the Muslim world to refer to mss found in Arabic script in a language other than Arabic.

community. And they will also highlight and provide additional information with regard to the development of the Afrikaans language. There is a desperate need for scholars from Africa, Southwest Asia and Southeast Asia to put their minds together in a joint effort to uncover the rich South Africa heritage and, at the same time, shed more light on the flexibility of the Arabic script and language.

This article will address the current status of the South African *ajami* mss and texts. In the process of doing that, the contributions of three prominent scholars in this regard will be assessed. Thereafter we will look closer at the chronological order, authors, and themes. And in order to reflect upon the relevance in preserving and studying all the extant material, a case study of one or two of the manuscripts will be undertaken.

### *Scholarly contributions: An assessment*

Although not many scholars have researched the evolution of the early Muslim community in South Africa, the works of, amongst others, Rochlin, Jefferies, Du Plessies and Shell have given invaluable input in this regard.<sup>2</sup> However, when assessing the South African *ajami* mss and texts, it will be helpful to refer to the writings of, at least, three important twentieth-century scholars. The three names that come to mind when looking at this area, are Adriaanus van Selms, Hans Kähler and Achmat Davids. These three scholars have, as will be seen, made very useful studies of some of the mss, in published articles and books.

But before their contributions are assessed, it is necessary to take a detour and raise some important theoretical questions. For example, 'How important are manuscripts?' and 'In what way can scholarship effectively contribute

2 All these scholars' contributions have been listed in Haron, *Muslims in South Africa: An Annotated Bibliography*, Cape Town: South African Library 1997.

towards the production of knowledge?’ Manuscripts are important because they contain ideas of scholars who have seriously pondered over their subject matter but did not have the opportunity of making them readily available to students or readers. They are important in that they lock away aspects of the past which can shed light on the present and future. And because of this it is important to scrutinize their authenticity, their relevance, and their content to assess in which way they might shed new light on a subject matter. In fact, George Saliba convincingly argues that Arabic manuscripts played a crucial role in Renaissance science when he wrote on the ‘Rethinking of Modern Science: Arabic manuscripts in European libraries’.<sup>3</sup> His argument may be applicable to the South African context with regards to the evolution of Afrikaans as a language, although the manuscripts here are not scientific but religious manuscripts. Bearing this in mind, let us move to the scholars whose contributions brought about radical changes to the perceptions communities had of Afrikaans in particular and literature in general.

*Van Selms: The pioneering academic*

Adriaanus van Selms, a Dutch scholar, settled in South Africa in the late 1940s, and went to lecture in Semitic Studies at both the Universities of Pretoria and of South Africa. As a semitist he was in a unique position make a study of the South African *ajami* mss. The first of these few valuable studies appeared in 1951 when he published *Arabic Afrikaans Studies I: 'n Tweekalige Kategismus* in Amsterdam; this study concentrated on Shaykh Ahmed Behardien’s *Kitāb al-tawḥīd*. Thereafter, in 1953, he wrote an article entitled ‘Die oudste boek in Afrikaans: Isjmoeni se “Betroubare Woord”’ which appeared in *Hertzog Annale II van die SA Akademie* (no. 3),

3 This was a lecture published by the Center of Arabic Studies at Georgetown University. It appeared as part of the Occasional Paper series 1999 (36 pp).

and he identifies in the same journal in 1956 ‘n Arabiese Grammatika in Afrikaans’. The former article identified *al-Qawl al-matīn* as the oldest text written in the Arabic script and also in the Afrikaans language, and the latter focused on Shaykh Isma’il Hanief’s two-volume work on Arabic Grammar in Afrikaans. However, by 1979—almost two decades after he supervised Mia Brandel-Syrier’s thesis which focused on Abu Bakr Effendi’s *Bayān al-Dīn* (and which was subsequently turned into a book)—he did a transcription and translation of Abu Bakr Effendi’s work entitled *Abu Bakr se ‘uiteensetting van die Godsdienste’: ’n Arabies Afrikaans teks in die jaar 1890*; this was also published in Amsterdam. This particular study of his led Ponelis to review Van Selms’ work. In addition to these works, Van Selms also penned academic material which concentrated on issues relevant to Semitic studies.

