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EFFORTS OF OFFICIAL ALGERIAN INSTITUTIONS IN CATALOGING MANUSCRIPT HERITAGE

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Abstract

Cataloging manuscripts and generating various types of indexes represent crucial technical endeavors that furnish both descriptive and objective information. This process facilitates the cataloging and presentation of manuscript intellectual contributions on international platforms. Such indexes serve as conduits linking researchers, scholars, and manuscript enthusiasts, thereby streamlining their access to these documents. Cataloging also plays a pivotal role in advancing studies and research pertaining to the geographical, literary, and intellectual histories of specific subjects, thereby simplifying the efforts of editors and researchers engaged with manuscript heritage. Through catalogs, one can ascertain the number of manuscript copies available, their detailed descriptions, and the principal themes they encompass.

This study aims to elucidate the concept of manuscript cataloging, its governing principles, the current state of manuscript cataloging in the Arab world, and the contributions of official institutions in Algeria to this field.

Keywords: Algerian Manuscripts/Cataloging, inclusion, Verification.

1. Overview of Cataloging Arabic Manuscripts

The absence of universally accepted scientific standards for cataloging manuscripts has resulted in inconsistencies in how manuscripts are described across various catalogs. It is widely acknowledged that the primary goal of cataloging is to achieve bibliographic control of manuscripts, documenting their existence, and ensuring they are accessible to users such as readers, researchers, and verifiers.

There is a divergence of opinions among scholars regarding the nature of manuscript cataloging; some perceive it as an integral part of the scientific domain, while others consider it a distinct art form that complements and enhances the study of manuscripts. Indeed, both codicologists, who focus on the physical aspects of manuscripts, and catalogers share a common interest in detailing the manuscripts or examining them as physical entities. (Al-Hafyan, 1999, p.34).

Dr. Ayman Fouad Sayed characterizes cataloging as a subset of codicology, providing essential data about the content and physical form of the manuscript, and acknowledging it as an independent entity (Ayman Fouad, 1997, p.533). The primary objectives of manuscript catalogs are to describe the manuscripts and identify their locations. Cataloging encompasses the task of inventorying manuscripts in libraries and collections, categorizing them by title or author, accompanied by a succinct description.

A comprehensive description should furnish the researcher with sufficient information about the manuscript, enabling them to assess its relevance for their research, whether for publishing the manuscript, investigating its history, or codicological purposes.

Professor Mohammed Essam Al-Shanti describes the cataloging of Arabic manuscripts as : "Cataloging is the systematic recording of fundamental details about a manuscript, including its title, author, the author's year of death, the start and end of the manuscript, its size, pages, lines per page, dimensions, the scribe's name, date of copying, script type, ownership, listening, authorizations noted on it, its subject, and the sources documenting the manuscript's name and attributing it to its author, among other pertinent information." (Al-Chanti, 1990) Without the classification and cataloging of manuscripts, and the subsequent publication of these catalogs, the manuscripts housed in public and private libraries would remain hidden, only discoverable by chance or fortune.

Cataloging manuscripts represents one of the most arduous academic endeavors, distinctly different from cataloging printed books. It demands patience, extensive experience, and proficiency, coupled with a comprehensive knowledge of Arab culture and diverse scientific fields to accurately identify manuscripts upon examination and critically interpret their texts.

This becomes particularly challenging when the manuscript is incomplete at the beginning or end, incorrectly titled, or erroneously attributed to an author. The cataloger must employ auxiliary tools, a collection of primary sources that verify the manuscript's title or its association with an author, or elucidate ambiguities in certain manuscripts, thus aiding in unraveling their complexities. Reference can also be made to foundational texts on history, biographies, and scholarly classifications.

Professor Ayman Fouad Sayed delineates the cataloging of Arabic manuscripts (Ayman Fouad, 1997) as a pivotal component of codicology, detailing the content and physical form of manuscripts. This necessitates a cataloger's profound cultural insight and familiarity with calligraphy and bibliography, enabling them to discern writing materials, ink types, and script varieties, establish the copy's date, verify the title of the book, and document the author's name, while also determining its print status.

