

The Bohra Manuscript Treasury as a Sacred Site of Philology: a Study in Social Codicology

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Abstract

This article examines the social meaning of philology in Arabic from the perspective of a contemporary Indian Shiʿi Muslim community, known as the Alawi Bohras. Rather than approaching philology as a tradition of canonical texts, it considers philology as a social act: a set of practices that are imbedded socially in the community. We focus on the community's *khizāna*, or manuscript treasury, and investigate its social role as a sacred site of philology, its Arabic manuscripts being only accessible to the highest clerics. Even though inaccessible to believers, the *khizāna* manuscripts have rich social lives as objects of concealment, agency, and healing. These social lives precisely lay bare the encounter between the philological and the community. As a study in social codicology that explores this encounter, the case of the Alawi Bohras is an invitation to rethink the social meaning of philology and manuscripts in Muslim societies.

Keywords

Alawi Bohras – Arabic manuscripts – social codicology – *khizāna* – philology – anthropology

Introduction

This article looks at Alawi Bohra manuscript repositories as sacred sites of philology. Rather than approaching philology in an Arabic-Islamic context as a tradition of canonical texts, it considers philology to be a social act. Through this lens, the article examines the social meaning of philology from the perspective of a contemporary Shiʿi Muslim community in India: the Alawi Bohras of Baroda.

What is philology in the Bohra context, who has the right to practice it, and how is philology spatially and materially embedded in the community—these are questions this article will explore. In the first section I focus on the central site where philology takes place in the Bohra community: the *khizānat al-kutub*, or manuscript treasury: a sacred space inaccessible to most believers, let alone researchers. In the context of these manuscript treasuries and their conditions of access, I argue, Arabic plays a unique role as a language and script of secrecy. In the second section of this article I concentrate on the Arabic manuscripts enshrined in the *khizāna*. I will demonstrate that these manuscripts, even though they are considered secret due to their esoteric content, have rich social lives through their materiality as objects of concealment, agency, physical consumption, and healing.

In the third section I describe my encounters with, and active participation within the community and its day-to-day life, including archival and other socio-philological practices: from book practices and scribal rituals to various modes of ‘consumption’, to borrow Arjun Appadurai’s term, through reading, editing, cataloguing, collecting, to veneration of sacred scripts and book hands, enshrining, and, finally, to discarding.¹ It is the study of the encounter between the philological on the one hand, in this case the world of manuscripts and their repositories, and people, on the other, that I term ‘social codicology’.² As a study in social codicology, this article investigates the tension inherent in this encounter, i.e. “what people do with texts”, whether printed or handwritten, and how the social informs the philological and vice versa.

Rather than relying on academic discursive practices that have made manuscripts in Muslim contexts the object of studying “the other”, my starting point is the Bohras’ perspective on what it means to practice philology. This means observing the Bohras and their manuscripts at work. The case of the Bohras, I argue, challenges current methodologies and parameters of studying manuscripts in Arabic Muslim contexts, acknowledging the fact that reading them as objects and texts is important, yet it is not the only way to practice philology.

1 This article is based on ethnographic, archival, and codicological fieldwork conducted in Baroda, India, between September and December 2012. See Olly Akkerman, *The Bohra Dark Archive and the Language of Secrecy: A Codicological Ethnography of the Royal ‘Alawī Bohra Library in Baroda* (PhD Diss., Freie Universität Berlin, 2016). Presently, the thesis is in preparation as a monograph under the working title *Script, Access, and Secrecy Across the Indian Ocean. The Alawī Bohra Treasury of Books*. Arjun Appadurai uses ‘commodities’ to describe the value people attribute to ‘things’, which, as we will see in this article, is helpful for understanding the social meaning of Bohra manuscripts. Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 3.

2 Akkerman, *The Bohra Dark Archive*, 12.

The Alawi Bohras and the Treasury of Manuscripts: the Community

Closed off to the outside world through an oath of secrecy, the Alawi Bohras are a small but thriving Muslim merchant community from Gujarat, India, consisting of around ten thousand believers. The social practice of *taqiyya* (dissimulation of one's religious affiliation) is prevalent among believers, and therefore not much is known about the community, let alone its manuscript repositories.³ The Alawis are Bohras, meaning that they consider themselves to be Musta'li Tayyibi Shi'i Isma'ilis, following a line of Imams that dates back to the concealment of Imam al-Tayyib in Yemen in the twelfth century.⁴ The community of Musta'li Tayyibi Isma'ilis in India consists of three groups: the Dawoodis, followed by the considerably smaller Alawi Bohras, and the Sulaymani Bohras. Each of these Bohra groups follows a separate genealogy of spiritual leaders, known as *Dā'ī* or *Saiyedna* (Ar. *Ṣayyidnā*).⁵ Saiyedna Abu Sa'eed il-Khayr Haatim Zakīyuddin is the present 45th *Dā'ī* of the Alawis and the head of its sacerdotal family.⁶

