



The Interest of French Orientalists in the Manuscripts of the African Sahara

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Abstract:

French Orientalists were interested in manuscripts in the Sahara Desert, driven by scientific, political, and religious objectives. They focused on collecting, translating, editing, and publishing manuscripts.

Their work—such as Houdas and Delafosse's translations of important historical texts—contributed to enriching knowledge about the region. With the development of Orientalist studies, interest in editing and publishing manuscript heritage increased, from manuscript catalogs to the critical editions of legal and literary texts, thus contributing to the preservation and highlighting of the region's cultural heritage.

Keywords: Orientalists, manuscripts, Sahara Desert, Arab heritage, French Orientalism.

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The introduction

The Sahara, particularly its western regions, witnessed a remarkable interest from French Orientalists in its manuscripts, driven by a complex mix of religious, scientific, and political motives. While some sought to understand Islam for the purpose of proselytizing and spreading Christianity, others saw these manuscripts as a window into unknown cultures and a historical, literary, and scientific heritage worthy of study and documentation. This interest coincided with French colonial expansion in the region, which added a political dimension to the motivations of some Orientalists, as the study of local cultures was considered a tool for understanding and facilitating the administration of African societies. This article will examine examples of prominent French Orientalists who dedicated themselves to studying manuscripts in the Sahara, highlighting their motivations and most important contributions, while also addressing the impact of the colonial context on their work and scholarly output.

01- Definition of Orientalism

Linguistically:

The word "Orientalism" is derived from "East," and in European languages, it is derived from the Latin root "oriens" (east) or from the root "orientalis" (east). It means the direction of the sun and morning, the rising sun, and the east. Technically:

There are different definitions of Orientalism.

Broad meaning: This encompasses all Western studies of the East: its farthest reaches (China and Japan), its middle reaches (India and Iran), and its lower reaches (the Arab and Islamic world), including their languages, literature, civilizations, and religions.

Specific meaning: This is the meaning in which the term "Orientalism" is used in the Arab and Islamic world, referring to Western studies related to the Islamic East, including its languages, literature, history, beliefs, laws, and civilization. This meaning is common in the writings of Orientalists themselves.

Narrower meaning: This is limited to the study of Arab and Muslim civilization in Spain and Sicily during the Middle Ages.

2- Objectives of Orientalism: These are complex and intertwined, and vary among researchers. Historical periods. However, some of the main objectives can be summarized as follows:

Religious/Missionary: Spreading Christianity was one of the most important early motivations of Orientalism, and this objective remains, albeit less pronounced in the modern era for some Orientalists. This includes studying Islam with the aim of finding weaknesses in it and attacking it or warning of its "danger" to Christianity and its civilization, in addition to translating the Bible into Eastern languages.

Scientific/Educational: Some Orientalists sought to study the languages, literature, and civilizations of the East out of scientific curiosity, with the aim of expanding human knowledge and shedding light on the cultures of other peoples.

Commercial/Economic: Trade between the West and the East played a role in driving some Orientalists to study the languages, customs, history, and culture of the East in order to facilitate trade and discover new resources.

Political/Colonial: Orientalism was closely linked to Western colonialism in the East. It contributed to the formation of a stereotypical image of the "backward East" to justify colonial control, and it also contributed to training officials to administer the colonies and understand the culture and languages of the peoples under colonial rule.

Strategic/Military: Orientalism sometimes had military objectives, such as understanding the geography and nature of countries targeted for control.

Cultural/Literary: Some Orientalists were interested in studying and translating Eastern literature and poetry into European languages to introduce and disseminate it.

Personal: The objectives of Orientalism may also have personal motives, such as the desire for travel, adventure, and discovering new worlds, or personal ambition and the desire for fame and recognition.

