

Chapter 1

Arabic Language, Mobility, and Cross- border Networking of Shinqiti Intellectuals: Mauritania, the Arab Gulf, and Beyond in the Globalized World

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1. Introduction

Mauritania occupies a distinctive position at the western edge of the Arabic-speaking world. Geographically, it lies at the intersection of North and West Africa; historically, it has been connected to trans-Saharan routes linking the Maghreb, the Atlantic Sahara, and the Sahel; and linguistically, Arabic has long been central to religious learning, literary culture, and public life. Article 6 of the Mauritanian Constitution recognizes Arabic, Pulaar, Soninke, and Wolof as national languages and Arabic as the official language. Mauritania has also been a member of the Arab League since 1973. Yet in scholarship on the modern Arab world, the country has often remained peripheral to narratives centered on Egypt, the Levant, Iraq, and the Arabian Peninsula.

This apparent marginality is misleading. Before the colonial period, the region was widely known as Bilād Shinqīt, the land of Shinqīt, after the historic Saharan town of Shinqīt. The *nisba* Shinqītī, whose plural is Shanāqīṭa, continues to identify scholars and families linked to Mauritania and has long been associated in the Arab East with a particular scholarly reputation: mastery of Arabic, poetry, Qurʾānic

learning, Islamic jurisprudence, and, above all, an exceptional culture of memorization. From the nineteenth century onward, scholars from Bilād Shinqīt travelled eastward for pilgrimage, study, teaching, publication, and employment. Their movement linked Mauritania to Cairo, Mecca, Medina, Kuwait, al-Zubayr, and other centers of Arabic and Islamic learning (al-Idrīsī 2009; Lydon 2004; Wuld al-Sālim 2012).

This chapter examines that mobility from two connected perspectives. The first is the local educational tradition that produced such scholars, especially the *maḥḍara*, the traditional Mauritanian institution of Arabic and Islamic learning. The second is the movement of Shinqītī intellectuals beyond Mauritania and the ways in which their knowledge acquired authority in Egypt and the Gulf. The argument is that mobility was not simply a later consequence of scholarly achievement. It was built into the educational culture itself: knowledge was memorized, carried, recited, copied onto portable wooden boards, transmitted from teacher to student, and ultimately transported across regions by people whose scholarly authority travelled with them.

The discussion draws on my fieldwork in Mauritania in 2012 and 2015, as well as on earlier research on Mauritanian Arabic culture and Shinqītī intellectual networks (Takeda 2014; 2019). The purpose here is not to provide a comprehensive history of Mauritania or of the *maḥḍara*. Rather, it is to show how a local tradition of Arabic linguistic and Islamic learning became a resource for cross-border knowledge production in the modern Arab world.

2. Arabic and Linguistic Culture in Mauritania

Mauritania is frequently described as the “country of a million poets” (*balad al-milyūn shā‘ir*). The expression acquired particularly wide currency in the Arab world after the Kuwaiti magazine *al-‘Arabī*

devoted a major illustrated feature to Nouakchott in its April 1967 issue (no. 101). The article, entitled “Nuwākshūt: Aḥdath ‘Āṣima fī Aqṣā Minṭaqa min Waṭani-nā al-‘Arabī” (“Nouakchott: The Newest Capital in the Farthest Region of Our Arab Homeland”), introduced Mauritania through the memorable image of “a million poets” at a time when the country’s population was approximately one million (Norris 1968; Takeda 2014; Zabbāl 1967: 70). The expression is rhetorical, but it captures an important feature of Mauritanian linguistic culture: poetry, memorization, and command of Arabic have long carried considerable social prestige. This reputation is closely connected with the country’s history of traditional learning and with the scholarly identity associated with Bilād Shinqīt.

In everyday life, many Mauritians speak Ḥassānīya, the Arabic variety historically associated with the Banū Ḥassān and now widespread across Mauritania and adjacent Saharan regions. Alongside it, *fuṣḥā*—classical and modern standard Arabic—occupies the domains of formal education, religious learning, writing, public communication, and much of the media. As elsewhere in the Arab world, the relationship between spoken and standard varieties cannot be reduced to a simple opposition. In Mauritania, however, fieldwork suggests an especially positive social valuation of *fuṣḥā* and of the ability to use it confidently. In educational and religious settings, speaking standard Arabic is not treated as artificial or socially embarrassing; it is commonly understood as a sign of learning and cultivated competence (Taine-Cheikh 2007; Takeda 2014).