The Alawis have their religious headquarters, including the royal palace of their *Dā'ī*, in the old Mughal city of Baroda. The majority of believers reside in the Alawi Bohra *mohallah* (quarter). Even though a small diaspora can be found in the Gulf, and, to a lesser extent, in the global North, the Alawis' network and social cohesion as a community is remarkable.⁷ Within the community, the presence of the *Dā'ī* in the daily lives of believers, wherever they reside, can be explained socially, through his spiritual position as head of the clerical hierarchy. The *Dā'ī* derives legitimacy from his *genealogy*, which according to the Bohra interpretation of the Ismaili knowledge system puts him in the theological category of semi-infallibility, and from his custodianship of *books*.

3 See Akkerman, *The Bohra Dark Archive*, "The Bohra notion of *taqiyya*," 71, 72.

4 Not to be confused with the Agha Khani Nizari Ismailis, who are currently following a living Imam in the person of Kareem Agha Khan IV.

5 See for a more detailed description Tahera Qutbuddin, "Bohras," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 3rd ed., ed. Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas and Everett Rowson, Brill online. She estimates one million Dawoodis, 8,000 Alawis and 8,000 Sulaymanis. According to the Alawi Bohra clerical headquarters, the Alawi community includes 10,000 believers.

6 <http://alavibohra.org/history.htm>, accessed January 9, 2018.

7 Jonah Blank has observed a similar pattern among the Dawoodis in his ethnography. Jonah Blank, *Mullahs on the Mainframe: Islam and Modernity among the Dawoodi Bohras* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2001), 159.

The *Khizāna*

The Alawi Bohra *khizānat al-kutub*, or treasury of books, in Baroda houses a collection of circa 450 Arabic manuscripts of Ismaili authors from Yemen, Fatimid Egypt and North Africa, ranging from historical accounts to *fiqh* compendia, philosophical treatises, and *bāṭinī* (esoteric) literature. According to the narrative of the community, its manuscript tradition derives from the royal libraries of the Fatimid Imams of North Africa and Egypt (909–1191 AD) and was transmitted to Yemen in the late twelfth century, and finally, via Indian Ocean trade, to Gujarat in the seventeenth century.⁸ Moreover, manual copying of Arabic Ismaʿīli manuscripts is a sacred tradition that continues until the present day, playing a vital role in strengthening the community's contemporary identity and hierarchical structures and accommodating notions of the afterlife.⁹

In the absence of the hidden Imam in the present time, the Dāʿī is the sole custodian of the community's repository of handwritten books. As such he is responsible for the preservation of its manuscript collection and the traditions that surround it.¹⁰ The Dāʿī is not just an ordinary individual in the community who has privileged access to the manuscripts. Rather, he embodies these manuscripts, through manual copying, reading, memorizing, editing, collating, collecting, transmitting, and preserving them. In this role as both cleric and scribe, he is seen as the living *khizāna*. Practicing "philology" in this context, which includes all of the above-mentioned practices, is considered a sacred obligation that comes with great responsibility. Much more than a "heritage" in the secular sense, the collection of the treasury of manuscripts is seen as the sacred capital of the Alawi Bohras, whose communal identity is inextricably linked to these texts and their material transmission.

Through the lens of the community, the *khizāna* is considered a sacred devotional space that can only be entered after abiding by its unwritten rules. In order to access it, one first needs personal authorised permission of the Dāʿī, followed by oaths of secrecy, rituals of initiation, dress code, and physical purification. In practice, access is prohibited for the majority of believers, except for the Dāʿī's closest clerical confidants, which are a handful of, mostly male, trusted family members. According to my observation among the Alawis, as

8 Akkerman, *The Bohra Dark Archive*, 49–51.

9 Ibid., 291–332.

10 As this article was written from the perspective of the community, I have deliberately chosen to use the term used by the community, *khizāna*, or treasury of manuscripts, instead of "library" or "archive".

an institution of power with very specific conditions of access, the treasury of manuscripts is at the centre of the day-to-day life of the community. In this sense, it functions not only as a treasury of manuscripts, but also as the office of the Dā'ī. While a lay person may access the *khizāna* as the Dā'ī's office, accessing the treasury of manuscripts, which occupies the same room, is restricted. This tension is always present in this space: believers are granted an audience with the Dā'ī and see manuscripts lying around or stored in cupboards, but are not permitted to touch or read them. I witnessed that this tension is crucial to how the *khizāna* functions: visitors need to see what they cannot access. Through its specific conditions of access, I argue, the *khizāna* separates those who have the power to see, touch, read, and copy the manuscripts, from the rest of the community.¹¹ It separates those who can practice philology, and thus rule the community, from those who cannot.