Over recent decades, numerous studies have endeavored to set standards for cataloging Arabic manuscripts. Their authors have devised cards encapsulating the critical data to be recorded. Generally, manuscript cataloging should encompass several elements: title page (book name), author's name, manuscript's beginning (introduction), end (conclusion), numbering and ruling, size, script type, scribe's name and copying date, manuscript description, and the sources and indexes used to authenticate the title or author, among others.

2. Concept of Manuscript Cataloging

A catalog is defined as "the book that compiles the names of books, (Group of Authors,1998,p.597) " with Ibn al-Nadim's compilation, dating back over a thousand years, standing as one of the most significant in Arab scholarship. Yet, he was not the pioneer in using the term in this context, drawing instead on earlier catalogs such as those of Jabir ibn Hayyan's works, Galen's compilation by Hunayn ibn Ishaq, and al-Razi.

In Arab heritage, "catalog" refers to bibliographic compilations that enumerate and inventory works, exemplified by the catalogs of the House of Wisdom in Baghdad, the Fatimid al-Aziz library in Cairo, and the library of al-Mustansir in Cordoba. These catalogs were instrumental in delineating the contents of libraries and encapsulating their intellectual contributions, thereby facilitating access and use. (Al-Halouji, 1999, p.26).

The term "catalog" has found application in various spheres, such as book catalogs, rhyme catalogs, places catalogs, personal names catalogs, and library catalogs, with each category bearing a distinct significance, differing from the others, and serving a specific purpose unique to its type.

Cataloging, therefore, is a process designed to provide a scientific and physical depiction of various informational carriers in a library, encompassing manuscripts, books, audio-visual materials, periodicals, and more.

A manuscript, defined as any handwritten material across different sciences on mediums (Benbain,1990,p.109) like paper, leather, ancient clay tablets, stones, or others, necessitates cataloging to organize scientific and knowledge materials for prompt usage. This involves a precise description of the manuscript to distinguish it from others, thereby enabling researchers to access it easily, provided the manuscript's title, author's name, and subject are known. (Abu Heiba, 1989, p.34).

The essence of manuscript cataloging lies in offering bibliographic control, documenting the existence of manuscripts, and presenting them in a manner that makes them accessible to readers and researchers.

Thus, manuscript cataloging is portrayed as an exhaustive and technical descriptive process, furnishing researchers with a comprehensive understanding of the various scientific materials contained within, encapsulating details like the name, author, year of the author's death, the manuscript's beginning and end, number of parts, pages, lines per page, size, scribe's name, date of copying, location, script type, documented ownerships, listings, authorizations noted, manuscript placement, and citing the sources that validate the manuscript's name and its attribution to its author, among other pertinent information. (Al-Chanti, 1990, p.206)

3. Importance of Cataloging for Manuscripts

It should be noted that at the onset of the 20th century, Orientalists, along with Arab and Muslim scholars, recognized the importance of the rich heritage encapsulated in millions of manuscripts dispersed globally. Consequently, they embarked on initiatives to inventory, enumerate, and amass this vast manuscript heritage, aiming to streamline access and facilitate scholarly study.

Their endeavors were twofold: firstly, to inventory and amass the scattered manuscript heritage from various global locales, preserving it for the benefit of scholars and individuals dedicated to the science of manuscript

heritage verification. Secondly, to catalog these manuscripts, thereby simplifying the process of accessing them from anywhere with ease and convenience.

Cataloging and unveiling manuscripts stand as a distinct discipline, requiring individuals endowed with specific qualifications and knowledge crucial for the accurate and proper cataloging of manuscripts.