This linguistic attitude is important for understanding the *maḥḍara*. The traditional curriculum does not teach Arabic simply as a means of communication. Arabic is also an object of disciplined study. Grammar (*naḥw*), morphology (*ṣarf*), rhetoric (*balāgha*), lexicography, and the close reading and memorization of classical Arabic poetry form

important parts of the traditional Arabic linguistic sciences (*‘ulūm al-‘arabīya*). Canonical pre-Islamic poetry, including the *Mu‘allaqāt*, is valued not only as literature but also as a source of authoritative linguistic attestations (*shawāhid*; sg. *shāhid*) for grammar and lexical usage. Qur’ānic orthography (*rasm*) and the system of vocalization and recitational signs known as *ḍabṭ*, discussed separately below, belong more specifically to the Qur’ānic sciences, although they share the same concern with linguistic and graphic precision.

3. *Maḥḍara* Education and the Traditional Arabic Linguistic Sciences

The *maḥḍara* is a traditional private institution of learning associated especially with Mauritania and the wider scholarly tradition of Bilād Shinqīt. The term is generally explained as a place noun derived from the root ḥ-ḍ-r, from *ḥaḍara*, “to be present” or “to attend.” In Ḥassānīya, /ḍ/ may be realized as /z/, and the form *maḥḥara* is therefore also widely used. An alternative etymology relates *maḥḥara* to the root ḥ-ẓ-r, “to prohibit” or “to restrict,” interpreting the institution as a protected or restricted space devoted to religious learning (Ibn Aḥmad 1996: 65). Mauritanian discussions of the term have long noted both explanations.

The derivation from ḥ-ḍ-r also has support in older Arabic usage. Mauritanian scholars have cited a verse by Labīd ibn Rabī‘a as a *shāhid* for this derivation. In the verse, the plural *maḥāḍir* refers to encampments or gathering sites around water sources. The same verse is also cited by classical lexicographers, including Ibn Manẓūr (1986, s.v. ḥ-ḍ-r):

فَالْوَادِيَانِ فَكُلُّ مَعْنَى مِنْهُنَّ وَعَلَى الْمِيَاهِ مَحَاضِرٌ وَخِيَامٌ

fa‘l-wāḍiyāni fa-kullu maghnan minhumū / wa ‘ala‘l-miyāhi
maḥāḍirun wa khiyāmū

“Then the two valleys and every dwelling-place of theirs; at the watering places were encampments and tents.”

The precise historical derivation of the institutional name need not be reduced to a single explanation. Both forms, however, illuminate features that became characteristic of the Mauritanian *maḥḍara*: gathering around a teacher, encampment and mobility, and a socially protected space devoted to learning.

Historically, the institution was closely adapted to a pastoral and mobile way of life. A learned teacher—usually referred to locally as *al-shaykh*, *al-murābiṭ*, or in some contexts *al-ṭālib*—taught in and around his household or tent. When the household moved seasonally with family and livestock, students who wished to continue studying could move with the teacher. In this sense, the *maḥḍara* was literally portable.

Contemporary Mauritania is far more settled, and many *maḥḍara* schools now operate in permanent locations. Nevertheless, the older model remains important for the institution’s self-understanding. The *maḥḍara* differs from a modern school not only in architecture but also in organization. Students may enter at different levels, study different texts, and progress at an individual pace under the supervision of a teacher. Earlier fieldwork-based estimates placed the number of *maḥḍara* schools in Mauritania at around eight thousand; the figure should be understood as an approximate estimate rather than a current census (Takeda 2014; 2019).

