

THE ARABIC COLLECTION

In 1961 the Institute of African Studies initiated the collection of Arabic manuscripts from Ghana. The work was greatly facilitated by the appointment to its staff in 1962 of al-Hajj Osmanu Eshaka Boyo, whose wide range of contacts among the Muslims of Ghana has been of great advantage. The Institute has come into possession of a number of original manuscripts, but in general its policy for the present has been to make photographic or Xerox copies, returning the originals to their owners. The work of reproduction has been greatly assisted by a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation towards the purchase of equipment.

A descriptive check-list of the collection is in course of preparation. At present some 400 items have been provisionally catalogued, while some further 100 items have not as yet been examined. It is clear that the works so far accessioned constitute only a small fraction of the total body of material in the libraries of Ghana malams. In addition to the work of collection and cataloguing, a number of translations have been prepared or are in course of preparation. While the majority of the works are in Arabic language, some 50 items are in Hausa, and it has been a matter of considerable interest to find a few manuscripts in Ghanaian languages, Dagbani, Mampruli, and Guan. The majority of the works in the Institute's collection are of local West African authorship. Of particular interest is the tarikh tradition, - that is, the tradition of historical writing - which appears to have been well developed within Ghana by at least the early 18th Century. The most important of these historical works so far recovered is the Kitab Ghunja, compiled in its present form in 1751/2 by Muhammad ibn Mustafa of Gonja. This is a chronicle of Gonja history from the later 16th century to the middle of the 18th century, but also includes important references to Dagomba, Ashanti, Takyiman, Bonduku, etc. The collection also includes other histories of Gonja, and of Dagomba, Mamprusi, Wa, Namasa, etc. Histories of the Hausa, Bornu, and Fulani have also been accessioned.

A different tradition is that of the poets. Particularly noteworthy are the works, of which the Institute now has over fifty, of al-Hajj Imoru ibn Abi Bakr of Salaga and Kete Krachi, who was born in Kano c. 1850, and died in Kete Krachi in 1934. Many of his poems deal with contemporaneous events such as the Salaga civil war of 1892, the colonial take-over of around 1900, the influenza epidemic of 1918, etc., and these form an invaluable source for the social historian of the period.