4. Cataloging Manuscript Heritage

The term "Al-Fahras" (catalog), of Persian origin, has been utilized by Arabs for over a millennium, sometimes pronounced with an open 'taa' and at other times without. (Al-Halouji, 2004, p.128) The expansive reach of Muslims across diverse territories and their prolonged rule have culminated in a significant legacy of Arabic manuscripts, with nearly three million manuscripts circulating in libraries worldwide. These manuscripts are the legacies of extended generations in Islamic countries, transferred to Europe and America under various conditions and periods. (Ayman Fouad, 1997, p.509).

Through meticulous methodology and varied physical means, those involved in manuscript studies can undertake research that incorporates the maximum possible evidence, aiming to construct as accurate a historical narrative for a manuscript as possible. Developing a manuscript's history involves numerous observations, analyzing the relationships within the classified subject to identify and associate them with similar indications in other subjects, thereby compiling and examining them for historical classification and scrutinizing the binding and its alterations.

5. Rules for Cataloging Arabic Manuscripts

Professor Mohammed Essam Al-Shanti notes that there are initiatives to standardize the principles of manuscript cataloging or elucidate its methodologies, as reflected in most manuscript catalogs across the Arab world. These serious efforts are predominantly rooted either in personal endeavor and individual experience accrued through the cataloging process, the scientific outcome of manuscript verification, or adherence to Anglo-American cataloging principles.

He highlighted that a significant challenge in the science of manuscript cataloging is training adept catalogers, achievable only if Arab universities across various Arab nations establish specialized departments dedicated to cataloger training. The second challenge pertains to the principles and rules of cataloging itself, as the Arab library sphere lacks universally accepted cataloging standards, resulting in most cataloging tasks being executed without definitive rules, occasionally casting doubts on the manuscript documentation. (Al-Chanti, 1990, pp. 201-208).

With the emerging need for manuscript cataloging to enhance accessibility, it became imperative to converge on a cataloging methodology, prompting the composition of numerous books and scholarly articles.

Yet, Arab scholars have not unified around a single standard method for cataloging manuscripts; instead, methodologies have ranged from concise to detailed, as demonstrated by the works of Salah al-Din Al-Munjid, Shaban Khalifa, Muhammad Awad, Abdul Sattar Al-Halouji, and Mary About Fotouh.

The basic elements commonly agreed upon in manuscript cataloging encompass the manuscript title, author's name, opening and conclusion of the manuscript, library storage number, genre (subject), script type, material of the manuscript (e.g., parchment, paper), number of pages, ruling (lines per page), dimensions in centimeters, variations in pens and inks, confirmation of whether the copy is in the author's handwriting or copied from the author's version or by a scholar, the text's vocalization and diacritics, clarity of handwriting, titles of chapters and sections in larger or colored font, the number of parts and volumes, presence of gilding or miniatures, binding description and leather type, copying date and scribe's name, and, if the date is absent, guidelines for estimating the date. (Al-Monjed, 1976)

6. Explanation of Key Fields in a Manuscript Cataloging Card

A proper cataloging methodology should incorporate the crucial elements of the manuscript, the most significant of which include:

- **Manuscript title or name:** The manuscript's title should be accurately recorded as it appears on the title page, ensuring its verification by reviewing the introduction, where authors often mention the book's name, which may also be found at the manuscript's end. Reference works that document the title, such as "Kashf al-Zunun 'an Asami al-Kutub wa al-Funun: Ithar al-Maknun," "Hadiyyat al-'Arifin," or "Kitab al-Fihrist" by Ibn al-Nadim, should be consulted for confirmation.

- **Author's name:** The author's complete name, including nicknames, titles, and any known accolades or distinctions, should be meticulously recorded, avoiding overly grand titles. Verification of the author's name should be sought in the book's introduction, if available, and corroborated with biographical and classification sources. The author's name arrangement should commence with the nickname, proceed with the title, and follow

with the first name, father's name, grandfather's name, and lastly, his fame or reputation. Orientalists typically begin with the title followed by the nickname. The author's death year in Hijri, along with the Gregorian equivalent if possible, should also be included.