*Hans Kähler: The diligent researcher*

In the 1960s and early 1970s the German scholar Hans Kähler was actively researching the contribution of South Africa’s Cape Malay community. However, in order to do a successful effort he was forced to scrutinize the *ajami* literary movement which came to be known as the Arabic-Afrikaans literary movement or Die Maleier-Afrikaans Taalbeweging.<sup>4</sup> In 1960 he wrote ‘Ein rezentes Werk der arabisch-afrikaanse Literature der Kap-Malaien’ in *Afrika und Übersee* (xliv), and in 1961, ‘Studien zur Arabisch-Afrikaanse Literatur’ in *Der Islam* (xxxvi). The first scrutinizes Shaykh Ahmed Behardien’s ‘Thur after Jumu’a issue’, and the second studies the literature prepared by Abu Bakr Effendi and Shaykh Ahmed Behardien respectively. In 1971 he published in Berlin the valuable work entitled: *Studien über die Kultur, die*

4 Muller penned an article with this title because he felt that it was more appropriate and meaningful since the Malays engineered the use of the Arabic script. See his article in *Tydskrif vir Volkskunde en Volkstaal*, xviii, 1, 6, January 1962.

*Sprache und die arabisch-afrikaanse Literatur der Kap-Malaien.*<sup>5</sup> This monograph provides insights into the history of the Cape Malays, their practices and interpretations of Islam and the books which they used and the extant Arabic-Afrikaans manuscripts which were circulating amongst them. He also covered their literature which covered religious topics which appeared in the Latin script. By 1976 he published an article 'Die Literatur der Kap-Malaien' in *Handbuch der Orientalistik* (iii, 1); the article listed manuscripts such as *Sayr al-sālikīn* which were brought from Mecca by some pilgrims.

*Achmat Davids: The guru of 'Islamic studies' research*

Davids<sup>6</sup> has been researching Muslim culture at the Cape since the late 1960s, a time when Van Selms and Kähler had already been making their academic contributions. At that point in time he was busy as a social worker committed to serving the community. After much research he produced the famous work entitled *The Mosques of the Bo-Kaap* in 1980. In this work he refers to the Arabic-Afrikaans Literature but does not provide any detailed study of it, he only refers to the texts of Van Selms. This was followed by *A History of the Tana Baru* which reflected more on religio-cultural issues. However, in 1988 Dr Weiss raised a critical question pertaining to the authenticity of *al-Qawl al-matīn*, and Davids decided to respond to it in 1989. Both articles appeared in the

5 Berlin: Reimer 1971.

6 Read the obituary by Robert C.-H. Shell and Shamiel Jeppie in the 1999 issue of the University of Western Cape Institute of Historical Research's journal *Kronos: A Journal of Cape History* as well as that of Jeppie in the 1998/9 issue of the University of Cape Town Centre for Contemporary Islam *Journal for Islamic Studies*. In addition to these, a special issue of *Boorhanul Islam Magazine* (xxxiii, 4, November 1998) was devoted to Achmat Davids' invaluable contribution. Haron also compiled a list of his writings; this list appeared in the 1998/9 issue of *Journal for Islamic Studies*.

then Rand Afrikaans University-based *Journal for Islamic Studies*.

It was in 1987 that he began to publish a series of articles pertaining to this topic. His article entitled 'Arabic-Afrikaans: A view of the written Afrikaans of the Cape Muslims during the 19th and early 20th centuries' appeared in the *South African Journal of Linguistics* (v, 1); this was followed in the same year by 'The role of Afrikaans in the history of the Cape Muslim Community' which appeared in H. du Plessis's *Afrikaans en Taalpolitiek*. It was, moreover, in 1990 that he contributed his seminal article entitled 'Words in the Cape slaves' Mode: A socio-historical linguistic study', this appeared in the *South African Journal of Linguistics* (viii, 1). This article formed part of his larger 1991 master's thesis at the University of Natal, *The Afrikaans of the Cape Muslim from 1815-1915: A Socio-Linguistic Study*. In the same year he also made a fine study in 'Abu Bakr Effendi: His creation of Afrikaans letter in Arabic Script' in *South African Journal of Linguistics* (ix, 1). The following year he penned 'Some Lexical Aspects of Cape Muslims Afrikaans' in *Lexicos* (ii), and this was followed in 1993 by 'The early Afrikaans publications and MSS in the Arabic Script', which was part of a compilation of articles in honour of Frank Bradlow edited by P. Wiestra and B. Warner. In 1994 he continued to expand on the development of Afrikaans by publishing 'The contribution of the slaves to the genesis of Afrikaans' and 'Afrikaans die product van akkulturasie', these appeared as chapters in *Taal en Identiteit* and *Afrikaans en Nederlands* edited by Olivier and A. Coetzee respectively, and in 1996 his "Laying the lie of the Boer" language: an alternative view of Afrikaans' appeared in the German edited *Matatu: Zeitschrift für afrikanische Kultur und Gesellschaft*.

