GAMBIA

by

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INTRODUCTION

The Muslims of Gambia, particularly the Fulanis and Mandingos, have a long tradition of learning and scholarship. In the 19th century especially, the local 'ulamā’ produced manuscripts of considerable literary and historical importance. A number of these have been inherited by the present owners of private libraries, but sadly most of them are ignorant of the importance of their collections.

The physical condition of the manuscripts is generally very poor: they have not been repaired for decades. To my knowledge, a considerable number have been destroyed by termites, bookworms and damp over the years. Much effort is needed to repair the surviving manuscripts before they disappear.

The following survey reveals that there are about 1,494 Islamic manuscripts in eighteen collections in the Gambia. This figure shows that the country is very rich in Islamic manuscripts, and many more private collections are likely to be discovered if more efforts are made to organise and control this invaluable material in the future.

I am grateful to all those Mallams, informants and friends without whose assistance this survey would not have reached its present form.

INDIVIDUAL COLLECTIONS

BADDIBU

Alimamy Maba Diakhou

Status: Private
Conditions of access: By permission of the late owner’s descendants.
Total number of Islamic MSS: 94.
Description of collection: This is the collection of Alimamy Maba Diakhou, the leader of the Gambian jihād in the 1850s. It was bequeathed to his family following his death in 1867. It is not known how he acquired these manuscripts. Some family sources say that he might have copied the majority of them himself in the early part of his life.
The collection covers the following subjects: fiqh (10 MSS); adab (2); geomancy (11); Qur’ān (1); history (19); medicine (7); poetry (10); grammar (5); Ḥadīth (2); wudū‘ (9); Sufism (18).

Most of the MSS are the works of Sheikh Umar Tal and Ahmadu Baba of Timbuctu. Almost all of them have lost their bindings. A random inspection shows that some have also lost pages. The collection, nevertheless, possesses significant scholarly material; an example is: Ṣuḥḥ al-Malik fi jā‘id ʿIrān Mālik, by ʿUlaysh, dated 1925.

The collection is uncatalogued.

Usman Jamma Ba

Date of establishment: 1905
Status: Private
Conditions of access: By appointment with the owner.
Total number of Islamic MSS: 117.
Usman Jamma Ba is a great nephew of Alimamy Maba. He inherited the bulk of this collection from his ancestors, but he has enriched and enlarged it by acquiring more MSS from scholars visiting the area.

The significance of this collection lies in its valuable material on the history of the Gambia and Senegal.

The subjects covered are as follows: genealogy (6 MSS); Qur’āns (3); Ḥadīth (17); tafsīr (1); history (24); adab (8); correspondence (31); sīra (1); fiqh (16); ṣaṣīda (7); medicine (1); poetry (2).

Rare manuscripts include: (i) Tadhkira al-mustarshidin wa-falāḥ al-tālibīn by Alhājj Umar Tal, dated 1829; (ii) Majmū‘at al-mukhtārā, anonymous and undated; and (iii) Tarikh budan Fūsī ḥalāt wa-Tārīḵ, anonymous and undated.

It is not known whether this collection has been catalogued or not.

BANJUL

Alh. Abdoulaye M. Jobe

Imam of Banjul Central Mosque
39 Lancaster Street
Banjul
Date of establishment: 1960

Alimamy Fodi

c/o Banjul Central Mosque
Date of establishment: 1950
Status: Private
Conditions of access: By appointment with the owner.
**BRIKAMA**

**Fodi Silla**

Market Road  
Brikama  

**Status:** Private  

**Conditions of access:** By appointment with the owner.

**Total number of Islamic MSS:** 125 (Arabic; Mandingo).  

**Description of collection:** This collection was bequeathed to the owner by his grandfather. The MSS are of 18th/19th-century date and might have originated from sources outside Gambia, given that the owner’s grandfather was an itinerant scholar, and had taken part in most of the fiqhāds in the region. Most of the MSS are now fragmented and seriously damaged by damp. The collection is preserved in a box in the owner’s private apartment, but is not satisfactorily kept.

The subjects covered are: Sufism (12 MSS); Hadith (21); fiqh (47); sermons (2); fatooud (6); history (16); geomancy (1); Qur’ān (4); science (16).

It is not known whether the collection has been catalogued.

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**FARAFENI**

**Alfa Yuusuf N’Dare**

Markaz Umum ud deen  
Farafeni  

**Status:** Private  

**Conditions of access:** By permission of the owner.

**Total number of Islamic MSS:** 43 (Arabic; Fulbe).  

**Description of collection:** Most of the MSS are not dated, and the majority are untitled. A careful examination of the few titled ones reveals many inaccuracies in the titles. The MSS are not well preserved. Almost all of them have their pages torn, and some pages are missing, making it extremely difficult to read them or ascertain their value.