It is important to differentiate between these objectives when studying and evaluating the works of Orientalists, as their motives vary from one researcher to another. What may be a scholarly objective for some may be a missionary or colonial one for others. Among the French Orientalists who were interested in manuscripts in the African Sahara, we mention the following:

1- Prominent Figures of French Orientalism in the African Sahara

Orientalists: They are researchers and scholars specializing in the study of the cultures, languages, history, literature, religions, and civilizations of the East, especially the Near, Middle, and Far East. The term "Orientalis," meaning "Eastern," is derived from the Latin word for "Eastern."

Historically, Orientalism has been associated with European colonial powers, and some Orientalists played a role in serving colonial projects. However, this cannot be generalized to all Orientalists; some have contributed positively to understanding and presenting Eastern cultures to the world through their objective academic studies and translations of literary, philosophical, and religious works.

The field of Orientalism encompasses diverse disciplines such as religious studies, anthropology, literature, archaeology, linguistics, history, and philosophy. There is ongoing debate about Orientalism and its role in shaping stereotypical images of the East, and some Orientalists are criticized for their bias and condescending view of Eastern cultures. It is important to distinguish between Orientalism as a research methodology and Orientalism as an ideology linked to colonialism. Orientalism as a research methodology—if applied objectively and impartially—can contribute to a deeper understanding and appreciation of Eastern cultures, including African cultures. Among the French Orientalists who were interested in studying, collecting, editing, translating, publishing, and writing about the history and culture of the Sahara, we find:

Maurice Delafosse (1870-1926). A French specialist in the history and languages of Africa, he contributed significantly to the study of the history and culture of West Africa, particularly the Mandinka people. His most notable work is his translation of "The History of the Fattash" with Octave Hudas, in addition to his studies on the history of Futa Toro and his editing of some local histories. He was interested in the study of African languages and contributed to the compilation of several dictionaries. Despite his colonial background, his works remain an important reference for researchers of West African history.

2. Octave Hudas: Through his research and translation of a number of important Arabic texts by a French Orientalist, he became famous in West Africa. Among his most important works are his joint translation with Maurice Delafosse of Abd al-Rahman al-Sa'di's "History of the Sudan" and his contribution to the translation of "The History of the Inquisitor." Hudas focused on the study of Islamic culture and history in West Africa, and his work contributed to shedding light on this region of the world.

French Orientalist: Louis Massignon (1883-1962) - A Catholic, he was famous for his profound studies of Islamic mysticism and Sufis, especially the figure of al-Hallaj. Massignon was interested in the spiritual dimension of Islam and focused on studying and interpreting Sufi texts. One of his most prominent works is his book "The Passion of al-Hallaj, Martyr of Islamic Mysticism." Massignon was deeply influenced by the figure of al-Hallaj; he even converted to Islam briefly, but returned to Catholicism. Despite this, his studies on Islamic mysticism remained highly valuable and influenced the West's understanding of the spiritual aspect of Islam. Massignon was also interested in interfaith dialogue and called for understanding and mutual respect between Muslims and Christians.

(François Clozel) (1860-1918) Colonel François Clozel was a French geographer and administrator. Clozel spent a large part of his career in West Africa, where he played an important role in French colonial expansion in the region. He was interested in the study of human geography and local cultures, and wrote reports and indexes on the resources, languages, and customs of West Africa. He is also known for his research on the Fouta Djallon tribes. His work contributed to documenting valuable information about the region, albeit from a colonial perspective.

(Vincent Monteil) (1913-2003) was a French Orientalist known for his studies on Islam in sub-Saharan Africa. His most famous book is "Black Islam" (L'Islam Noir), which is considered a seminal work in the study of African Islam. Monteil was interested in the social and political aspects of Islam in Africa; He focused on its influence on various African cultures; he also conducted studies on African languages and made contributions to the field of linguistics.

(Jean-Louis Triaud) 6- Jean-Louis Triaud

A French historian specializing in the history of West Africa, particularly Senegal. Triaud was interested in the study of Islam in the region and wrote works on jihad and Islamic movements. His most notable work is his critical edition of "Bayan ma waqa'a" by al-Hajj Umar al-Futi, an important historical source for understanding the history of West Africa in the 19th century. Triaud also published numerous articles and studies on various aspects of Senegalese history.