*Ajami mss and texts: Intellectual knowledge in the making*

From the above-mentioned scholars' contributions it is quite evident that there are many mss and texts which are still extant and are circulating in the community. Kähler's study listed much of this material; however, Davids' research revealed that there were more than the list provided by Kähler. In spite of the efforts of these scholars to list them, there is as yet no list of the mss and texts. No concerted effort was made to collect, collate, and catalogue them; the main reason for this is that the community at large is oblivious of the importance of preserving these mss and texts. Therefore, it is not surprising to find them hidden away in cupboards of individuals without the proper care being taken to preserve them. Since this is still the problem, an effort should be undertaken to preserve them and thereafter scholars need to get together and study them.<sup>7</sup>

Before giving a brief chronological overview of the emergence of the literature under discussion, the genre has to be defined. In other parts of the world, this genre of literature came to be known as *ajami* texts. However, in South Africa the term 'Arabic-Afrikaans' was coined by scholars such as Van Selms because the Arabic script was used to convey religious texts in the Afrikaans language; a language which was at one stage described as creolised Dutch, from its parent language. Be that as it may, the term has been popularised by

7 This researcher made an effort in this regard by writing 'Towards a Catalogue of Islamic Manuscripts in South Africa with special reference to Melayu Mss at the Cape'. This appeared in Wan Ali (ed.), *Traditional Malay Writing*, Kuala Lumpur: National Library of Malaysia 1997, 243-63 [Chapter 10]. Subsequent to this publication, the National Library of Malaysia sent out one of their cataloguers, namely Hajji Munazzah, to catalogue the Melayu mss at the Cape; this appeared in her compilation *Katalog Manuskrip Melayu di Afrika Selatan*, Kuala Lumpur: Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia, Series no. 16, 1998 (91 pp). Also cf. Haron's review in *Manuscripta Orientalia*, vi, 3, September 2000, 71-2.

the current crop of scholars to such a degree that it would be difficult to replace it with the term *ajami*.

*Arabic-Afrikaans literature: A brief chronological survey*<sup>8</sup>

Arabic-Afrikaans literature refers to the use of Cape Dutch in the Arabic script, which has become the written language medium employed by the religiously educated Muslim leadership and at Muslim religious schools in Cape Town since the 1830s. The 74 extant Arabic-Afrikaans texts were written between 1856 and 1957. *Hidāyat al-Islām* is said to be the first text prepared in Arabic-Afrikaans in 1845. An extant manuscript, *Tuḥfat al-<sup>c</sup>awāmm*, which deals with the basic Islamic creed, was written by Imam Abdul-Kahhar ibn Abdul-Malik in 1868. However, from 1845 onwards a number of such texts in ms and lithographic form are extant. The most well-known text to have been prepared in the 1860s, later published in 1877 in Constantinople, is the *Bayān al-dīn*. It deals specifically with the Islamic creed and other related juristic issues pertaining to the Ḥanafī school of law.

In 1890 Imam ‘Abdullah ibn ‘Abderouf produced *Die Boek van Tougeed*, and in 1894 Hisham Ni’matullah Effendi prepared *Sirāj al-idāḥ*, which is a simple text on Islamic practices from the Ḥanafī perspective, as well as *Hādhā ‘ilm al-ḥāl li’l-ṣibyān* which emphasises the elementary aspects of the ritual prayer and the annual tax. In the same year Imam Abdur-Raqīb ibn Abdul-Kahhar published an Afrikaans version of *Safīnat al-najāt* written by Salim ibn Samir Al-Hadrami. The latter also printed lithographically his *Kitāb al-Riyāḍ al-badī<sup>c</sup>a fī uṣūl al-dīn wa-ba<sup>c</sup>ḍ furū<sup>c</sup> al-Sharī<sup>c</sup>a* in 1899; it deals with aspects of the Islamic creed, and issues pertaining to the ritual prayers and similar. This was followed in 1900 by the translation by Shaykh Abdur-Rahman ibn Muhammad Al-‘Iraqī—who wrote about 10 Arabic-Afrikaans texts between 1898 and 1913—of Shaykh Nurud-

