

Institute for the Study of Islamic Thought in Africa (ISITA) and the Program of African Studies,
Northwestern University
Center for African Studies, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Call for Papers

Sacred Word:

The Changing Meanings in Textual Cultures of Islamic Africa

A Symposium dedicated to the memory of Professor John O. Hunwick (1936-2015)

Sponsored by the Institute for the Study of Islamic Thought in Africa (ISITA) and the Program of African Studies (PAS) at Northwestern University and the Center for African Studies (CAS), University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, this symposium will take place at Northwestern University (Evanston, IL) from April 21-22, 2016.

This meeting is the first in a series of collaborative programs on Islam in Africa organized under the auspices of the newly established Illinois-Northwestern Consortium for African Studies (funded by a U.S. Department of Education Title VI National Resource Center grant). It is being planned in anticipation of the ISITA-led workshops, projected for summer 2017 in Evanston and Africa, on aspects of the codicology of West African Arabic manuscripts, and also in preparation for PAS and CAS's collaboration with the University of Birmingham on its 2016 Thirteenth Cadbury Workshop on "Bodies of Text: Learning to be Muslim in West Africa."



A special evening reception Thursday April 21st is planned to honor Professor John O. Hunwick, in whose memory the conference is dedicated. This will involve members of his family, his students, and additional community friends and associates in a time for remembering his many contributions.

Page from an anthology of poems by Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse
From the John O. Hunwick Collection, Northwestern University Library

Problematique

“Sacred Word: The Changing Meanings in Textual Cultures of Islamic Africa” will be a meeting that seeks to approach the meaning(s) of textual cultures in Muslim societies in Africa and the changes that have taken place in that culture during the last two centuries.

Across the Abrahamic tradition language and writing are seen as part of Divine Revelation and the early books in each religion attest to the sanctity of the Word. The decorative arts applied to embellish the page, like illumination and calligraphy, were extensions of the Word. Light, another sign of the Divine, was conveyed in the arts and on the page. Enveloping the Word in worthy bindings was an art of equally significant meaning. The very ink and pens with which the script was fashioned reflected a cosmic order for some writers. Poetry emulated songs of adoration from earliest-recorded meter. The recitation arts sought purity in their oral portrayal of the Word. Education focused on accurate transmission of the Word. In the Word was authority, and authority was the Word.

We encourage contributions that examine the aesthetics of the word across Muslim Africa in a variety of contexts and forms. With regard to manuscripts, what meaning do copyists and calligraphers invest in illumination, or patterned writing, or other design elements on a manuscript page? Do inks, or binding, or scripts reveal a significance we have ignored in our past focus on the content of manuscripts? Do titles reveal the intent of a writer, or the sophistication of a work? Can we trace a secularization of the written (Arabic) word in recent times?

We seek papers that explore what is sought or conveyed, in addition to the literal meaning of words on a page, in manuscripts and uses of the word in daily life. What are the meanings that African Muslims attribute to the word—whether it is carefully inscribed on the pages of a manuscript or coming from a religious ring tone on a cell phone or emblazoned across a lorry. And how has that changed during the past two centuries? Does an Ajami text, in Arabic script, carry a special status?

How do African Muslims give aesthetic form to the word beyond the page? How is the word transformed into sound or material objects? How is it performed and broadcast? Is there a Muslim music, or Muslim TV programming that can be distinguished from other musics, other programming? And how is it differentiated? Are there other Muslim art forms, perhaps, that flow out of the deep roots of the pre-Islamic and Andalusian prosody? Has the glass-painting of Senegal become a religious art? Or do expressions of piety arrive at such status only when an Arabic inscription is added? To what extent do these art forms, whether they are regional, national, or global, serve to localize or globalize Islam?

Please send paper proposals to: isita@northwestern.edu by **December 14th, 2015**. Proposals should include an abstract of no more than 300 words and a title, as well as the author’s name, email address, and institutional affiliation. Graduate student proposals are especially welcomed, and should be accompanied by a thesis abstract. Some financial support may be available to cover travel costs for invited participants, particularly from overseas.