

# Description and Rationale

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## Title

Malian Arabic Manuscript Microfilming Project: Enhancing Access to CRL Digital Reproductions

## Project Description\*

In 2002, CRL digitized all 16 microfilm reels composing an important repository of West African primary sources: the Malian Arabic Manuscript Microfilm Project (MAMMP). These reels were first microfilmed in the late 1970s with the support of the National Endowment for Humanities (RC-\*0771-78, 1977-1980). These documents were collected in state repositories in France (Bibliothèque National de France), Senegal (Archives nationales), and especially in private collections in Mali. Yet, despite the significance of the materials, after 40 years the MAMMP manuscripts are still underutilized. Only David Robinson's classic *The Holy War of 'Umar Tall* (Clarendon Press, 1985) and my recent *Sultan, Caliph, and the Renewer of the Faith: Ahmad Lobbo, the Tārīkh al-Fattāsh, and the Making of an Islamic State in West Africa* (Cambridge University Press 2020) have substantially employed manuscripts from MAMMP.

The MAMMP manuscript corpus presents challenges for researchers due to the inaccurate order of the reproductions, low quality of some of the original pictures, and most importantly the lack of proper organization and metadata (the only existing handlist, microfilmed and digitized as reel 16, is partially handwritten and partially typed, and is incomplete and inaccurate). In response to these issues, I am seeking CAMP support to fund this project. I aim to make these manuscripts accessible by doing the following: 1) reorganizing the corpus by removing the pictures that are not readable and those that are available online on other platforms (namely reel 1: selected manuscripts from West Africa from the Bibliothèque National de France in Paris, which are now accessible online via the website <https://gallica.bnf.fr>); 2) collating the manuscripts in proper order; and 3) providing basic metadata for each document (in Appendix 1, I have a sample spreadsheet for the manuscripts). Given the complexity and scope of the project, which involves c. 10,000 digitized manuscript frames in Tiff format, I am seeking funds for a phase one of the entire project, which will entail three phases to achieve completion. Phase one will involve work on the set of 5 reels 8:1-5, a coherent sub-group of manuscripts collected in Central and northern Mali by the late professor William A. Brown (University of Wisconsin), which comprises c. 3,500 digital manuscript frames mainly dating to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Although I will further look for funding for subsequent phases of the project, and anticipate involvement of colleagues at the University of Illinois Library (in particular, Laila Hussein Moustafa, Associate Professor and Middle East & North African Studies Librarian, and Atoma Batoma, Adjunct Associate Professor and African Studies Librarian), at the end of phase one a self-contained set of manuscripts will be made available to scholars. Through phase one I will also establish the workflow to carry out organizing the rest of the collection, including prioritizations, creating more metadata, and establishing quality controls. If funded, I anticipate a project start date of January 2021.

## Reasons for Consideration\*

In his seminal work *The Invention of Africa*, philosopher Valentin Y. Mudimbe (1988) stresses that “Africanism,” or discourse about Africa, is mainly based on the “Colonial Library.” Indeed, the colonial archives, as well as oral sources collected by Western-trained academics, have formed the backbone of African Studies since it emerged as an academic discipline in the 1950s. However, the “Colonial Library” is not the only space of meaning in Africa. There is also what Ousmane O. Kane calls in his *Non-Europhone Intellectuals* (2012) the African “Islamic Library” comprising the literary and scholarly production of African Muslims writing in Arabic and in *‘ajami* (African language written with the Arabic alphabet).

MAMMP is an essential part of that Islamic Library, comprising manuscripts that are an indispensable corpus of underexplored sources for the history of West Africa from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As described above, the digitized manuscripts await proper organization and metadata. This project hence aims to further the previous intellectual efforts and economic investments of scholars and foundations (including CRL) by making these documents fully available. In so doing, Africanists, researchers in related fields, and public will have ready access to source materials that enable more accurate and inclusive scholarship.

Most of the MAMMP manuscripts come from northern and central Mali, a region that is practically inaccessible to scholars due to the chronic instability of the country, which started in 2012 with the Jihadist occupation of northern Mali and that has continued, most recently, with the August 2020 coup that dethroned former president Ibrahim Boubakar Keita and led to the establishment of a military junta. Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic has further stressed the importance of remote access to vital primary sources such as the manuscripts contained in MAMMP.

## Authors

MAMMP contains hundreds of Arabic documents from a large number of authors, most of them unidentified in the existing handlist. While the proposed project will provide a full list of authors, my preliminary survey conducted in preparation of my book revealed prominent West African authors, among them:

‘Uthmān b. Muḥammad Fodiye b. ‘Uthmān b. Ṣāliḥ Fūdī (d. 1817)

Muḥammad Bello b. ‘Uthmān b. Muḥammad Fodiye (d. 1837)

Aḥmad B. Muḥammad Būbū b. Abī Bakr b. Sa‘īd al-Fulānī, known as Aḥmad Lobbo (d. 1845)

Nūḥ b. al-Ṭāhir al-Fulānī (d. 1857)

‘Umar b. Sa‘īd b. al-Mukhtār b. ‘Alī b. al-Mukhtār, known as *al-ḥājj* ‘Umar (d. 1864)

Aḥmad al-Bakkāy b. Muḥammad b. al-Mukhtār al-Kuntī (d. 1865)

## Publishers

Yale University Library

## Proposal Contributors

Mauro Nobili, Assistant Professor, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign  
(<https://experts.illinois.edu/en/persons/mauro-nobili>)

Said Bousbina, Independent Scholar, France  
(<https://amesa.library.columbia.edu/scholars/94?locale=en>).