Arabic and the *Khizāna*

The Alawi Bohra *khizāna* is considered a sacred space that is central to the community, yet one that is not accessible to all. Arabic, as an oral and written language, and even *naskh* as a script form has a special status in the treasury of manuscripts and contributes to its inaccessibility.

Within the space of the treasury of books, Arabic is the original language of the chain of transmission of Ismaili manuscript copies from Fatimid Egypt and Yemen. The Bohras have preserved this Arabic Ismaili philological tradition that travelled over sea, as opposed to the Persian Ismaili tradition, which travelled over land in Persian. It is because of the Bohras' uninterrupted link to this maritime Middle Eastern past that the manuscript corpus of the *khizāna* is almost entirely in Arabic. This is unusual in the social linguistic context of Gujarat and South Asia at large, where either Gujarati or other vernacular languages are spoken, and where, with few exceptions, the languages of scholarship are Persian or Urdu.¹²

Furthermore, Arabic *naskh* is favoured and cultivated in scribal practice as a script, as opposed to *nasta'liq*. The superiority of *naskh* in Bohra philological practice, and its association with Arabic in the *khizāna* is so prevalent that the few manuscripts written in Urdu or Persian are still transcribed in *naskh* bookhands. In the larger context of the community, all devotional literature,

¹¹ Akkerman, *The Bohra Dark Archive*, 333–35.

¹² See for an exception the intertwining of Arabic and Tamil in Torsten Tschacher's article in this issue.

with the exception of the Qur'an, is written in *Lisān al-da'wa* (lit. the language of the community): the Bohra sociolect which is a mix of Gujarati and Urdu written in *naskh* script.¹³

The question of access to the *khizāna* and its manuscripts thus does not only concern space, it also concerns the learning of advanced Arabic, which, beyond memorizing the Qur'an, is not allowed for believers. Only the highest clerics are trained in classical Arabic, of which one needs a high command in order to read or copy manuscripts. As such, Arabic as a language and *naskh* as a script are employed as a language of secrecy. After all, the treasury of manuscripts has no physical locks or keys: in theory, any believer could enter its space and even pick up a manuscript. He or she would, however, not be able to decipher its *naskh* book hands, let alone understand its highly philosophical vocabulary and esoteric content.

Practicing Philology in Bohra Baroda

Thus far we have seen that the *khizāna*'s social function as the office of the clerical headquarters and the manuscript repository is that of a treasury that enshrines Arabic texts as sanctified objects from the past. "Sanctified" and "enshrined" are not meant to convey that the manuscripts are inert objects of material culture. On the contrary, they are part of a living manuscript culture and have rich social lives, which we will explore in detail in section three.

The *khizāna* is a modern-day manuscript scriptorium. It is the space where philology *takes place*. The verb "to take place" is used as philology in this context is a social act, a set of sacred practices and rituals that take place within the space of the *khizāna*, and gives it meaning. The *taking place* of philological practices such as manual copying, reading, memorizing, editing, collating, collecting, orally transmitting, and preserving, is carried out by the Dā'ī and his confidants, as mentioned above. The question remains, however, how do the clerics conceptualise these practices, what do they mean to them, and how do they position themselves as scholars, and scribes? In other words, what does philology mean in the Bohra context?

Let us take the example of the scribal culture of the *khizāna*, which has a set of rituals that connects many philological practices. As we will see in section

13 The Bohras refer to their community as "*da'wa*" (Ar. "propaganda"). The term goes back to the time of Ismaili missionary activities in Gujarat, in the eleventh century AD, which are still associated with the community today. Arabic, mixed with the local Gujarati, became the language of conversion.

three, manuscript copying is part of a long tradition of philological practices, transmitted uninterruptedly from father to son by generations of Dā'īs, dating back to the manuscript cultures practiced in medieval times in Yemen. Following this clerical narrative, it would be easy to essentialise the *khizāna* as a space which has functioned untouched by the outside world, untouched by colonial in(ter)ventions, such as the printing press, or the emergence of the modern nation state.

While observing the life of the *khizāna*, I learnt that the Dā'ī, among others of his close family members, holds a degree in Islamic Studies from the Indian university system. This intellectual encounter between the transmission of Bohra clerical traditions on the one hand, and what Bohra clerics take from the Islamic Studies curriculum on the other, is important in understanding why the *khizāna* works the way it does today. First, it legitimises the Dā'ī's position in the community as spiritual head and as an academic. Second, this encounter has shaped the way the clerics think of and deal with their manuscripts. While following their own sacred traditions of manuscript transmission and consumption, at the same time they rely on their academic training, which is heavily rooted in the tradition and vocabulary of colonial scholarship in British India and "Western" philology. This constant negotiation between the two epistemological worlds shapes the tradition of Bohra philology that is practiced in the *khizāna* and determines how the treasury of manuscripts is understood.

