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# Loose-leaf Islamic Manuscripts of West Africa: Retention, Adaptation or Invention?

**Abstract:** Manuscript units in Islamic West Africa are formed by unstitched leaves placed between protective boards, wrapped in a leather folder and secured with a strap. The extant manuscripts assembled of single leaves are omnipresent. Judging by traces of production, most of the loose-leaf manuscripts were originally made of bifolia or bifolia gathered in quires. The use of unstitched bifolia at the initial stage of production is comparable to the practices reconstructed for the central lands of Islam, and such formal similarity points to the past connections across the Sahara. However, the complete omission of stitching in binding seems to be a clear break from the original Islamic tradition. Does unstitched binding retain some features of the past? Is it an adaptation of a specific type of binding to a wider variety of socio-cultural uses or was it an entirely West African invention? This short essay gives tentative answers and suggests a reconstruction of the historical development of loose-leaf binding.

## 1 Keeping loose leaves together

Folios in loose-leaf manuscripts from West Africa are organised by catchwords. A catchword written in the left corner of the lower margin of the verso of the folio refers to the beginning of the first line that starts the text of the recto of the next folio. Catchwords unambiguously keep the folios in correct order, providing a kind of virtual binding without stitching.[1]

The unstitched set of leaves is held together as a whole by placing it between protective boards, wrapping in a leather folder and securing with a strap. Some manuscripts are also placed into a made-to-measure satchel (Figs 1 and 2).[2]

1 The metaphor of stitching by catchwords was common with the European medieval binders, who also used an alternative term *stitchwords*, see Clemens and Graham 2007, 49.
2 Brockett 1987; Blair 2008; Mutai and Brigaglia 2017.


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**Fig. 1:** A leather wrapper; The Metropolitan Museum of Art; Open Access Public Domain.

**Fig. 2:** A satchel, Maiduguri, Nigeria; photo by Dmitry Bondarev.

## 1.1 Single folia or bifolia?

The notion of loose leaf requires some explanation. Most of the surviving loose-leaf manuscripts of West Africa produced before the middle of the twentieth century consist of single leaves. Their various codicological features are, however, indicative of a bifolium form, i.e. a single leaf folded in two. The single leaves that we observe in the extant manuscripts are usually bifolia which have fallen apart as a result of wear and tear or constant folding. Some evidence is provided by traces of a ruling frame (*misṭara*) visible on the paper and the positioning of the lines of the text in relation to inner and outer margins. Wider margins always face outwards and the narrow margins inwards – to what would be the spine side of a quire. The fact that the width of the inner margin is usually consistent suggests the placing of the *misṭara* in a fixed position, such as the crevice of a folded paper. The bifolium nature of loose-leaf manuscripts is supported by some surviving manuscripts. In the latter, some leaves are singletons and some bifolia (Fig. 3).