- **The beginning of the manuscript, or its opening:** This involves documenting the manuscript's initial sentences, excluding standard phrases like 'Bismillah' or 'Alhamdulillah.' This step aids in confirming the manuscript's name and the author's identity, with attention paid to the book's narratives, writing style, and the composition's purpose or intended audience.

- **The end of the manuscript, or its conclusion (Colophon):** The manuscript's concluding sentences before the copy date and scribe's name should be recorded, verifying the manuscript's completeness. The composition year and any other pertinent details found at the manuscript's end should be noted.

- **Parts of the manuscript, number of pages, line count, and page dimensions:** In cataloging, it should be noted if the manuscript comprises multiple parts, distinguishing between those authored by the original author and those added by scribes. The chapters, sections, or translations beginning and concluding the cataloged section should be indicated. The presence of page numbering should be recorded; if absent, the leaves, rather than pages, should be numbered. The count of lines per page should be documented, and if line counts vary, a range should be provided, or the term "varied" should be used for inconsistent line counts. The dimensions of the pages, both length and width, must also be recorded.

- **Script type and ink colors:** The cataloger must possess knowledge of various scripts to accurately identify the script used in the manuscript, noting any script variations or the involvement of multiple scribes. The script type should be described in terms of readability, aesthetics, and quality. Additionally, it should be noted whether the words are vocalized, unpointed, or if the manuscript is in the author's own handwriting or from their era, including the color of the ink used.

- **Scribe's name, copying date, and location:** The scribe's name and profession, especially if they were a renowned calligrapher, should be documented by consulting biographical and class sources. The date of copying should be detailed with the day, month, and year, and the location of the copying should also be recorded.

- **Cover:** The cataloger should provide details about the manuscript's cover, noting any gilding, decorative writing, geometric patterns, or botanical illustrations. Analyzing the leather cover from an artistic standpoint can offer insights into the evolution of the binding industry across different historical periods.

- **Manuscript sources:** The origin of the manuscript (whether by gift, endowment, purchase, etc.) should be specified, along with the manuscript's previous number, if known.

- **General notes and mention of ownerships, listenings, and authorizations:** The cataloger should assess the manuscript's condition, noting any damage such as moisture exposure or missing pages. Any obliterations or perforations should be documented. "Continuation words" at the bottom of pages, which help match the first word on the following page, can indicate missing parts of the manuscript. Information on whether the manuscript has been corrected or compared with other versions, the individuals involved in this process, or if it was read to the author, should be included. Notes or corrections in the margins, records of ownership including dates and names, as well as any authorizations or listenings with their respective dates, should also be recorded.

- **Sources about the author and the manuscript:** The cataloger must list the sources used to confirm the manuscript's title, the author's name, their date of death, and the manuscript's attribution to its owner.

7. The Manuscript Cataloger: The Role and Qualities Required

Cataloging manuscripts is a demanding task, necessitating that the cataloger possesses specific attributes, including:

- The cataloger should have a deep understanding of manuscript studies and the skills to authenticate texts accurately.

- Expertise in the science of cataloging is essential to perform the task effectively and efficiently.

- The cataloger should have a broad understanding of different scripts, their types, and the ability to trace scripts back to their origins.

- Recognizing and understanding the mistakes made by predecessors in the cataloging field is crucial for improving the accuracy of current cataloging efforts.

- The cataloger must be adept at dealing with incomplete manuscripts, carefully examining manuscript entries and ensuring the contextual sequence of the text, avoiding premature judgments about the manuscript's date or its authorship without substantial evidence.

- The ability to link texts with each other and their sources is vital, as it helps in constructing an approximate history of the text, recognizing that no author exists in isolation from sources and that each author subsequently becomes a source for other works.

The cataloger should be skilled in verifying annotations, documentary data such as comparisons, corrections, readings, listenings, and authorizations in manuscripts, as these are crucial indicators that help establish the manuscript's facts. (Al-Machoukhi, 2011).

- A thorough examination of the manuscript's binding techniques is important, as each historical period has its distinctive binding style, which can provide insights into the manuscript's age through its decoration and artistic features.