8 Achmat Davids also has an entry on the same subject which will appear in one of the later volumes of *EI* (2).



Din's *Tuḥfat al-atfāl*, which is a simplified presentation of the pronunciation of the Arabic alphabet. In 1907 Imam 'Abdur-Rahman ibn Qasim Gamieldien prepared *Tartīb al-ṣalāt* and *Kitāb muṭāla'ā li-tadrīs talāmīdh madrasat Ḥabībiyya*; the latter focuses upon moral behaviour and the former on the ritual prayer. In 1909 Shaykh 'Abdullah Taha Gamieldien translated *Masā'il Abī Layth al-Samarqandī*,<sup>9</sup> a tenth-century Māturīdī text on creed. And in 1910 Shaykh al-'Iraqi wrote *Kitāb 'ilm al-farā'id* which deals with inheritance, marriage and the pilgrimage. *Kitāb al-qawl al-matīn fī umūr al-dīn*<sup>10</sup> attributed to Shaykh Aḥmad al-Ushmūnī was translated by Imam Abu Bakr ibn Abdullah 'Abdur-Rauf. In 1928 Shaykh Isma'il Hanief, who has prepared more than 18 texts in the Arabic-Afrikaans format, translated and published *al-Muqaddima al-Ḥadramiyyah* written by Shaykh 'Abd Allāh b. al-Shaykh 'Abd al-Raḥmān Bā Faḍl al-Ḥadramī in Cairo; it deals with ablution and other Islamic rituals. He also translated *Mawlūd al-Barzanjī*, a Sufi liturgy, in 1939.

#### *The authors and the subject-matter*

According to Kähler (*Studien über Kultur*, 189), there are about 20 individuals—some of them trained theologians—who wrote these religious texts. From amongst the list in Kähler's work, the names of Abdul Kahhar ibn Hajji Abdul Malik (early nineteenth century), Abd ur-Rahman ibn Muhammad Al-Iraqi (late twentieth century), Abu Bakr Effendi (late twentieth century), Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn

9 Cf. this researcher's study of this text, 'The Cape Town-Samarqand Connection—a study of a tenth century theological text' which was delivered at the 1997 International Congress of the Association North African and Asian Studies conference in Budapest; the paper will appear in one of the forthcoming *Arabic Studies in Budapest* volumes.

10 Cf. Van Selms' article which deals with the authenticity of the text, and thereafter read the articles of Weiss (*Journal for Islamic Studies*, 1988) and Davids (*idem*, 1989, cf. above) respectively which question its authenticity.

Baha ud-Din (mid-twentieth century), and Ismail ibn Muhammad Hanif (mid-twentieth century) loom large. Although the names of the latter two still circulate in the contemporary Muslim community, Abu Bakr Effendi's name stands out above them all for his unique contribution (see later 'case study'). Two of the authors, Effendi and Al-Iraqi, were trained theologians who hailed from the Middle East. Since attention will later be given to Effendi, a brief word about Al-Iraqi will be in order. Al-Iraqi, as his agnomen suggests, comes from Iraq and he settled in South Africa towards the late nineteenth century. After his arrival he became involved with community affairs to such an extent that he prepared a few religious texts for the community; among them is a commentary of chapter Yūsuf in the Qur'ān. This particular commentary was the subject of Kotze's postgraduate linguistic research in 1980.

Qur'ānic commentary was thus the subject matter of a few of the extant Cape mss. However, most of the themes focussed on the articles of faith and the principles of Islam, and the favourite topic was the concept of *tawḥīd*. Apart from these, there have been interesting texts such as the Arabic grammar which was written by Shaykh Isma'il Hanif (d. 1958) (cf. Van Selms, 'Die oudste boek'). This shaykh was trained at al-Azhar University in Cairo and wrote more than 20 texts in Arabic-Afrikaans; one of these was printed in Cairo.<sup>11</sup>

11 An interesting phenomena has been the printing of some of these writings in either Egypt or India. As mentioned, some of Hanif's works were printed in Cairo whilst other authors such as Kahhar preferred Bombay. Theologians in Gauteng also seemed to have preferred their connections in India to print some of their writings; a ten-volume work, for example, was published in India.

*Abu Bakr Effendi's contribution: a case study*<sup>12</sup>

Since mention has been made of the fact that Hanif's work was printed in Cairo, it should come as no surprise to learn that Abu Bakr Effendi's *Bayān al-dīn* was printed in Istanbul in 1877. Its publication there can be attributed to the fact that there was no printing press able to do the task at the Cape. This forced Effendi to have it done at the expense of the Ottoman Turkish government; the authority that had been instrumental for his journey to the Cape at the request of the British crown in the 1850s.

Abu Bakr Effendi is being used as a case study to reflect to what extent his contribution has enjoyed the attention of contemporary scholars with an interest in the area. His *Bayān al-dīn* has been the focus of a few research projects because of the contents which appeared in Arabic-Afrikaans, and the fact that he was an adherent of the Ḥanāfi school as opposed to the Shāfi'i school to which all other Muslims there belonged at that time. And since this was a sensitive religious issue it sparked off rigorous religious debates and concern that it would lead to further splits within the growing Muslim community. When a few copies of the text were circulated at the Cape to be used as a religious textbook, the Shāfi'is objected, and this led to a conflict which continued into the mid-twentieth century.<sup>13</sup>

12 Cf. Eric Germain's excellent article 'L'Afrique du Sud dans la politique panislamique de l'Empire ottoman', *Turcica: Revue d'études Turques: Peuples, Langues, Cultures, État*, xxi, 1999, 109-48. See pages 115-22 which specifically refers to Shaykh Abu Bakr Effendi.