(Xavier Coppolani) (1866-1905) 7- Coppolani was a French officer and commissioner in Mauritania during the period of colonial expansion. He played a key role in subjugating the Mauritanian tribes to French rule, employing a diplomatic and military strategy to achieve this. Coppolani was assassinated in 1905 by a tribal leader resisting the French occupation.

An analysis of the writings of these Orientalists reveals a close overlap between colonial administration and academic research. Their interest in Saharan manuscripts manifested itself through four main axes:

3- Manifestations of Orientalist Interest in Saharan Manuscripts:

French Orientalists showed great interest in collecting manuscripts in the Sahara, particularly in West Africa. They considered these manuscripts an important source for understanding Islamic cultures and civilizations in Africa, and for studying the religious, linguistic, and literary sciences that flourished in the

region. They sought to understand the intellectual and social history of Muslim peoples in Africa and to decipher the manuscripts, which they considered invaluable treasures of knowledge.

1- Manuscript Collection:

The process of collecting manuscripts encompassed various parts of sub-Saharan Africa, including:

Attempts to identify Mauritanian manuscripts; In 1909, the French Orientalist Louis Massignon published an article titled "A Saharan Library," in which he inventoried the manuscripts of the library of Baba bin Sheikh Sidiya al-Abiri in Boutilimit. This library contained 512 manuscripts on various subjects of Arab-Islamic culture, excluding notebooks and letters.

This was followed by another attempt by the French administrator Paul Marty in 1916, within his book "Islam in the Land of the Moors," where he presented a list of the library of Sheikh Sidi Muhammad bin Sheikh Ahmad bin Sulayman al-Dimani. This library comprised 174 manuscripts out of a total of 240 books. In 1950, al-Mukhtar bin Hamden and Albert Larache published an article on the libraries of Chinguetti, which included an appendix containing a bibliographical inventory of Chinguetti manuscripts, focusing on their owners.

As for the library of al-Hajj Umar, it was confiscated by Colonel Archinard after the occupation of Ségou in 1890 and transferred to the National Library of France in Paris. After intermittent efforts to raise awareness of the library, a comprehensive inventory was completed between 1979 and 1982 and published in 1985 with the participation of an international team of researchers. This library comprises 518 collections weighing over half a ton and represents a significant source for the political, social, and economic history of 19th-century West Africa, covering a vast geographical area from Futa Toro to Hausaland.

The collection is distinguished by its richness in the writings and letters of Usman dan Fodio, his brother, and his son. It also includes the works of Sheikh Sidi al-Mukhtar al-Kabir and his son, pedagogical texts in the Fulani language, and writings by al-Hajj Umar himself. Some of the manuscripts in this library are considered unique copies, further enhancing its importance.

2. Translation, Critical Edition, and Publication of Saharan Manuscripts

The critical edition, translation, and publication of Saharan manuscripts are considered among the most important contributions of Orientalists to the study of the peoples of the region, due to the valuable information these manuscripts contain. For example, Octavian Hodus translated Al-Saadi's "History of the Sudan." This book by Sheikh Abd al-Rahman al-Saadi is considered one of the most important sources for the Islamic history of the Western Sudan region, covering a significant period during which the author himself lived (1004-1066 AH / 1596-1655 CE). Among the most prominent events discussed in the book and witnessed by al-Saadi are:

The period of Moroccan Pasha rule: Al-Saadi witnessed the period of Moroccan Pasha rule in Western Sudan after their conquest of the Songhai Empire. He chronicled some of these Pashas in his book, highlighting the conditions of the region during their rule.

The decline of the Songhai Empire: Al-Saadi documented the decline and fall of the Songhai Empire to the Moroccan invasion, providing important information about this pivotal period in the region's history. He also chronicled some of the Songhai sultans before the fall of their empire.

The rise of Islamic centers: Al-Saadi discussed the rise and flourishing of some Islamic cities; As a center of "Jeni" where the author lived and held the positions of judge and imam, this allowed him to see the reality of these flourishing scientific centers up close.