The aforementioned elements are crucial in achieving accurate manuscript cataloging without errors. Although modern laboratory techniques for determining the age of paper, parchment, or papyrus, as well as inks, have not yet been fully accessible to us, they are known to provide precise age estimates of the materials tested in laboratories. However, the expertise of the cataloger or verifier remains essential and significant. When we receive a copied version of the original book or manuscript, the laboratory can inform us about the age of the copy, but the origins of the composition-when it was created and to whom it belongs-' still heavily depend on the cataloger's skill, experience, and expertise.

Everything discussed is vital for establishing a correct cataloging process for manuscripts without errors. While there are modern methods for dating paper, manuscripts, papyrus, and inks, these methods have not yet reached us, and they are more accurately known through laboratory analysis. Nonetheless, the expertise of the cataloger or verifier remains indispensable. When we obtain the original book or manuscript, the laboratory can guide us on the age of the copy, but determining the original composition's date and authorship relies on the cataloger's sagacity, experience, and expertise.

8. The Reality of Cataloging Arabic Manuscripts

Writer Abdul Sattar Al-Halouji, in his work "Manuscripts and Arab Heritage," encapsulated the current state of Arabic manuscript cataloging, revealing several critical observations: (Al-Halouji, 2001).

- A significant number of Arabic manuscripts remain uncataloged, indicating a gap in the comprehensive documentation of Arab literary heritage.

- Some manuscripts are recorded in catalogs despite being physically missing, leading to discrepancies between catalog entries and actual manuscript availability.

- Various catalogs do not exclusively document manuscripts but rather encompass all library holdings under a single subject, blurring the distinction between manuscript and printed material.

- There is a lack of uniformity in cataloging systems across different published catalogs, even though they commonly categorize manuscripts by title. This preference for title-based entry over author-based entry might stem from the relative ease of dealing with titles compared to the complexities of Arabic names, with their honorifics, surnames, and commonly known names. Nevertheless, the organizational approach of these catalogs varies considerably, with some adopting thematic categorization and others differing significantly in the level of detail provided.

- The process of publishing catalogs has been fraught with errors, including inconsistencies in authors' names, titles, and dates, leading to varying attributions across different catalogs.

- Many Arabic manuscript catalogs are devoid of indices, which hampers efficient searchability and accessibility within these catalogs.

9. Efforts of Official Algerian Institutions in Cataloging Manuscript Heritage:

The endeavors of official Algerian institutions in cataloging manuscript heritage (Dorbane, 2023, p.367) are commendable and have made significant strides. These institutions have actively encouraged the public to contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage by donating or selling their manuscripts and documents to the National Library.

In September 1969, a pivotal step was taken with the formation of a committee dedicated to researching and studying manuscripts. This committee's notable founders included the Minister of Education and Information, and the Director of the National Library. The inaugural manuscript catalog was compiled in 1970 (Yahya ben Saleh, p.137) by Jaloul Bedoui and Rabeh Bounar, drawing upon earlier catalogs created by figures such as Weber Brogi, Abdel Ghani Bayoud, Mohamed Ben Abi Chanab, Baron Deslans, and Mahmoud Bouayad.

However, this initiative faced challenges as the catalogs, though prepared, were not printed or published and subsequently became lost after being transferred to the National Book Institution for publication. (Bonfikha, 1994, p.785).

Beyond these initial efforts, various organizations, including the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Endowments, have taken on the responsibility of managing manuscripts through its directorates across the country. (Yahya ben Saleh, p.137).

The Algerian National Library (Saoudi,2023,p.609) stands out in its role of collecting, preserving, restoring, and archiving manuscripts. The library's manuscript department is notable for its collection of 4,200 manuscripts, predominantly in Arabic, with a few in Persian and Turkish, spanning the 11th to 13th centuries (Lekhal,2010,p.19). Dr. Mokhtar Hassani has confirmed that the library now holds over 6,500 manuscripts, including both original works and photocopies, underlining the library's crucial role in safeguarding and cataloging Algeria's manuscript heritage .(Hassani, 2009,p.7).