For example, notions of the *Urtext*, stemma, and critical apparatus, are effortlessly combined with textual reconstruction and handwritten critical edition making of fresh manuscript copies, which in turn, are used for oral recitation and *ijāza* (license) transmission, and veneration through their sacred materiality via the bookhand of the Dā'ī. On the level of academic discourse, the Dā'ī closely follows publications in the field of Ismaili Studies about his own community, and Ismaili literature, which impacts his personal study of the *khizāna*'s corpus. Furthermore, I observed how the clerics use academic publications to reconstruct the historical narrative of their community, legitimising the Alawi Bohra's position in the world.

Observing the Treasury of Manuscripts at Work

Along the lines of anthropologist Appadurai and his *The Social Life of Things*, it was recently suggested that we need to start *practicing codicology* (the material study of manuscripts) *as a social science*, as "texts do have a social life,

which we need to know about if we want to understand them properly.”¹⁴ As a classically trained codicologist introduced to the world of manuscripts in sterile university libraries, I could never fully grasp what *practicing codicology as a social science* meant, nor what was meant by the social lives of texts, until I was confronted with the Bohra *khizāna* and the sacred materiality that was attributed to the written word, whether through manuscript repositories and their specific conditions of access or the philological practices that kept this tradition alive.

The Bohra's modern-day manuscript scriptorium, as we have seen, is home to a set of philological practices that are deeply rooted in the sacred traditions of the community on the one hand, and in the classical Islamic Studies training of the clerical elite on the other. The cleric's ability to negotiate these realms to his advantage explains why I was able to access the community, and its manuscript repository. It was in the summer of 2012 that I received an official invitation by the Dā'ī to stay in his royal household as the community's "court historian". I have discussed the story of my access to the community, its social practices of *taqīyya* to the outside world, and the *khizāna* in detail elsewhere.¹⁵ Crucial in this process was my training in Islamic Studies and codicology, which was recognised by the clerics as academic capital. My experience with Islamic manuscripts eventually would lead to access to the *khizāna* and the invitation to prepare a private catalogue for the Dā'ī.

My gender turned out to be a decisive factor in the process of access, as the community took me in because as a woman, I had to be taken care of. My gender thus provided a special kind of access. In a practical sense, perhaps, it limited my movements outside the community, yet at the same time it gave me unique insights into the day-to-day life of believers and, moreover, after I had gained the trust of the clerics, access to their entire manuscript collection. I was often told that, had I been a man, living in the community would have been impossible. I consider this and various other experiences related to positionality and gender, such as notions of purity and chastity and practicing philology, central to my personal experience of observing the Bohra treasury of manuscripts at work.

Even though unintentional at first, conducting archival fieldwork within the Bohra community and accessing and cataloguing its living *khizāna* became an exercise in ethnographic observation. Trained to "work with" perfectly preserved manuscripts in special collections reading rooms, ordering

14 Buskens, "Paper Worlds", 5. Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things*, 3.

15 Akkerman, *The Bohra Dark Archive*, 20–47.

books by filling out a library form, opening them on cushions while wearing gloves, this world, the world of a living Indian Bohra manuscript repository *at work*, was completely alien to me. Cataloguing these manuscripts day in and day out, writing codicological descriptions in pencil while sitting on the floor, surrounded by heaps of manuscript leaves and scrolls, the only research tools available to me were a notebook, a ruler, and a traditional *rida* (the Bohra equivalent of a burqa with a cape).

Cataloguing a living manuscript treasury was an experience far removed from the sterile reading rooms of the libraries I knew so well. The success of accessing the Bohra *khizāna* can be attributed to the fact that, during my presence in the community, the codicologist was forced out of her academic comfort zone, making use of anthropological research methods and (participant) observation. “Going native” was thus not only a way to negotiate access to the *khizāna* but, more importantly, completely placed the social life of this institution and its manuscripts at the centre. Practicing philology *with* the Bohras, observing their living manuscript scriptorium for months and actively participating in it, led me to a social understanding of codicology, the study of manuscripts and their repositories. It is the study of this encounter between texts, and what people do *with* it, that I term social codicology.

The Life Cycle of Bohra Manuscripts

Through the lens of social codicology, I observed that the social lives of the individual manuscripts are constantly in flux throughout their material life cycle. As material objects, manuscripts have life cycles from the moment they are brought into being, to their various modes of consumption, to their demise.¹⁶ The social lives of texts throughout these life cycles are constantly subject to change as their meanings change within different ritual, cultural, geographical, spatial, and temporal contexts.