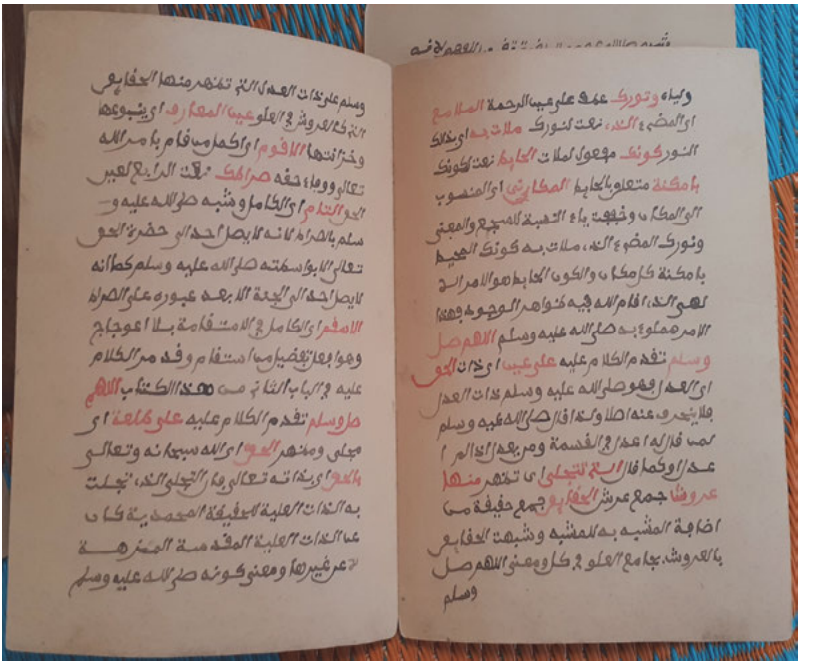

**Fig. 3:** A bifolium of a manuscript from the Bibliothèque de Manuscrits de Djenné; photo by Maria Luisa Russo.

Given that the text is uninterrupted and flows from the verso of the preceding leaf to the recto of the following leaf on the surviving bifolia, it is obvious that bifolia were not gathered into quires but were rather placed one after another. Adrian Brockett, who studied sequences of watermarks and countermarks in two nineteenth-century Qur'an manuscripts, arrived at a similar conclusion about the predominant bifolium format.[3]

The current practices of manuscript production exhibit the same bifolium principle. Scribes in modern-day Nigeria, for example, use a bifolium as the minimal unit of production. The process of cutting and preparing sheets of paper by Nigerian scribes was recorded in detail in my documentary and described by Maimadu Barma Mutai and Andrea Brigaglia.[4] Here, suffice it to say, that the end result of such a process is a bifolium – a folded sheet. This is irrespective of the ultimate size of the sheet prepared for the intended manuscript format. The Qur'an manuscript I describe in the documentary has the size of a full sheet of paper folded twice (i.e. *quarto*, very approximately 15 × 21 cm) and the Qur'an discussed by Mutai and Brigaglia has been written on larger bifolia, each folio being 26.5 × 19 cm.

Once the bifolia have been prepared, the scribes use a ruling frame (*misṭara*) to facilitate the even positioning of the text. If, in the past, the *misṭara* was made of parallel cords stitched to a piece of cardboard, the modern-day *misṭara* has only a rectangular frame. The impression of the frame made into a bifolium provides an inconspicuous borderline for the text area of four pages (i.e. recto and verso of the first and second folio). Here again, a single bifolium remains a minimal production unit.[5]

The same principle occurs when the scribe writes the text. The folded bifolium is filled up with writing starting from the recto of the first folio and finishing on the verso of the second folio.

## 2 Learning and reciting using unstitched manuscripts

Loose-leaf manuscripts are prominent in all settings of Islamic education observed nowadays, from the very beginning to the most advanced levels.

**3** But see Déroche 2006, 88–89, for counter-examples.

**4** Bondarev 2009, minutes 6:28–9:22; Mutai and Brigaglia 2017, 341.

**5** Bondarev 2009, minute 9:27.

One can see in a 1963 documentary shot in Borno that loose leaves are already redistributed between the students at the initial learning stage so that they can copy the Qur'anic passages from paper to wooden slates (Fig. 4).[6]

**Fig. 4:** Copying the Qur'an text from single leaves onto wooden writing boards; screenshot from a documentary released in 1963, entitled *Maiduguri: eine mohammedanische Stadt im Sahel*, directed by Nina Fischer, production of Bayerischer Rundfunk, Studienprogramm (<https://www.br.de/fernsehen/ard-alpha/programmkalender/ausstrahlung-2370796.html>, accessed on 20 February 2023).

It is difficult to tell from the video whether the student is holding some bifolia or bifolia cut into two single leaves. Given that the Qur'an manuscripts of the period often retain the bifolium structure, it would be natural if such manuscripts were distributed in bifolia. On the other hand, it is single leaves rather than bifolia that are used in the recently observable reading sessions which involve traditionally made manuscripts. Did these leaves, by regular folding and unfolding in the process of reading, gradually separate from their adjacent counterparts of what were erstwhile bifolia? Or were the bifolia further cut to produce

**6** This is, however, only one of the methods used in memorising the Qur'an.

an even smaller unit which became *the* circulation unit? This remains unclear. For now, I suggest the following production-circulation relationship: the smallest production unit of a bifolium has two minimal modes of circulation, one in form of the same bifolium, and the other in the form of a single leaf cut from the adjoining leaf of the bifolium.

Loose leaves feature in reading and recitation by advanced scholars. Abba Tijani and I recorded a recitation session of *Kitāb al-Shifāʿ bi taʿrīf ḥuqūq al-Muṣṭafā* (a biography of the Prophet Muhammad composed by al-Qāḍī ʿIyāḍ, d. 1149) in Maiduguri, Nigeria, in 2005 (Fig. 5). The late Imam Ibrahim Ahmad (right), former Chief Imam of Borno, and Shettima Komi (left) chanted the text in Arabic and Old Kanembu/Tarjumo. They both hold different copies of the same text in Arabic, both copies being loose-leaf. Shettima Komi first reads in Arabic, and then Imam Ibrahim translates it into Old Kanembu (Old Kanembu is not written in the copy the Imam holds). This is a typical two-person recitation of the same Arabic text when the text is being translated into a different language.