There are indications that the MSS might have been copied some time ago, since most of them were inherited from people who are said to have lived several centuries ago.

The collection covers the following fields: theology (7 MSS); figh (4); literature (12); Sufism (13); epistemology (1); sermons (4).

This collection needs urgent restoration, otherwise it will soon be lost. It is uncatalogued.

**Alhaji Fodi Faal**

Farafeni Mosque  

**Date of establishment:** 1938  

**Status:** Private  

**Conditions of access:** By appointment with the owner.

**Total number of Islamic MSS:** 175 (Arabic; Fulbe; Wolof).  

**Description of collection:** This collection originates from various countries in the region. The owner, a widely travelled person, acquired the MSS during his numerous sojourns abroad. All are in excellent condition and are kept in a wooden box, which contains his valuables. Many have artistic significance and beautifully decorated covers. The dated ones are all from recent centuries. The subjects covered are: poetry (5 MSS); sermons (8); ṣūra (15); Sufism (21); figh (28); taqāṣīd (47); history (30); genealogy (1); litanies (2); Qur’ān in separate āṣās (18).

Scholarly works of great importance abound in this collection.
However, the most important one is a four-volume work entitled *jausārīr al-iklīf*, undated, copied by Muhammad Tūrā. It is not certain whether the collection has been catalogued or not.

**GUNJUR**

**Alfa Keita Muhammad**

Alfa Keita Residence  
Gunjur  
*Date of establishment:* 1953  
*Status:* Private  
*Conditions of access:* By appointment with the owner.  
*Total number of Islamic MSS:* 100 (Arabic; Fulbe).  
*Description of collection:* A large number of the MSS were acquired in Timbuktu, Mali. Some were copied by the owner. They are in very good condition with no damage. They are arranged in subject order on a table in the owner’s study, but they are exposed to dust and insects.

The titles of the Arabic MSS are, however, confusing as some of them have been titled in the owner’s language, Fulbe, and as a result have lost their original meanings. Despite this shortcoming, the collection is orderly, and possesses unique scholarly material. The MSS are recent (18th century onwards).

The subjects covered are: history (14 MSS); literature (13); *fiqh* (11); *ṣaḥīḥ* (29); sermons (3); *fatwās* (17); astrology (1); medicine (8); Sufism (1).

The MSS have superb bindings and fine calligraphy. Rare texts in the collection are: *Raiyina ṭıqāma tāfīl aḥūl al-Walī*, anonymous and undated; and *Nayl al-ṭīlāḥ* by Ahmad Bābā, undated and copied by Kaytā Muhammad.

**Iddrissa Jallo**

*Status:* Private  
*Conditions of access:* By appointment with the owner.  
*Total number of Islamic MSS:* 3.  
*Description of collection:* There are only three MSS in this collection. Two are historical works, whose authors and titles are unknown, and one is an incomplete MS. on the work of Shaykh ‘Uthman dan Fodio, entitled *Bayān waṣīfah al-Hijra*.

The collection is well preserved, and kept in the private room of the owner. It is uncatalogued.

**Mu'allim Kabba**

Madrasatul Qwmiyyah  
Gunjur  
*Date of establishment:* 1970  
*Status:* Private  
*Conditions of access:* By appointment with the owner.  
*Total number of Islamic MSS:* 17 (Arabic; Fulbe).  
*Description of collection:* The owner claims to be a descendant of Fudūt KABBÀ, a 19th-century Jihadist, who once ruled the town. He also claims to have inherited the collection from his ancestors. The collection comprises sermons, correspondence, and Sufi tawâfīq. The MSS are not dated and have lost their original covers. Some have their pages torn. They are poorly preserved in a carton. The collection is uncatalogued.

**KAUR**

**Alimamy Cisse Braima**

c/o the Imam of Kaur  
Kaur Central Mosque  
*Status:* Private  
*Conditions of access:* By special appointment with the Imam of Kaur.  
*Total number of Islamic MSS:* 74 (Arabic; Fulbe).  
*Description of collection:* This is a particularly interesting collection as it belonged to Alimamy BRAIMA who ruled the town in the middle of the 19th century. It has been inherited in succession by his descendants. Family sources suggest that most of the MSS in the collection have been lost to termites, bookworms and visiting researchers. They cover the following subjects: geography (1 MS.); Qur’ān (1); history (17 MSS.); *fiqh* (6); taqāsid (14); genealogy (2); astrology (5); *tafsīr* (1); literature (3); correspondence (18); sermons (6).
Some of the MSS are of 17th-, 18th- and 19th-century origin, although the majority are undated. They are damaged in every way, and are in urgent need of restoration. Despite the numerous holes in the pages, it is still possible to read them. Some of the MSS have lost their covers, while those covers which survive are worn out, so that they have lost their titles. This makes it almost impossible to identify the texts. The collection is kept in a wooden box, and is not well preserved.