For example, as soon as an esoteric Bohra manuscript circulates outside the community, ending up in a university library or museum, it is no longer considered secret as it can be accessed freely by the academic community or

16 See Buskens, “Trash to Treasure,” 197. Igor Kopytoff introduced the term *cultural biographies* in his “The Cultural Biography of Things,” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 64–91. Konrad Hirschler uses *documentary life cycle* when describing the reuse of Mamluk legal documents in his lecture “Documentary Life-Cycles: Reuse of Mamluk Legal Documents,” Fourth Conference of the School of Mamluk Studies, American University of Beirut, May 11–14, 2017.

museum visitors. In such a new context, the invisible locks and keys of Bohra *khizānas* and manuscripts disappear and the object acquires a new social life as an object of academic study or as a museum piece.¹⁷ To problematise this notion further, the narratives of these social lives can even be dichotomous. Though considered secret by the community, many Bohra manuscripts contain traces of popular reading which indicate circulation outside clerical milieus. As we will see, several social lives can be attributed to one and the same object simultaneously throughout its material existence. In the following sections, we will go through the life cycles of Bohra manuscripts, from their *birth* in the scriptorium, to their various modes of *consumption* as objects, to refer to Appadurai once more, and *veneration*, to their inevitable codicological *demise* despite anti-aging attempts, and finally to their social *afterlife*.

Birth: Manuscript Copying as an Act of Jihād

Manuscripts, as John Dagenais describes, come into being when they are turned into another.¹⁸ As mentioned earlier, the Alawi Bohra clerics continue to copy, collate, and edit their rich manuscript collection manually in their *khizāna* according to ancient traditions of secrecy and rituals of initiation. In the final stages of my social codicological fieldwork I was initiated into the different stages of how these manuscripts are copied, a great honour Bohra clerics consider an act of *jihād*. Through *philological participant observation* I learnt that, according to the tradition of Bohra scribal culture, manuscript copying does not start with pen and paper. Instead, it is first and foremost a matter of one's state of mind and etiquettes related to time, space, body (including posture and sartorial practices), and to ritual and spiritual purity.¹⁹

The copying process, I observed, has two aspects. First, there is the social dimension of the *scribal*, that is, copying an experience, which includes various rituals related to the scribe's habitus, such as sartorial practices, posture, the

17 The idea of invisible locks and keys that everyone respects derives from Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space. The Classic Look of How We Experience Intimate Spaces*, trans. Maria Jolas (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 81. As a concept it is very useful to better understand the social role of the Bohra *khizāna* as its inaccessibility is something all believers of the community are aware of. It is an unwritten rule in the community, and therefore the gate of the *khizāna*, which can be found in the house of the royal family, is always open.

18 John Dagenais, *The Ethics of Reading in Manuscript Culture: Glossing the Libro de Buen Amor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 16–17.

19 Akkerman, *The Bohra Dark Archive*, 320–32.

reciting of Qur'anic verses before commencing, and ritual purity. Second, the *scriptural* elements which are the technical and aesthetic practices of manuscript copying. Scribal and scriptural cultures together form the notion of what I call *scribal politics*: all choices made by the scribe (whether stylistic or ritualistic) while copying, collating, or editing a codex, actively give shape to the material culture of the Bohra treasury of manuscripts.²⁰

The scribe, in this context, has agency as it is his or her scribal mind and book hand which, sometimes even unintentionally, introduces new features which are copied from generation to generation, creating new paratextual traditions and, on a macro-level, transforming manuscript cultures.²¹ In the case of the Bohra *khizāna*, the agency of the scribal mind can be traced and reconstructed codicologically, through the identification of paratextual features in the margins of incipits, colophons, fly leaves etc., and witnessed through ethnographic observation.

The practice of manually copying manuscripts in this context is another example of the possibilities of combining ethnographic observation with codicology. The long hours spent in codicological participant observation, even as an outsider, turned out to be crucial for understanding and experiencing what is a manuscript *khizāna* at work. Only through such participation was I able to understand why copying a manuscript is considered an act of *jihād*: it is very labour-intensive. Physically and psychologically it is a painful *effort* that requires great patience, dedication, endurance and grit.²²

Social Life: Consumption and Veneration through Paratexts

Throughout their material existence and consumption, texts and documents come in various book forms and sizes. It is important to show the direct but often overlooked connection between codicological book format and social usage. Not all texts look like the classical codex. Writing surfaces are often recycled into other codicological forms within manuscript cultures and repositories. Single leaf manuscripts are re-bound in *majmū'a* compilations, book snippets are turned into talismans, and damaged folios are used as support for

20 Ibid.

21 See Esther-Miriam Wagner, Ben Outhwaite, and Bettina Beinhoff, ed., *Scribes as Agents of Language Change* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013). In the context of sharia courts in Iran in the 19th century, see Zahir Bhalloo and Omid Rezai, "A *shar'ī* court document from Neyrīz, Fārs (1303/1886)," *Studia Iranica* 46/1 (2017): 49–77.