Memorization lies at the heart of *maḥḍara* pedagogy, and versified pedagogical texts are particularly valued because meter and rhyme facilitate memorization, recitation, and oral transmission. A short poem widely attributed to al-Shāfi‘ī and frequently cited in Mauritanian discussions of learning expresses this ideal succinctly:

عِلْمِي مَعِي حَيْثُمَا يَتَّبَعُنِي صَدْرِي وَعَاءٌ لَهُ لَا جَوْفَ صُنْدُوقِ
 إِنْ كُنْتُ فِي الْبَيْتِ كَانَ الْعِلْمُ فِيهِ مَعِي أَوْ كُنْتُ فِي السُّوقِ كَانَ الْعِلْمُ فِي السُّوقِ

‘ilmī ma‘ī haythumā yammamtu yatba‘unī / ṣadrī wi‘ā’un la-hū lā jawfu
 ṣundūqī

in kuntu fi l-bayti kāna l-‘ilmu fī-hi ma‘ī / aw kuntu fi ssūqi
 kāna l-‘ilmu fī ssūqi

“My knowledge is with me wherever I go; it follows me. My breast is its vessel, not the inside of a box. If I am at home, knowledge is there with me; if I am in the marketplace, knowledge is there in the marketplace.”

The point is not a rejection of writing. Rather, written texts and oral mastery reinforce one another. A book that has been fully internalized can travel without luggage. This helps explain the prominence of concise *matn* texts and, especially, versified teaching texts (*naẓm*) throughout the *maḥḍara* curriculum.

Students normally begin with the Qur’ān and subsequently proceed to texts in the Arabic linguistic sciences and the Islamic sciences. In grammar, a common progression leads from *al-Ājurrūmīya* to Ibn Mālik’s *al-Khulāṣa*, better known as the *Alfīya*, and then to more advanced Mauritanian works of commentary and supplementation. Among the most important is Ibn Būnā’s *al-Iḥmirār*. Ibn Būnā (d. 1805/6) composed approximately 1,200 additional verses to supplement points omitted or treated only briefly in the *Alfīya*, drawing particularly on Ibn Mālik’s other grammatical works. The title *al-Iḥmirār*, literally “reddening,” evokes the scholarly practice of distinguishing supplementary material through red ink. The exceptional prestige of the *Alfīya* in Mauritanian grammatical culture is expressed in the well-known phrase *naḥnu alfīyūn*—“we are people of the *Alfīya*” (al-Ya‘qūbī 2005; Takeda 2019).

The curriculum is, of course, not limited to grammar. Morphology is represented, for example, by Ibn Mālik's *Lāmīya al-Af'āl* and by Mauritanian commentarial traditions such as Wuld Zayn's *al-Ṭurra*, later revised and expanded by Muḥammad Sālim Wuld 'Addūd and also known as *al-Khiyāṭa*. Rhetoric (*balāgha*) and classical poetry are likewise important components of advanced linguistic training. The memorization and close reading of pre-Islamic poetry, including the *Mu'allaqāt*, provide students not only with a literary canon but also with a reservoir of authoritative *shawāhid* against which grammatical and lexical usage can be tested (Takeda 2019).

Lexicography likewise becomes part of memorized learning. The preface and selected sections of al-Fīrūzābādī's *al-Qāmūs al-Muḥīṭ* have traditionally been studied as texts in their own right, and commentaries on the dictionary circulated in the *maḥḍara*. Advanced scholars were celebrated not merely for being able to consult a dictionary, but for carrying substantial lexical knowledge in memory (Takeda 2019).

Great importance is also attached to precise vocalization. Students are trained to distinguish words that share the same consonantal spelling but differ in meaning according to their short vowels. One widely memorized mnemonic text is known in Mauritania simply as *Muthallath Quṭrub*. The lexical material ultimately goes back to Quṭrub's prose *Muthallath*, but the version actually used in *maḥḍara* education is a versification by 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Maghribī al-Miknāsī, also known bibliographically as *al-Mūrith li-Mushkil al-Muthallath*. Small printed editions circulating in Mauritania nevertheless bear the familiar title *Muthallath Quṭrub*. The text organizes lexical "triplets" whose consonantal skeleton is identical while meaning changes with the short vowels, turning fine distinctions of vocalization and lexical meaning into compact verse that can readily be memorized and orally transmitted (al-Miknāsī n.d.; Takeda 2019).

