

Abstract

In the past decade, there has been renewed interest in Arabic writing cultures in Africa, particularly the manuscripts created within these writing traditions. The study of these manuscripts, and of written documents in general, is dominated by philological and other textual approaches, which see the importance of the manuscripts at the level of content only. While such studies are invaluable, alternative approaches, such as those addressing the manuscripts' broader and changing social and historical contexts, are necessary for greater understanding of them as objects in society.

This paper focuses on the Islamic manuscripts of Cape Town, locally referred to as *kietaabs*, written by Muslims predominantly in the 19th century, in *jami* (Arabic-Malay) and Arabic-Afrikaans. Inspired by the idea of a 'biography' of the archive and 'the social life of things', the study traces the life of the *kietaabs*, from their creation and original use, to their role in contemporary South African society, as objects of heritage and identity. It approaches the *kietaabs* as *objects*, emphasizing their movements, status and use, rather than their content.

This approach reveals distinct phases in the *kietaabs*' life, based on their use and status in society. It also highlights how changes in the greater context surrounding the manuscripts, such as educational reform, linguistic shifts and political change, influence the dynamics of their biography. From a methodological point of view, the study provides a novel way of approaching African Arabic manuscripts, and other archival materials, offering a lens through which to view not only the texts themselves, but their role(s) in a broader socio-historical context.