22 Akkerman, *The Bohra Dark Archive*, 320–32. Annemarie Schimmel, *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1990), 39.

bindings. These material transformations and the temporality of their physical appearance are social lives in and of themselves that deserve academic attention.²³

The collection of the Bohra *khizāna* in Baroda is materially very diverse. Its cupboards contain scrolls, miniature *saḥīḥ* notebooks, bound and unbound codices of different sizes, poster-sheet documents, and single-leaf texts. Participating in the community's ceremonies while cataloguing these various "book" formats at the same time, I became aware of the strong link between the social role of these manuscripts and their physical appearance. For instance, texts that had a distinct ceremonial function were recorded in the form of scrolls. I witnessed on several occasions the public display of scrolls describing the appointment of a new Dā'ī by his predecessor or *waqf* property belonging to the community displayed in mosques and mausoleums during gatherings and processions. As scrolls, they were easier to open and more portable than a codex. Secret texts, on the other hand, only to be read after initiation, were bound in heavy leather flap-bindings and came in the form of a codex, enabling the reader to keep the text to himself while being surrounded by others.

It is, however, not only the physical appearance which establishes the significance of the manuscript and helps believers to understand what they can and cannot access. According to Peter Beal, it is the authority the manuscript has and the place it occupies in the chain of transmission, which constitutes its meaning.²⁴ A fascinating feature of the Bohra philological tradition is that the dichotomy between secret texts and ceremonial public texts cannot only be traced in the material form of the manuscript, but is also represented in the rich, previously mentioned paratextual traditions they contain. I observed that manuscripts meant for public usage were not only considered vehicles of knowledge but were also used as talismans and objects for various healing rituals (such as the drinking of Qur'anic scripture dissolved into water), a tradition which can be traced both textually in the manuscripts through commentary traditions, and in the day-to-day practice of believers. Examples of these paratextual features are descriptions on how to take Qur'anic omens, planetary pie charts (meant for the *shaykh* to interpret whether a believer is pregnant), recipes for making amulets, lists of auspicious and inauspicious days, glossaries, and writing exercises.

23 See for the material transformations of multiple text manuscripts: Michael Friedrich and Cosima Schwarke, ed., *One-Volume Libraries: Composite and Multiple-Text Manuscripts* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016).

24 Peter Beal, *A Dictionary of English Manuscript Terminology 1450–2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 244.

I could only come to understand how these popular practices were carried out with manuscripts *that were not supposed to be read* when I observed and participated in these practices in the day-to-day life of the *khizāna*. During these rituals, performed by the Dā'ī, manuscripts were taken out of their cupboards. Instead of being read by the clerics, they were used for talismanic purposes so that their existence was known and the hierarchies of power between those who could access and those who could not were constantly demarcated.²⁵

Manuscripts that were carriers of secret esoteric knowledge contained marginalia which made the text, or even the script of the book even more inaccessible to the uninitiated reader. Examples include curses, secret alphabets and numerals, and invocations to protect the manuscript from demise. These rich paratextual traditions, whether protecting the reader talismanically or protecting the text *from* the uninitiated reader, can be traced in Bohra manuscripts of all genres and periods. Through social practices of healing and secrecy Bohra manuscript culture is kept alive today. It is the living link between the sacred domain of text and script and the profane realm of the community.

Demise: Manuscripts as Fortresses of the *Kabīkaj*

Venerated as secret and inaccessible objects, Bohra manuscripts are embedded in the community through their social lives. Outside the realm of clean university libraries, books are, however, often also *lived in*. While cataloguing the manuscript collection in Baroda, I observed a large diversity of tropical flora and fauna living in books, rotting, crawling, jumping, nesting, dying and so forth, and the long process of demise.²⁶

Demise is the main reason why Bohra clerics continue to copy manuscripts on a daily basis. The collection of *khizāna* is thus in a constant state of flux. While, at times, its holdings are enriched with fresh material and very old copies that accidentally come to light, Bohra manuscripts also suffer biological damage in the humid climate of Gujarat. For example, termite invasions are capable of eating through entire codices, furniture, and even houses in a matter of hours.²⁷ Manuscripts I encountered were often in a terrible codicological state, their leaves completely eaten away by termite attacks, monsoon water damage, inks biting away papers, scrolls and spines of codices which would

25 Akkerman, *The Bohra Dark Archive*, 333–35.

26 To my dismay, some of these Barodian termites crossed over to me: another social encounter the codicologist did not see coming.