13 At the turn of the century three questions were posed by a Muslim residing in Johannesburg to the Shaykh al-Azhar, *Shaykh Muḥammad °Abduh*; he thus gave his opinion which featured in a document referred to as the 'Transvaal Fatwa' (cf. Voll 1995); from amongst the three was a question whether a Shāfi'i could pray behind a Ḥanāfi in the ritual prayer. It could be that Ismail Kemal Bey was also commenting upon this *fatwā* in his article 'The Transvaal question from the Musalman point of view'; this appeared in *The Forthnightly Review*, cix, January 1901, 147-73.

The text was important to socio-linguists who needed to have some idea as to its historical position, and in which it contributed to the development of the Afrikaans language. Their interest was heightened because it was written by a Turk of Kurdish origin whose mother tongue was Turkish (and probably Kurdish) and not Dutch; they thus raised the questions as to how he managed, in a short period of time, to master the language and prepare a very useful religious text for the Cape Muslims.

Thus no scholar fails to mention his name and his important work. However, the first study of his work was done by Mia Brandel-Syrier. She published a translation into English and brief commentary in 1960.<sup>14</sup> Her translation assisted in understanding the text and its contribution to South African literature as a whole and Islamic literature in particular. Professor Adriaanus van Selms wrote the foreword to the book. However, van Selms produced his Afrikaans translation and transliteration of the work only in 1979! Almost 20 years after Brandel-Syrier's contribution; it may moreover be assumed that the text was probably in draft form for a number of years before Van Selms could have it published, and that he was directly involved in the supervision of Brandel-Syrier's work which was written for a postgraduate degree.

Subsequent to Brandel-Syrier's publication Kähler made a brief study of the text<sup>15</sup> which was, in turn, followed by Muller's positive comments in 1962 regarding the Malay-Afrikaans linguistic movement. By 1971 Kähler published his findings on Cape Malay culture in his book, in which he devoted a few pages to Abu Bakr Effendi's work; Kähler listed it as the first of its kind amongst this genre of literature.

14 *The religious duties of Islam as taught and explained by Abu Bakr Effendi. A translation from the original Arabic and Afrikaans*, ed. with an introduction and notes by Mia Brandel-Syrier, Leiden: E. J. Brill 1960.

15 Kähler, *Studien*.

Ten years after this, Ponelis chose to look at the vocalization and diphtong structure in the Arabic-Afrikaans language in Abu Bakr Effendi's work.<sup>16</sup> And in 1983 Kotze attempted to do a related study. About ten years after these contributions Achmat Davids produced his fine study on the Cape Muslims' contribution to the development of Afrikaans. A spin-off of his detailed study of Arabic-Afrikaans (which was for his Master's degree at the University of Natal), he wrote an exciting article on the use of the letter 'e' by Abu Bakr Effendi in his work; this article shed new light on the latter's unique contribution. Perhaps it needs to be pointed out that while there are a number of extant texts, an urgent effort has to be made to study these from various angles and this can only be done if Arab linguists with their counterparts in Africa can work in these neglected areas.

#### *Closing remarks*

The current status of mss and lithographic texts is such that there is an immediate need to collect, collate and catalogue them; an effort has been made, at least, to catalogue some of them by this researcher and a cataloguer attached to the National Library of Malaysia. However, these attempts are small and need the support of other scholars.

It is indeed in this area where scholars from Africa, Southwest and Southeast Asia can co-operate so that this intellectual and cultural heritage does not disappear or is lost. While much has been written about Arabic-Afrikaans mss, little or nothing has been mentioned about the Arabic mss that are still circulating among some individuals; here mention may be made of one lengthy ms on Islamic jurisprudence and theology which belongs to the Gamieldien collection. This particular beautifully handwritten ms has to be scrutinized, studied and eventually edited by comparing it to other extant

16 Ponelis, *op. cit* (1981).

texts from where it originated; in fact, many such studies have to be undertaken to help record the rich heritage of not only the South African Muslims but South African society at large. If this should take place it will also shed light on the transmission of knowledge from Southwest Asia to Southeast Asia to South Africa. Indeed a study of these intellectual contacts has to be made; however, it can only be done if there is closer co-operation of some sort among scholars from the Afro-Asian and European continents.