**Fig. 5:** Reciting from loose-leaf manuscripts; photo by Dmitry Bondarev.

A YouTube video, also recorded in Maiduguri in 2014, shows a recitation of the same text with more people in attendance.[7] The configuration of the setting is the same: two reciters read from loose-leaf copies of the same text. Importantly, many people in the audience also have their loose-leaf copies. They follow the recited text by listening to it and silent-reading from their copies. This kind of recitation is ordered linearly: one phrase of the Arabic text is translated into the target language, then the next Arabic phrase in sequence is translated, then the next one, and so on.

However, there are situations that require a simultaneous reading of a large portion of a text within a fixed time frame. On such occasions, the same copy of a manuscript is distributed between the participants of a ritual reading, and different parts of the same text are read aloud in parallel. A passage from Robert Launay and Rudolph T. Ware deserves special attention in this respect:

> This faith in the efficacy of the Divine Word spoken in Arabic is not limited to the practices of daily prayer and Qur'anic recitation. For example, in the Dyula community of Korhogo [Côte d'Ivoire], part of the funerary ritual consists of *reading an entire book of over a hundred pages* of praise to the Prophet on behalf of the deceased. To accomplish the task rapidly, *three or four detached pages are redistributed to each literate member of the audience*. When the signal is given, one might see *thirty men simultaneously chanting the pages* they have each been assigned, *finishing the recitation in several minutes rather than several hours*.[8]

Similar practices of simultaneous reading have been reported in fifth-century AH Tunis, but the manuscripts involved were multi-volume Qur'an copies, most certainly stitch-bound.[9]

## 3 Loose-leaf: practice or form?

The manuscript production and use of single leaf manuscripts raise some questions. Did practices of learning and recitation play any role in the formation of the specific unstitched character of West African Islamic manuscripts? Were there external factors behind this codicological feature, such as direct borrow-

**7** Imam Mustafa Laisu Ibrahim Ahmad, the Chief Imam of Borno State, recites *Kitāb al-Shifāʿ* in the main mosque of Maiduguri. 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u0cc18rhPpg (accessed on 13 January 2023).

**8** Launay and Ware 2016, 256–257, emphasis added.

**9** Ben Azzouna 2017, 121.

ing of the loose-leaf format from historical donors of Islamic culture? Historical evidence is insufficient to answer these questions with any certainty and the hypothesis on the origin of the widespread loose-leaf format in West Africa suggested at the end of this essay is of a very tentative nature.

Islam came to various regions of West Africa via trans-Saharan trade routes from several sources of influence and at different times. The Muslim presence of Ibāḍī merchants is evident in the late ninth century in ancient Ghana, in what are now areas between Mauritania, Senegal and Mali. The people of Gao, in present-day eastern Mali, encountered Islam in the late tenth century, possibly by way of contact with the Umayyads of Al-Andalus,[10] and later had strong connections with the Almoravids. Further east, in what is now northern Chad and southern Libya, the rulers of Kanem converted to Islam in the eleventh century, coinciding with the late Fatimid period, although much earlier contacts were also reported, going back to the Ibāḍī rulers of Jabal Nefūsa (modern Libya) of the mid-eighth century. The kings of Mali were converts to Islam from the twelfth century, being in contact with the Almoravids and later with the Almohads and the Mamluks. The successor state of Mali was the Songhay Empire that propagated the Muslim faith from the late fifteenth to the late seventeenth century along the territories of the middle bend of the Niger river.[11]

Despite various substantial reconstructions of the coming of Islam to the south of the Sahara (including the studies cited in the previous footnote), there are only some vague indicators of the early Islamic practices in West Africa during the time span between the ninth and fourteenth centuries characteristic of the early development of Islamic culture in sub-Saharan Africa. The scant data available for that period hardly yield any direct evidence of manuscript production, let alone binding techniques. At the same time, a very general overview of what came to the Sahel region with Islam is at odds with the predominant loose-leaf type of manuscripts.

I will outline six aspects of the early Islamic culture of West Africa that must have defined the form and function of Islamic manuscripts there. These are conversion to Islam, Qur'an manuscripts, script style, layout, paper and book covering.