27 Akkerman, *The Bohra Dark Archive*, 206.

crack when opening the codex, aggressive moulds, discolorations due to failed restoration attempts such as lamination, “suicidal” re-binding, traces of censorship, the circumcision of marginalia, and so on.²⁸

The realm of the preservation of books perfectly highlights the link between the social and the textual, as the *Kabikaj* example illustrates. Bohra manuscripts contain very rich traditions of marginalia, referred to here as paratexts. A common paratextual feature in this regard is the *Yā Kabikaj* (“Oh *Kabikaj*”) invocation, which is the name of a very bitter plant known as the *Ranunculus Asiaticus*, the leaves of which were inserted in manuscripts of Middle Eastern provenance as a local and very effective termite repellent.²⁹ In the South Asian context, however, *Ranunculus Asiaticus* historically was not available and thus the tradition of writing the invocation of the name of the *Kabikaj* plant in Arabic on fly-leaves and around colophons became common. Within the context of Bohra scribal culture, the tradition of writing the *Kabikaj* invocation acquired new meaning as the *Kabikaj* is known in oral traditions as the King of cockroaches. It is supposedly a terrifying creature whose reputation is so notorious that termites and insects will not even come close to the book. Moreover, the *Kabikaj* formula is believed to protect the book from the uninitiated reader which, in the context of Ismaili esoteric texts, includes all believers except for the Dāʿī and his inner circle.

The case of the *Kabikaj* exemplifies not only that manuscripts have a social life in the context of their communal or institutional embeddedness through libraries, collections, and archives, or ritually in their codicological form as a codex as carriers of script or as secret objects, but also that paratexts have a social life as well. It shows that, on a micro-level, different codicological features are constantly in flux, acquiring new meanings in different contexts and changing geographic environments through the introduction of new scribal practices.

28 With “suicidal” bindings I mean circumcising damaged margins so extensively and binding the quires so tightly that it is impossible to open the codex. “Bohra bookbinding: from spine to cover,” *The Bohra Dark Archive*, 245.

29 Adam Gacek, “The Use of ‘*Kabikaj*’ in Arabic Manuscripts,” in *Manuscripts of the Middle East 2* (1986), 49–53. See also Gacek, *Arabic Manuscripts*, 137–38. Hans Wehr mentions the *Ranunculus Asiaticus* as the *Asiatic Crowfoot* on page 812 of his Arabic-English Dictionary under *Kabikaj*. Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic. Third Edition* (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1971). The taxonomy report of the *Ranunculus Asiaticus*, as listed in the *U.S. National Plant Germplasm System* indeed confirms that the botanical species is common in the Middle East but does not grow in South Asia. It lists the contemporary popular names of the plant, which includes Persian Crowfoot or Persian Buttercup and mentions that it is mostly used for ornamental purposes. <https://npgsweb.ars.grin.gov/gringlobal/taxonomydetail.aspx?id=30814>, accessed January 18, 2018.

The Social Afterlife of Manuscripts

At some point in time and space, even the material life cycle of the most sacred objects and bookhands comes to an end. In the case of manuscripts in any sacral context, the transformation from the material into the immaterial is problematic as one is faced with the phenomenon of what Adina Hoffman and Peter Cole describe as *sacred trash*: texts that can no longer be used but at the same time cannot be disposed of because of the sacred script(ure) it contains.³⁰

In Baroda, the fragility of manuscripts as *objects that perish* and the many states of decay and demise I observed became apparent after leaving the *khizāna* each evening, and finding manuscript dust and snippets of folios in the many layers of my pious Bohra dress. Some of these manuscript fragments contained entire words written on them in very old and beautiful scribal hands. These fragments were not just random scribbles. Rather, they were the bookhands of highly esteemed scholars from Yemen and the legendary infallible Dā'is from Gujarat, containing secret esoteric knowledge and magical powers. In short, objects that should not be disposed of but instead be treasured and stored, buried or consumed with dignity.

What is one supposed to do with manuscript snippets that accidentally make their way into one's attire outside the libraries they belong to? This was yet another social codicological predicament for which I was not prepared. When consulting the *shaykhs* on this matter, I was informed that the most respectful thing with the "remains" of deceased manuscripts was to dissolve them in water. The dust of the manuscripts was meant to be ingested by believers through drinking during ceremonies, a practice which is considered a great blessing as both the content of these texts as well as their script are believed to have healing powers.