There are some MSS of rare significance and artistic value, but the loss of their titles makes it impossible to enumerate them.

It is not known whether the collection has been catalogued.

Billiti Jawara

Kaur Palace

Date of establishment: 1968

Status: Private

Conditions of access: By permission of the owner.

Total number of Islamic MSS: 5 (Arabic).

Description of collection: 5 MSS are complete texts of the Holy Qur'an; 1 is on Hadith; 2 on fiqh and 1 on Sufism. They were acquired from professional book copyists in Banjul. The Qur'anic MSS are beautifully bound in original, full leather bindings.

The collection is uncatalogued.

KARANTABA

Bundu Watara

House No KA 11

Date of establishment: 1957

Status: Private

Conditions of access: By the appointment with the owner.

Total number of Islamic MSS: 449 (Arabic).

Description of collection: The core of this collection is formed by MSS which the owner purchased in Kaolack in neighbouring Senegal when a student of the late Sufi Shaykh, Ibrahim Nyass. He enriched the collection by purchasing a number of MSS from local scholars when he returned to Gambia about a decade ago. The collection has old manuscripts, of which the majority are on Sufism. The dated MSS are of 17th- and 18th-century origin. Some of them are not titled. The collection covers the following subjects: literature (29 MSS); Sufism (73); Qur'ān (9); fiqh (23); medicine (48); tawhid (32); sihr (44); fatooh (53); correspondence (71); mysticism (31); history (36).

Some of the MSS are written in more than one colour. The collection is well preserved and is packed in a well-sealed carton. Though dusty and cobwebbed, the MSS are in excellent physical condition, even though some have lost their covers as a result of poor handling by their original owners. Important MSS in the collection include: Al-jarr'at al-sīfiyya wa-l-nafha al-kāfiyya by Al-Mukhtar Kunti, undated; and Al-risāla fi l-fiqh by Al-Qayrawānī Abū Zayd, undated.

Unpublished catalogue:
A handlist describes the unique MSS in the collection.

KUNTAUR

Moddibo Dauda

Status: Private

Conditions of access: By appointment with the owner.

Total number of Islamic MSS: 40 (Arabic).

Description of collection: Most of the MSS were copied by the owner. He acquired about 18 from a scholar in Segou, Mali. Most of them are in fair condition. However, some have been damaged by bookworms and rats, which has resulted in the loss of a number of their pages and covers. At present, the collection is kept in a poorly constructed wooden box. The dates of some of the MSS indicate that they were written or copied during the 18th and 19th centuries.

The manuscripts are on the following subjects: Hadith (5 MSS); Qur'ān (fragments) (3); literature (2); grammar (6); poetry (3); Sufism (7); fiqh (3); tawhid (3); astrology (1); medicine (2); prayers/charms (3).

Important manuscripts in the collection are: Qasīda fi rithā' Aḥmad al-Bakkāṭ, undated and anonymous; and Iḥlā'at al-dā'yānna by Abū ʾAbd Allāh Mukhtar, copied by Muhammad Muhammad, undated.

This collection is not catalogued.
**SABAJI**

Sheikh Umar

Masjid Saba

Date of establishment: 1948

Status: Private

Conditions of access: None.

Total number of Islamic MSS: 2 (Arabic).

Description of collection: The collection consists of a copy of *Tafsir al-Jalalayn* and a volume of *Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*. They are well preserved and in a satisfactory condition, on a bookshelf in the owner’s private apartment. They are undated, and uncatologued.

**SALEKINI**

Soumangi Ba

Status: Private

Conditions of access: By appointment with the owner.

Description of collection: An unspecified number of MSS are preserved in the residence of Shaykh soumangi Ba, but it was not possible to examine the collection because the owner was absent from the town.

**WULI**

Alimany Dembo

Status: Private

Conditions of access: By appointment with the late owner’s family.

Description of collection: *Alimany Dembo* or *Foni* (teacher), as he was popularly known, settled in this town with his students about a century and a half ago. Apparently he was a prolific writer, and had authored or copied numerous literary works. Some sources credit him with sowing the seeds of Islamisation in Wuli, Yarbutinda and surrounding areas. His collection of much valuable material has been inherited by his descendants, but access to the collection was refused, so it is not possible to give a description of it.