The book provides valuable information about the Tuareg and Fulani tribes active in the Western Sudan region during that period, contributing to a better understanding of the region's social and political dynamics. "The History of the Sudan" was first published in Paris between 1913 and 1914, edited by

Houdas and assisted by his student, Benoît. Houdas ensured the original text was published without any alterations. This followed a French translation of the book between 1898 and 1900. The Arabic edition comprises 333 pages and was reprinted in 1981.

Al-Saadi's work is considered a fundamental reference for the study of Western Sudan's history, particularly due to its detailed account of events he personally witnessed. The Orientalist Houdas's edition of the original text made this historical resource readily available to scholars and researchers. He also collaborated with Maurice Delafosse on the translation of "The History of the Fattash." The book "Tarikh al-Fattash" by Muhammad ibn Mahmud Ka'at (d. 1593 CE) is considered a primary source for the history of the Songhai Empire, covering its political, cultural, and social aspects. Its full title is "Tarikh al-Fattash fi Akhbar al-Buldan wa al-Juyush wa Akabir al-Nas" (History of the Searcher: On the News of Countries, Armies, and Notable People). It recounts events related to the Takrur, significant matters, and the distinction between the lineages of slaves and free people. Ka'at was born in Timbuktu in 1468 CE, received his early education there, and then traveled to Egypt where he studied at Al-Azhar University, before continuing on to the Hijaz. After returning to Timbuktu, he devoted himself to teaching; among his students was Sheikh Ahmad Baba al-Timbukti.

Ka'at lived during the reign of Askia Muhammad the Great and served as a judge in Timbuktu. "Tarikh al-Fattash" covers the history of the Songhai Empire beginning with Askia Muhammad the Great, and also addresses the city of Timbuktu, the Moroccan conquest, and the resulting changes. Some of Ka'at's descendants completed the account of the six years following his death in 1593.

The critical Arabic edition of "Tarikh al-Fattash" was published in 1913, comprising approximately 186 large-format pages. In the same year, a French translation of the book was published, containing 363 pages and including indexes not present in the Arabic version. The book was reprinted in 1964.

Given the book's importance as a source for the history of Songhai and other Islamic states, such as Mali, Orientalists studied it, and Houdas and Delafosse translated it into French.

"Tadhkirat al-Nisyan fi Akhbar Muluk al-Sudan" (A Memoir of Forgetfulness in the History of the Kings of Sudan) provides details about the Moroccan pashas who ruled Sudan after the fall of the Songhai Empire in 1590 CE. The book resembles a dictionary containing biographies of the pashas of Timbuktu from 1590 CE to 1750 CE, beginning with Pasha Jawdar, the commander of the Moroccan campaign.

The author of the book is unknown, but it is certain that he was a resident of Timbuktu and lived until 1751 CE. The book is sometimes attributed to the grandson of Prince Muhammad ibn Sudu (d. 1701 CE). It comprises 227 pages. The Orientalist Houdas relied on two manuscripts for his edition, highlighting the differences between them in the footnotes and providing French explanations of some vocabulary. The book includes biographies of 98 pashas, taking into account the duplication of some individuals holding the title of pasha; thus, the total number reaches 145.

The Orientalist Houdas translated the book "Tadhkirat al-Nisyan fi Akhbar Muluk al-Sudan" (A Memoir of Forgetfulness in the History of the Kings of the Sudan) into French and published it, along with the original Arabic text, in collaboration with Benoist in Paris twice: first in 1899 and again in 1901.

It is noteworthy that early Orientalists focused on history as a fundamental entry point for understanding Islamic culture in Africa.

In addition, Delafosse translated other local histories, particularly those concerning the Mandinka people, who formed a central focus of his studies. Among these was his translation of the history of Futa Toro, in collaboration with Houdas.

The Orientalists' focus on translating manuscripts indicates their interest in studying African Islamic heritage as a gateway to understanding Islamic culture in the region. It is also noteworthy that some

Orientalists, such as Delafosse, specialized in studying the history of specific ethnic groups, such as the Mandinka.