**10** Insoll 2003, 233.

**11** Hiskett 1984; Levtzion and Pouwels 2000; Insoll 2003.

# 4 Basic elements of the Islamic manuscript culture brought to West Africa

## 4.1 Conversion narratives

Medieval Arab geographers who mention Islam in sub-Saharan Africa describe the conversion of local rulers in similar words. Their story is typically centred on catastrophic droughts undergone by the ruler and his people. A Muslim scholar then comes onto the scene and suggests that the ruler should convert to Islam and recite some verses of the Qur'an to evade the disaster.[12]

## 4.2 Qur'an manuscripts

Although recitation of the Qur'anic verses in conversion narratives does not necessarily entail the presence of a manuscript, the prominence of the Qur'an in royal rituals and children's education is discernible from at least the mid-fourteenth century. Thus, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (1304–1377) talks about the recitation of the Qur'an at the court of the ancient Mali's Sultan Mansa Sulayman, and commends the zeal of the local Muslims to get their children to memorise the Qur'an.[13]

## 4.3 Script style

There is indirect evidence of visual characteristics of the early Islamic manuscripts in West Africa. Ibn Khaldūn (1332–1406) makes a distinction between the old heavy and angular script style, which he calls *Ifrīqī* (Ifrīqiya being the Arabic name for the region of modern-day Tunisia and western Algeria), and a new flowing and a more flexible style called the Andalusi hand.[14] Ibn Khaldūn reports that the old *Ifrīqī* style was preserved in south-western Tunisia, and Adrian David H. Bivar suggested that the old *Ifrīqī* style was also preserved in sub-Saharan Africa,[15] as evidenced by Qur'an manuscripts from Borno. Bivar's hypothesis of the antiquity of the Borno script style (*Barnāwī*) has been supported

**12** Levtzion and Hopkins 1981, 82; Launay 2019.
**13** Levtzion and Hopkins 1981, 289 and 296.
**14** Bivar 1968; Bivar 2007.
**15** Bivar 1968.

by subsequent research, suggesting the independent development of *Barnāwī* from its cognate Maghribi script, both going back to a family of Kufic scripts that were in circulation in North Africa from the tenth to twelfth centuries.[16]

## 4.4 Layout and decorative elements

Local aesthetics and decorative motives aside, West African Qur'an manuscripts exhibit a consistent similarity in visual organisation.[17] The features common in most such manuscripts are the same as in the Qur'ans from North Africa and Maghrib of the ninth century and onwards. These features include the rectangular and/or rounded decorations of the first chapter of the Qur'an and at the beginning of the second chapter, coloured trefoils for verse separation, a triangle-shaped sign used for every fifth verse and roundels for every tenth verse.[18]

## 4.5 Paper

Paper was never produced locally and was imported from the north. Initially from the suppliers in the Islamic states (for example, in the cities of Fez, Tlemcen, Kairouan and Cairo), and from European producers starting from the mid-sixteenth century.[19]

**16** Brigaglia and Nobili 2013; Bondarev 2014, 137–143.

**17** Brockett 1987, 46–47; Hamès 2013; Bondarev 2017.

**18** Déroche 2004, 67–96; Déroche 2006, 233–236.

**19** On the periodisation of paper production pertinent to the discussed period, see Déroche 2006, 55–58; Bloom 2008; on paper traded to West Africa in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Walz 1985; historical conjectures about the early paper trade in West Africa have been offered in Last 2008; Lydon 2011, 45–47; on Italian paper in sub-Saharan manuscripts of the nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, see Biddle 2017. The earliest extant manuscripts produced in sub-Saharan Africa are unfortunately too few and too late to be of significance for the history of the early Islamic culture in West Africa. I am only aware of two manuscripts from the sixteenth century: one is a copy of a treatise on Mālikī law *Risāla al-Qayrawāniyya* penned for the Songhay ruler Muḥammad Bāni b. Askiya Dāwūd (r. 1586–1588) and finished on 19 July 1587 (Hunwick 2002) and the second manuscript is a copy of another work on legal matters *Mukhtaṣar al-Khalīl*, possibly penned in Kano, Nigeria. This manuscript, catalogued as Paden/417, is held in the Melville J. Herskovits Library of African Studies, Northwestern University, and the date of the mid-sixteenth century (of one part of the manuscript) has been suggested by Michaelle Biddle based on the watermark (personal communication, March 2015).