These practices are important because they show that the *maḥḍara* was not simply a place where inherited books were repeated. It was also a site of local scholarly production. Mauritanian scholars composed supplements, versifications, marginal commentaries, mnemonic poems, and teaching manuals that adapted widely shared Arabic texts to local pedagogical needs. The tradition therefore combined preservation with continuous reworking: canonical texts travelled into Bilād Shinqīt, were reorganized and commented upon there, and could later travel outward again through the scholars trained in this system.

The most visible material object of *maḥḍara* education is the wooden writing board, the *lawḥ*. In Qurʾānic learning, a student works with relatively small portions of text. At an early stage the teacher may write the passage on the board; at a later stage the student writes it independently, recites it repeatedly, and, after the passage has been mastered, washes the board for reuse. Oral transmission and writing thus proceed together. The board is not merely a temporary substitute for paper. In many households it is a valued object associated with family learning and may be preserved across generations.

The close association between learning and mobility is also expressed in a saying attributed to the Mauritanian scholar and religious leader Nāṣir al-Dīn (al-Idrīsī 2009: 76):

مَنْ رَكَبَ مِنْكُمْ فَرَسَهُ فَلْيَجْعَلْ لَوْحَهُ بَيْنَهُ وَبَيْنَ سَرْجِهِ، فَإِنَّ الْجَهْلَ هُوَ أَقْبَحُ مَا يَأْتِي بِهِ الْمَرْءُ
الْآخِرَةَ.

man rakiba min-kum farasa-hu fa ʿl-yajʿal lawḥa-hu bayna-hu wa bayna sarji-hi, fa-inna ʿl-jahla huwa aqbaḥu ma yaʿtī bi-hi ʿl-marʿu ʿl-ākhirā.

“Whoever among you mounts his horse should place his writing board between himself and his saddle, for ignorance is the ugliest thing a person can bring to the Hereafter.”

The image of carrying the *lawḥ* even on horseback vividly captures the portability of learning that characterized the *maḥḍara* tradition.

This practice is closely connected with the Qur'ānic sciences of *rasm* and *dabṭ*. Here *rasm* refers to the conventional orthographic forms of the Qur'ānic text, especially the spelling conventions associated with the 'Uthmānic *muṣḥaf*, while *dabṭ* concerns the diacritical, vocalic, and other graphic signs used to guide correct recitation. Although these disciplines require a high degree of linguistic precision, they belong more specifically to the traditional Qur'ānic sciences than to grammar or morphology. In Mauritanian traditional education, practical familiarity with them has had an unusually prominent pedagogical place. Students learn not only to recite the Qur'ān from memory but also to reproduce its written form with close attention to orthography and recitational notation. In some *maḥḍara* traditions, complete Qur'ānic mastery includes the ability to move accurately between memory, voice, and writing.

Mauritanian scholars developed a substantial mnemonic literature for this field. Among the standard texts is *al-Īdāḥ al-Sāṭi* 'by al-Ṭālib 'Abd Allāh al-Jakanī, commonly known in Mauritania as *Rasm al-Ṭālib* 'Abd Allāh. Another major mnemonic poem is *Kashf al-'Amā*, on Qur'ānic orthography (*rasm al-muṣḥaf*), by Muḥammad al-'Āqib al-Jakanī (Ibn Māyābā), together with the author's extensive commentary *Rashf al-Lamā* 'alā *Kashf al-'Amā* (al-Jakanī 2004; Ibn Māyābā 2006). These works are standard examples of the Shinqītī tradition of rendering technically demanding knowledge of Qur'ānic orthography and notation into concise, memorisable verse and then elaborating it through commentary (Takeda 2019).

The practical importance of such works is visible in the everyday exercise of writing Qur'ānic passages on the *lawḥ*. Knowledge is first heard, then written, memorized, checked, erased, and written again. The

cycle makes the physical act of writing part of the discipline of memory.



Figure 1. Writing Qur'ānic text on a *lawḥ* in a Mauritanian *maḥḍara*.
Source: Author's photograph, 12 March 2012.

