

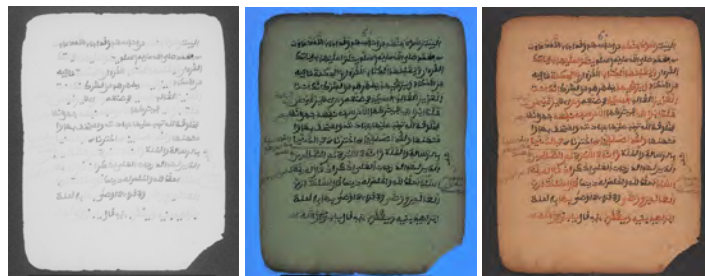


Art Conservation *and historical documents*

The thick stack of brittle papers covered in dense Arabic writings does not at first look like a rare cultural treasure. But as Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Arts Conservation (WUDPAC) second-year Fellow Karissa Muratore learned while studying scientific instruments and techniques used in conservation, the manuscript is rare and also a potential treasure trove of information about

generally unstudied Islamic Africa.

The manuscript also may be sacred; it is a tafsir, a critical explanation and interpretation of the Qur'an, often used as a teaching tool. If this use is determined to make it an object of "religious reverence," the pages require special handling as specified by Islamic law. The tafsir was



handwritten from memory in the early 1940s in Gambia by a man named Fode Suleyman Demba as he prepared to become a Muslim Iman, or religious leader. In 1967, after years of teaching and traveling, Demba gave the tafsir to anthropologist Peter Weil. The two men became friendly while Weil, now Associate Professor Emeritus at the University of Delaware, was in Gambia working toward his Ph.D. The tafsir is destined for academic study by scholars. Karissa's goal is to identify and understand the materials from which it was made and their state of degradation, along with the manuscript's religious context, so that an appropriate plan can be made for its handling and future conservation.

Karissa, a library and archives major, has organized her study around three material aspects of the tafsir: the paper on which it is written, the black and red inks with which it was written and annotated, and the leather used to make the decorated case in which it was carried. She also will attempt to identify the sizing used on the pages. Islamic law forbids contact between religiously reverential objects and impure materials such as certain animal products and liquid intoxicants. Gelatin sizing and alcohol are commonly used in conservation treatment, so a better understanding of the cultural context of this item is crucial before a treatment plan can be developed. While Karissa thinks the paper was imported, she believes the inks were made from native plants and that the leather came from the skins of local livestock. She theorizes that fingerprints found on some pages belonged to Demba.

Karissa hopes that through her study and later treatment, the manuscript will continue to live on and teach, perhaps not as it was originally intended, but in other, equally significant, ways.



ARTC Spotlight—July 2019

The University of Delaware's Art Conservation Department educates and trains professional conservators who are well versed in the treatment, analysis, documentation, and preventive conservation of individual artifacts and entire collections. For more news about our students and other department activities visit our web site at www.artcons.udel.edu.

Top: WUDPAC Fellow Karissa Muratore examining the tafsir's ink and paper under magnification. Above: Setting up the energy-dispersive x-ray fluorescence (ED-XRF) spectroscopy instrument to analyze ink for potential metal components. Above, right (l-r): a page of the tafsir viewed in infrared (IR), long-wave ultraviolet (UV), and ambient light. IR was used to identify and/or distinguish between iron-based and carbon-based inks, UV-induced fluorescence helped characterize materials in and/or damage to the paper. Right: Light brushing of surface dirt on tafsir pages; the decorated leather case is placed to the side of the workstation. Images: Y.L. Choi, M. King, K. Muratore, and M. Tedone.

