

**The Fourth Conference of The Islamic Manuscripts Association,
Cambridge, 6th-9th July 2008**

**Early Kanuri/Kanembu Ajami manuscripts:
creating and analysing a digital archive.**

Abstract

In 1958-59, A. D. H. Bivar, travelling in northern Nigeria, discovered four copies of the Qur'an, dating back to the sixteenth or eighteenth centuries, with the glosses in Old Kanuri/Kanembu (the language of Kanem-Borno - an ancient centre of Islam in Bilād al-Sūdān) and commentaries (tafsīr) in Arabic. This unique corpus of linguistic and historical data was not studied until 2005, when a 3-year AHRC interdisciplinary project was started at the School of Oriental and African Studies (<http://kanurimanuscripts.soas.ac.uk>).

In the course of a study of linguistic properties of the language of the Qur'anic glosses (LG), it was established that the form of the language used in the vernacular glosses was not contemporaneous with Kanuri/Kanembu as spoken at the time the manuscripts were created (i.e. between the 16th and 18th centuries), but rather reflected a much earlier variety, presumably Kanembu of the 14th-15th centuries. These extensive Ajami texts, with their fully developed system of writing in Arabic script, provide the earliest evidence for a Sub-Saharan language.

Apart from representing a unique corpus of archaic variety of Kanuri/Kanembu, the manuscripts also provide a valuable historical insight into the key role of Kanuri/Kanembu scholars in the early development of Islamic scholarship and religious traditions in the Kanem-Borno empire, historically one of the most extensive and powerful Islamic states in West Africa. The analysis of the Arabic tafsīr written in the margins of the manuscripts showed how rich the environment of the Qur'anic studies and learning in Kanem-Borno was. More than fifteen different tafsīrs have been identified in four Borno Qur'ans.

In the course of our fieldwork in 2005-07 the initial corpus of manuscripts with extensive archaic Kanembu glosses has been substantially increased from an initial 230 folios to more than 3,200 folios of Kanembu glosses, in an extra seven Qur'anic manuscripts, all of which are now available for study in digital form.

The paper will give a palaeographic description of the initial corpus (four manuscripts) and will discuss problems related to: a) digital photography in harsh environment, b) digital processing, c) editing, and d) analysis of the manuscripts. We will also touch upon a possibility of using highlight/shadow adjustments in Adobe Photoshop CS for the analysis of some physical characteristics of paper, such as chain-lines.

**Dmitry Bondarev, Abba Isa Tijani, Ahmad Al-Achtar
SOAS/AHRC**