## 4.6 Book covering

As mentioned earlier, loose-leaf manuscripts of West Africa are placed in leather wrappers which have a typical fore-edge flap and the envelope flap. These were elements of the early Islamic binding, classified by François Déroche as type II.[20]

## 4.7 A puzzle: why no traces of stitching?

What can be surmised from all this? That the most important Muslim scripture, the Qur'an, was introduced to sub-Saharan Africa at very early stages of conversion to Islam, must have been in manuscript form and written in an angular style of script similar to the *Ifrīqī* type. When local scribes started producing their own manuscripts, they copied the visual organisation of the imported Qur'ans. The earliest copies of the Qur'an encountered in West Africa must have been on parchment, the most common writing medium in central lands of Islam before the ninth century.[21] However, manuscripts on paper could have been introduced as early as the ninth and tenth centuries by routes from Cairo and Kairouan.[22] At the same time, the Qur'an manuscripts coming from the Maghrib could be on both parchment and paper until the fifteenth century.[23] Although it is impossible to say when exactly the first paper manuscripts appeared south of the Sahara, paper was certainly an expensive commodity and never produced locally. Finally, the type of Islamic bookbinding, with its characteristic fore-edge flap and envelope flap, was borrowed by local leather makers, but they stopped short of copying the entire binding technique and, instead, used book wrappers as separate entities unattached to the text block by stitching.

In short, West African Islamic manuscripts retain most of the features brought to the south of the Sahara from the Maghrib and North Africa with the only exception of stitching leaves together. This is puzzling. After all, stitching is not a complex technique, especially compared to writing or the manufacture of leather wrappers and satchels. More surprising still is that the Islam of West Africa is characterised by conservatism and retention, most obvious in the survival of the ancient Islamic system of schooling,[24] ongoing manuscript produc-

**20** Déroche 2006, 260.
**21** Déroche 2006, 33.
**22** Déroche 2006, 51.
**23** Déroche 2006, 78.
**24** Launay and Ware 2016.

tion,[25] similar translational practices across the whole of the Sahel,[26] and the antiquity of exegetical tradition in some regions.[27] Thus, it does not seem plausible that absence of stitching – this crucial subcategory of binding – was due simply to a random divergence from a codicological ideal. It is not a variation in style, but the omission of the whole category. It would, therefore, make sense to look at the unstitched type of manuscripts in the Islamic world as a possible prototype for the West African loose-leaf binding. Unfortunately, there is no evidence of the loose-leaf type in the central lands of Islam during the period of early contact with sub-Saharan Africa, from the ninth to fourteenth centuries. But it is not impossible that unstitched binding existed outside West Africa, as suggested by Duncan Haldane.[28] Nuria de Castilla and Karin Scheper also pointed to the existence of unsewn binding in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, respectively.[29] And if loose-leaf form occurs in the seventeenth-century manuscripts, why should it not exist in earlier times? Hence, a hypothesis.

## 5 Stages of development of loose-leaf binding in West Africa: a hypothesis

I suggest that the loose-leaf form so universal in West Africa points to some protoforms that did not survive in the central lands of Islam, possibly due to the transient nature of unstitched bindings. Thus, the codicological category of unstitched binding was part of the Islamic manuscript culture at the time of early contacts with West Africa. Even if it was not a prevalent type of binding, both stitched and unsewn manuscripts were introduced to West Africa together with other features of the Islamic manuscript culture. However, the unsewn type of binding was restricted to a specific functional domain: learning and memorising the Qur'an. Unsewn manuscripts were convenient for redistribution within the learning community. The paucity of paper and increased demand of religious texts and spiritual efficacy of 'bulk' recitation could then lead to an innovation whereby the restricted feature was extended to other functional

**25** Brigaglia and Nobili 2017.
**26** Bondarev 2022.
**27** Bondarev 2019.
**28** Haldane 1983.
**29** I am grateful to Nuria de Castilla and Karin Scheper for their remarks during the conference 'Tied and Bound' in Hamburg (20–22 May 2021).

domains and the unstitched transient type of binding consolidated into a permanent category.

More research is needed on unstitched binding in early Islamic manuscripts to explore this tentative reconstruction. It is also necessary to undertake the subregional classification of loose-leaf manuscripts in West Africa. Reports on loose quires rather than bifolia leave some doubt about bifolium as the only unit of production.[30] It is possible that some sub-Saharan regions favoured loose quires over loose folia. And if the manuscripts also existed in quires, their redistribution by single leaves would not make much sense since the sequential order of the text would then have been disrupted. This, again, is a question for future study.

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**30** Déroche 2006, 88–89.

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