3. Authorship/Orientalist studies witnessed a remarkable development after European contact with the coasts of equatorial Africa in the fifteenth century, focusing on West Africa and the Zaire region. With the French army's entry into cities like Ségou and Timbuktu, the colonizers realized the importance of Islam as an influential factor, especially in leading revolts against colonialism, which prompted them to study it seriously.

Orientalist interest in Islam was rooted in the French context and closely linked to the colonial presence in predominantly Muslim West Africa. The French governor, William Ponty, saw the necessity of studying Islamic society in detail to serve colonial objectives. This prompted many colonial figures to study Islam and Muslims in the region. Examples include Louis Reyn in Algeria, Coppolani on Sufism, Creyer in Senegambia, and Arnold on Islamic politics. The role of Orientalists was not limited to translation; they also encouraged original writing, commissioning scholars to produce works on the history and culture of the region. Among the most prominent of these works is "Flowers of the Gardens" by Musa Kamara, which Delafosse praised for its importance. The works of Paul Marty and Vincent Monteil also contributed to providing information about Islam in West Africa, despite their colonial bias.

The role of French administrators and military personnel in this field was also prominent, including François Clauzel, Delafosse, Prévier, and Paul Marty, whose writings, according to Bangoura, helped shape the French perspective on Islam in Africa. Governor Faïdherbe also conducted anthropological research in Senegambia, compiling extensive information on Wolof history in his book "The Colony of Senegal." However, the Faïdherbe school did not pay much attention to written Islamic knowledge, focusing instead on the study of popular culture.

With the renewed interest in Islamic culture in the traditional sense, there emerged a renewed interest in manuscript heritage, manifested in the creation of manuscript catalogs, such as John Ohnwick's "African Arabic Literature." Scholarly institutions, such as the African Classical Society, continue their efforts to collect and publish this heritage. Notable contributions in this field include Alpha Ibrahim Sow's work on Fulani heritage, his "Encyclopedia of Arabic Manuscripts in Mauritania," and Jean-Louis Triaud's edition of "Bayan ma waqa'a" by al-Hajj Umar al-Futi.

Conclusion:

It is clear that the interest of French Orientalists in manuscripts in the African Sahara was a complex phenomenon, intertwined with religious, scientific, and political motives. Through their exploratory journeys and linguistic and historical studies, these scholars contributed to unveiling a rich cultural heritage and enriching the world's libraries with translations and critical editions of rare manuscripts. However, the influence of the colonial context on their work cannot be ignored, as their condescending perspective was sometimes reflected in their analyses and interpretations. Despite these reservations, their efforts in collecting and studying African manuscripts remain an important resource for researchers and contribute to understanding Islamic history and culture in Africa. Our duty today is to continue objective scientific research, free from any preconceived notions, while benefiting from the positive aspects of the Orientalist legacy and critiquing its negative aspects. Despite their reservations, French Orientalists contributed to enriching knowledge of the cultural and Islamic heritage of the African Sahara through the collection, study, and publication of manuscripts.

Their interest in various aspects of African culture—from languages and history to sciences and religion—led to the emergence of specialized studies in these fields.

Their work contributed to documenting African languages and cultures that were threatened with extinction through the creation of dictionaries and linguistic studies.

Due to its connection to the colonial context, French Orientalism contributed to the formation of a sometimes distorted stereotype of Africa and its peoples, as some of its works promoted a condescending view of the African "other."

Reservations about colonial Orientalism led to the emergence of more objective studies in the modern era, which seek to understand African culture from a balanced perspective. This is what should be promoted by African researchers through the study and analysis of cultural heritage, including African manuscripts that embody the high level that the African Sahara reached in various fields, which French colonialism wanted to obliterate and distort through French orientalists. However, what prevented this was the activity of various national elites, such as scholars and sheikhs of Sufi orders, which preserved the cultural, religious and scientific heritage immortalized in many manuscripts in the African Sahara.

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