4. Knowledge on the Move: Shinqīṭī Scholars in Egypt and the Gulf

The scholarly reputation cultivated in the *maḥḍara* did not remain confined to Mauritania. Travel for pilgrimage and the pursuit of knowledge created routes linking Bilād Shinqīṭ with the Maghreb, Egypt, the Hijaz, Iraq, and the Gulf. For Shinqīṭī scholars, the journey eastward could simultaneously be a *riḥla* for learning, a pilgrimage to Mecca, an opportunity to meet other scholars, and the beginning of a teaching or publishing career abroad. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the *nisba* al-Shinqīṭī had become recognizable in eastern Arab intellectual circles as a marker of a particular kind of learned authority (Wuld al-Sālim 2012; Takeda 2014).

(1) Ibn al-Talāmīd and the Nahḍa-era scholarly world

One prominent example is Muḥammad Maḥmūd ibn Aḥmad al-Turkuzī

al-Shinqīṭī, commonly known as Ibn al-Talāmīd (1829–1904). His career took him through Mecca and other centers before he settled in Egypt, where he became known for his command of Arabic philology, poetry, and ḥadīth. His presence in al-Azhar appears in Ṭāhā Ḥusayn’s autobiographical *al-Ayyām*, which recalls the formidable learning and memory of the “Shaykh al-Shinqīṭī” and the impression he made on advanced students (Ḥusayn 1960, vol. 2: 154; Takeda 2014). This is an important point in itself: a scholar trained in the learned tradition of Bilād Shinqīṭ had become part of the intellectual world through which one of modern Egypt’s most influential writers encountered classical Arabic learning.

Ibn al-Talāmīd’s work also extended beyond teaching. He participated in the late nineteenth-century revival of Arabic textual scholarship in Cairo, was involved in discussions of the Arabization of foreign vocabulary, and collaborated with figures associated with Muḥammad ‘Abduh’s circle. He contributed to the editing of classical works, including the large lexicographical compilation *al-Mukhaṣṣaṣ* of Ibn Sīda, and took part in the wider culture of print, textual verification, and linguistic debate that characterized the Nahḍa. His reputation illustrates how Shinqīṭī expertise entered a modernizing intellectual environment not as a relic of an isolated tradition, but as a resource for philology, education, and the revival of Arabic heritage (Takeda 2014; 2019).

(2) From Kuwait and al-Zubayr to Najd

The Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula formed another important field of Shinqīṭī mobility. Muḥammad al-Amīn al-Shinqīṭī al-Ḥasanī (1876–1932), often known as Fāl al-Khayr, travelled through Egypt, Mecca, India, Oman, Bahrain, Kuwait, al-Zubayr in southern Iraq, and Najd.

His career shows that the movement of Mauritanian scholars cannot be understood simply as migration from one country to another. It was a network of repeated journeys, personal introductions, teaching appointments, patronage, and institutional initiatives.

In Kuwait, Fāl al-Khayr taught ḥadīth in the charitable association established in the early twentieth century. In al-Zubayr he helped establish the al-Najāt Association and a school that later became an important educational institution in the region. He also spent substantial periods in ‘Unayza in Najd, where he taught a generation of students that included ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sa‘dī, later a prominent Qur’ānic commentator (al-Dulayshī 1981: 105, 146, 177; al-Idrīsī 2009: 315–320). These activities demonstrate a pattern that would become increasingly important in the twentieth century: Shinqīṭī scholars were valued not only as individual teachers but also as carriers of educational methods and scholarly curricula at a moment when new schools and institutions were being built across the Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula.

(3) Muḥammad al-Amīn al-Shinqīṭī in Saudi Arabia

A later and particularly influential case is Muḥammad al-Amīn ibn Muḥammad al-Mukhtār al-Jakanī al-Shinqīṭī (1907–1974), author of the major Qur’ānic commentary *Aḍwā’ al-Bayān fī Ḍidāḥ al-Qur’ān bi al-Qur’ān*. He travelled to the Hijaz for pilgrimage in the late 1940s and subsequently remained in Saudi Arabia, teaching in Medina and Riyadh. His expertise in Qur’ānic exegesis, legal theory, Arabic, and classical poetry earned him a prominent position in Saudi scholarly life. When the Islamic University of Medina opened in 1961, he became one of its early professors, and he also served on the founding council of the Muslim World League (al-Ṭawayn 1998; Takeda 2019).