The presence of manuscript catalogs in the National Library represents a significant scientific asset, offering researchers and postgraduate students easy access to preliminary information and greatly facilitating their research endeavors. These catalogs include:

The General Catalog of Algerian National Library Manuscripts (Bouayad, 1990, p.187): Printed in Paris in 1893 in French, this catalog is the 18th part of the manuscript catalogs series in public libraries in France, listing 1,987 manuscripts. (Robach, 2007, p.18).

Catalog of the National Library Manuscripts: Compiled by Abdel Ghani Bayoud during the colonial era while he served as the library curator. This catalog was relocated to the National Library in Paris post-independence. Authored in 1953 in Arabic (Awfi, 1999, p.188) and handwritten by Abdel Ghani, it describes 343 manuscripts, including 65 collections. The original version of this catalog was lost in the French Library Directorate in Paris, leaving only a draft at the Algerian National Library. (Bouayad, 1990, p.188).

- **The General Register of National Library Manuscripts:** Initiated in 1954 by the library director Mahmoud Bouayad, this computerized list catalogs 318 manuscripts, featuring more than 20 collections. (Awfi,1999,p.17)
- **Supplementary Register of National Library Manuscripts:** A typed list in Arabic by Rabeah Bounar and Jaloul Bedoui, documenting 720 manuscripts. This register has not been widely circulated outside the National Library. (Awfi, p.18)
- **Catalog of Manuscripts of Prince Abdel Kader and Hassan Ben Rahal in the National Library:** Compiled by library director Mahmoud Bouayad, this undated Arabic catalog includes 59 manuscripts, with 38 from Ibn Rahal's collection and 21 from Prince Abdel Kader's collection. (Awfi, p.19)

Ibn Hamouda Library Manuscripts Catalog: Created by Nigerian researcher Hassan Gwarzo in 1993 while studying the figure of Imam Sheikh Muhammad bin Abdul Karim Al-Maghili. Available in the library (Awfi, p.19), this catalog is deemed incomplete and requires recompilation, as noted by Dr. Mokhtar Hassani. (Hassani, 2009, p.30)

The National Library has undertaken commendable efforts in republishing certain catalogs, such as the Fagnan catalog in 1995, introduced by the then-director general Mohamed Issa Moussa, underscoring its research significance in a two-page Arabic preface. (Awfi, p.p.117.118)

Additionally, in line with the "Algiers, Capital of Arab Culture" event sponsored by the Ministry of Culture, two significant manuscript catalogs were completed, further enriching the resources available for scholarly exploration:**A. Algerian Manuscript Heritage in Algeria and Abroad:**

Prepared by Mokhtar Hassani, this comprehensive catalog spans seven parts and aims to catalog the entire Algerian manuscript heritage, encompassing collections within national, Maghrebi, Middle Eastern, and European territories. This initiative seeks to enhance accessibility to the scholarly contributions of Algerian scholars in the domain of manuscript heritage, covering both published and unpublished works .(Hassani, 2009, p.41)

B. Cataloging the Manuscript Treasuries of Adrar Province:

Specifically focusing on the treasuries of the Aoulef district, this catalog was developed by the Laboratory of Manuscripts of Islamic Civilization in North Africa at the Faculty of Humanities and Islamic Civilization at the University of Oran. It catalogs 258 manuscripts, encompassing a broad range of topics including Quranic exegesis, Islamic jurisprudence, prophetic biography, the Islamic judicial system, and diverse areas such as linguistics, culture, social sciences, history, medicine, and astronomy.(Islamic Civilization Manuscripts Laboratory, 2009, p.117)

The National Center for Prehistoric, Anthropological, and Historical Studies, along with the National Center for Manuscripts, have also contributed significantly to manuscript cataloging efforts. For example:

➤ **Adrar Province Manuscripts Catalog:**

Compiled by Gouider Bashar and Mokhtar Hassani and published by the National Center for Prehistoric Research, this catalog lists 476 manuscripts on subjects like exegesis, mysticism, jurisprudence, inheritance law, Arabic literature and grammar, monotheism, prophetic biography, theology, history, medicine, astronomy, and war machinery. It also provides insights into some manuscript collections in the region. (Bachar & Hassani, 1999, p.199)

The National Center for Manuscripts is integral in collecting, restoring, preserving, and cataloging manuscripts, thereby advancing the promotion of manuscript heritage (Kehahlia, 2021, p.p.220-226). Given the intricate nature of cataloging, which demands profound cultural and scientific knowledge, these endeavors are pivotal in unveiling the rich cultural heritage preserved in private and public collections.

Algerian academic institutions have recently enhanced their infrastructure by establishing new research laboratories dedicated to manuscript study and verification, significantly impacting the maintenance, collection, preservation, cataloging, and verification of manuscripts. Notable among these are: *The Laboratory for Collection, Study, and Verification of Regional Manuscripts and Beyond at the University of Djelfa*; *The Laboratory for Manuscripts and Verification of Literary and Linguistic Heritage at the Central University of Algiers*; *The Laboratory for Algerian Manuscripts in Africa at the University of Adrar*; *The Manuscripts Laboratory at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Bouzareah, University of Algiers*; *The Laboratory for Collection and Documentation of Folk Poetry from the Ottoman Era to the 20th Century at the University of Tlemcen*; *The Laboratory of Manuscripts of Islamic Civilization in North Africa at the University of Oran*; *The Laboratory of Manuscripts Research and Studies in Maghreb Civilization at the University of Constantine*.

These laboratories are instrumental in motivating researchers to engage with and preserve the manuscript heritage, protecting it from deterioration and loss. The national enthusiasm for cataloging manuscript heritage has prompted the initiation of cataloging processes for numerous manuscript collections, enabling these laboratories to prepare extensive catalogs.

A primary objective of these laboratories since their inception has been the cataloging, study, and verification of a vast array of rare and valuable manuscripts at the national level. To realize this ambition, students from various regions have been trained in the cataloging and verification of manuscript heritage.

The Laboratory for Collection and Documentation of Algerian Folk Poetry from the Ottoman Era to the 20th Century at the University of Tlemcen is particularly focused on the Arab, and more specifically Algerian, manuscript heritage. It aims to catalog, verify, and publish this heritage, thereby reinstating its esteemed status within the Arab cultural consciousness. The laboratory houses a team of specialized researchers skilled in inventory, statistical analysis, cataloging, and verification of manuscript heritage, engaging in a range of scientific activities within its scope.

Conclusion

The cataloging of Algerian manuscripts, while extensively documented, exhibits significant inconsistencies in data volume and quality, organization methods, cataloging approaches, and the adoption of a standardized scientific methodology. These discrepancies arise from various factors:

Many cataloging initiatives are the result of individual efforts, based on personal experience acquired through the manuscript cataloging process or text verification endeavors.

There is a noticeable absence of consistent scientific standards and criteria across the catalogs, leading to significant variations in the quality and approach of cataloging.

Precise cataloging of manuscripts to minimize errors necessitates experience, skill, and expertise in the cataloging process. Additionally, modern laboratory methods for determining the age of materials like paper, parchment, or papyrus, and inks, play a crucial role in dating manuscripts. Despite these technological advancements, the nuanced expertise of the cataloger and verifier remains indispensable, especially when dealing with copies derived from original works. The laboratory can ascertain the age of a copy, but discerning the composition's origin, its time, and its rightful association relies heavily on seasoned expertise.

The complexities underscored by the above points reveal that manuscript cataloging is a challenging and intricate task, markedly different from cataloging printed materials. It demands a wide-ranging cultural knowledge from the cataloger and necessitates a concerted effort to establish and adhere to a unified and systematic cataloging strategy.

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