See appendix 2 for full CVs.

## Details and Sources

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### Resource Types\*

- Other: Arabic manuscripts

### Regions\*

- Sub-Saharan Africa

### Countries of Origin\*

Mali

### Major Languages

Arabic

### Source Format\*

- Microfilm

### Target Format

Digital

### Identifiers

The microfilm OCLC is 68170971 and the electronic OCLC is 698035376

### Links

Worldcat reference to the master reels of the microfilm collection:

[https://www.worldcat.org/title/malian-arabic-manuscripts-microfilming-project/oclc/68170971&referer=brief\\_results](https://www.worldcat.org/title/malian-arabic-manuscripts-microfilming-project/oclc/68170971&referer=brief_results)

Worldcat reference to the preliminary, incomplete, handwritten inventory:

[https://www.worldcat.org/title/malian-arabic-manuscripts-microfilming-project-inventory-lists/oclc/5278321&referer=brief\\_results](https://www.worldcat.org/title/malian-arabic-manuscripts-microfilming-project-inventory-lists/oclc/5278321&referer=brief_results)

Center for Research Library entry:

<http://catalog.crl.edu/search~S1?Ymalian&searchscope=1&SORT=D/Ymalian&searchscope=1&SORT=D&SUBKEY=malian/1%2C10%2C10%2CB/frameset&FF=Ymalian&searchscope=1&SORT=D&2%2C2%2C>

David Robinson and Louis Brenner 1980 published article on the history of the project:

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3171669>

## Source and Holdings

Location	Format	Holdings/Range	Notes
[Institution and holding location]	[Source format]	[Holding statement]	[Condition comments, etc.]
CRL, MF-16650 r.1-16	Microfilm	16 reels labeled as: reel 1-5, 5B, 6-7, 8:1-8:5, 9-10, 12	CRL has digitized all reels and will forward a copy of their scans for my use

## Source and Holdings Notes

As mentioned in the Project Description, the MAMMP 15 reels were microfilmed in West Africa (Mali and Senegal) and in France between 1977 and 1980 with funding provided by the National Endowment for Humanities (RC-\*0771-78). Reel 16 is the partially handwritten and partially typewritten preliminary handlist produced by Reverend Mounir Saadah, which is however incomplete and inaccurate. The original microfilms are still stored at Yale, but CRL has a copy from which a full set of over 10,000 digitized images in Tiff format were taken in 2002. These images have been converted to PDF and made available on the CRL website.

The reels comprise:

Reel 1. Selection of manuscripts from the Bibliothèque nationale, Paris, by David Robinson (currently emeritus, Michigan State University)

Reels 2-5. Selection of manuscripts and other documents from the Archives nationales du Sénégal, produced by the French Archives nationales and microfilmed by David Robinson

Reels 6-15. Selection of manuscripts Mali, by Louis Brenner (emeritus, School for Oriental and African Studies, London); the late William A. Brown (University of Wisconsin); and the late Malian traditionalist Almamy Maliki Yattara

Reel 16: Preliminary handlist of materials from Reels 1-15

In phase one, I am aiming to sort, collate, and describe, through the production of accurate metadata, the digital images of 5 reels, i.e., reels 8:1 to 5. The manuscripts contained in these reels represent a coherent set of documents from central and northern Mali mostly comprising works and letters written in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, by the end of phase one, an important, self-contained set of manuscripts will be made accessible and searchable to scholars.

## Physical Details

The 16 reels of the MAMMP manuscripts were digitized in 2002 by CRL. Hence, we will be working from the more than 10,000 digitized images in Tiff format that the CRL has already shared with us in preparation of this application. As stated above, a substantial part of the work will be to remedy some of the problems of this set of digitized images, namely lack of order and identification of those documents that display poor quality that makes the reading impossible. I will identify these documents and, as discussed with CRL staff, I will try to explore the possibility (for the next phases) of re-scanning them with new technologies for enhancement of picture quality.

## Existing Reformatted Materials

As mentioned above in the “Source and Holdings Notes,” CRL already produced a full set of images of the entire MAMMP collection that is available on the website in PDF. In preparation of this application, CRL has provided me with the entire set of manuscripts in TIFF - the original storage format. Of the whole set, phase one will focus on the reels 8:1 to 5, which comprise c. 3500 digital images.

## Intellectual Property Considerations

The manuscripts included in the original MAMMP reels were microfilmed by Yale University with the support of NEH before 1980, hence their content is open access.