His career represents a different stage of the same process visible in

Egypt half a century earlier. In Cairo, Shinqītī philological knowledge entered the world of print, textual editing, and Nahḍa-era linguistic reform. In Saudi Arabia, Mauritanian scholarly capital entered rapidly expanding institutions of Islamic higher education. The institutional setting had changed, but the qualities for which Shinqītī scholars were valued—memorization, textual command, Arabic eloquence, and broad training across the transmitted sciences—remained strikingly similar.

This reputation also helps explain why the name Shinqītī acquired considerable symbolic value in the Gulf. Mauritanian scholars were never a single intellectual school, and their political and theological positions varied. Yet the *nisba* often carried what might be called scholarly reputational capital: it signaled an association with a demanding tradition of Arabic and Islamic learning. In modern conditions, that reputation facilitated appointments, patronage, teaching, publication, and the creation of new scholarly networks extending well beyond Mauritania.

5. Conclusion

The case of Mauritania complicates a simple geography of center and periphery in the modern Arab world. From the perspective of Cairo, Damascus, Baghdad, or the Gulf capitals, Bilād Shinqīt may appear to lie at the far western edge of Arabic intellectual life. Yet the movement of Shinqītī scholars reveals a different map. Knowledge preserved and elaborated in Mauritanian *maḥḍara* schools travelled eastward through pilgrimage, teaching, textual scholarship, and personal networks. In Egypt it contributed to the culture of philology and classical revival; in Kuwait, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia it became part of the development of modern educational and religious institutions.

The *maḥḍara* is central to this history because it joined mobility to

a distinctive technology of learning. The portable *lawḥ*, the recited and memorized *matn*, the extensive use of versified pedagogical texts, and the study of Qur'ānic *rasm* and *ḍabt* allowed knowledge to be carried in both material and embodied forms. The teacher could move; the student could move; the board could be washed and reused; the memorized text remained. This did not make Mauritanian learning static or untouched by modernity. On the contrary, the tradition continually produced commentaries, versifications, and adaptations, and its graduates entered new institutions far from the Sahara.

Seen from this perspective, Mauritania should not be treated merely as a marginal West African or Maghribi case appended to the history of Arabic. It is better understood as one of the nodes through which Arabic linguistic and Islamic knowledge has been produced, conserved, and redistributed. The history of the Shinqīṭī scholars therefore offers a concrete answer to the larger question of this volume: knowledge moves because people, texts, memories, and institutions move together, and the routes of that movement are often longer and less centered than conventional maps of intellectual history suggest.

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Chapter 1. Arabic Language, Mobility, and Cross-border Networking of Shinqiti Intellectuals: Mauritania, the Arab Gulf, and Beyond in the Globalized World

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Before joining The University of Osaka, he was Professor at the Ritsumeikan Asia-Japan Research Organization and Deputy Director of the Asia-Japan Research Institute, Ritsumeikan University. In that capacity, he organized and hosted the NUQ-RU Global Symposium “Language, Mobility, and Knowledge Production in the New Era” in July 2023, from which the present volume originated.

Takeda conducted fieldwork in Mauritania in 2012 and 2015 on traditional education in the *maḥḍara*, focusing particularly on the transmission of the traditional Arabic linguistic sciences as well as on the study of *‘ilm al-rasm*, the discipline concerned with Qur’ānic orthography and spelling conventions. His broader research examines

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His major publications include *Developments in Contemporary Arabic and the Emergence of a New Arab Culture: From the Gulf States and Egypt to Mauritania* (in Japanese; Nakanishiya Shuppan, 2019), *New Express Plus Arabic: Audio Download Edition* (in Japanese; Hakusuisha, 2026), and the Arabic-language article “Juhūd Ruwwād al-Nahḍa wa al-Majāmi‘ al-Lughawiyya fī Iḥyā’ al-Lugha al-‘Arabiyya wa Taḥdīthi-hā fī al-‘Ālam al-‘Arabī al-Ḥadīth,” in *Kyoto Bulletin of Islamic Area Studies* (2012).