In a similar way, I was told that the *khizāna* was once invaded by termites in the 1950s. The termites "ate" a very large part of the royal household's furniture and most of the manuscript collection, including some of its oldest and most valuable works. The manuscripts were damaged so severely that they could no longer stay in the *khizāna*, but since they were objects containing sacred scripts of the Dā'is' ancestors they also could not be burnt or discarded as trash. The Dā'ī decided that the most respectful way to get rid of the manuscripts would be to pulverise them and dissolve the manuscript dust in the water tank of the *jamatkhana* (the community's central place of worship

30 Adina Hoffman and Peter Cole, *Sacred Trash: The Lost and Found World of the Cairo Geniza* (New York: Schocken, 2011). The term "sacred dust" was coined by Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The archive and Cultural History* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2002).

attached to the mosque). It was thought that for years believers were blessed by the water from this tank, literally drinking the sacred bookhands and inks of previous Daʿīs, together with the blessed words of the texts.³¹

The story of the water tank shows strong parallels with the paratextual traditions of healing and Qurʾanic talismans described above. Drinking manuscripts as a social practice challenges ideas of the materiality of sacred texts. In these instances, script is intentionally ingested and even digested by the body of the believer. In the case of water-dissoluble talismans and manuscript dust and snippets, it is therefore more appropriate to speak of the *immateriality* of manuscript and script. At the end of their material existence manuscripts can acquire social afterlives.

Even manuscripts with the busiest social lives, such as the scrolls, codices, notebooks, and talismans of the Bohra *khizāna*, must eventually retire. The transmission of the Bohra esoteric truths, however, continues through the living manuscript tradition of the community and its archival practices. The material death of one manuscript thus becomes the birth of another, and the cycle continues.

Conclusion: Socialising Manuscript Studies

This article suggests a more social and local perspective on the study of manuscripts in Muslim societies. “Socialising” codicology, and manuscript studies at large, entails looking at texts differently, transcending borders of classical philology, codicology, and palaeography to include ritual, mechanical, spatial, and social practices and oral histories of book copying, consuming, collecting, venerating and preserving. As such, social codicology works with the understanding that, as objects, *agency* is given to texts in all sorts of ways through practices and traditions, and, as such, narratives of social life are created. The Bohra treasury of manuscripts is an example of this. The manuscript collection itself is not secret, believers know these handwritten texts exist and can even see them lying on the shelves. What makes them secret is that, within the community, it is a socially accepted truth that they are not *meant* to be accessed: as physical objects, through the script and language they are written in, and even the paratexts they contain.

As we have seen, materially speaking, different facets of manuscripts can have different social roles, which we need to know about to understand handwritten texts holistically. A way to allow these social lives to unfold is to stop

³¹ Akkerman, *The Bohra Dark Archive*, 206.

looking at manuscripts as clean texts or by isolating their individual anatomical features. Instead—and this goes especially for pre-modern non-living manuscript traditions—we must focus on the messier parts of manuscript culture, what Dagenais calls the *rough edges*.³² Through this perspective of *rough edges*, respecting the integrity and locality of individual manuscripts becomes key. Scriptural incoherence and plurality exist for a reason in manuscript cultures. Handwritten texts and repositories of knowledge are living traditions with life cycles. The rich world of rough edges of Bohra manuscripts discussed above perfectly illustrates the dialogue between the textual-codicological and the social. Glosses, notes, poems, and magical squares and formulas scribbled down by different generations of Dā'īs found in the margins reveal exactly how the codices were used for popular healing practices.

During my fieldwork in the Bohra community I faced a living manuscript and archival tradition that made clear the link between text and day-to-day life, and how day-to-day life gives meaning to handwritten texts and vice versa. In such cases, a combination of archival social-codicological fieldwork, including conducting interviews and extended periods of participant observation, is paramount. Social codicologists will have to be trained to address questions of positionality, reflexivity, ethics, and gender in their work in these specific contexts. Such deep anthropological fieldwork is, of course, not always an option for the obvious reason that most manuscript traditions are not living practices anymore. Yet the same questions about the *social lives* of handwritten texts and their *rough edges* can potentially be applied to pre-modern manuscripts and libraries, as Dagenais has already demonstrated in the field of medieval Iberian literature.³³ Methodologically historicising *the social* in the context of manuscript studies is a fertile field which needs to be explored further.

Social codicology is not restricted to manuscripts and their life cycles, but also their places of spatial domestication. Archives, collections, and libraries in the present, whether public or private, are rich research sites that are often left out of the scope of our work. Yet the research practice of “going to the archives,” the fieldwork that we all do when we are spending time in reading rooms, glossing, cataloguing, scrutinizing, editing, translating, etc., consists of fascinating social practices which should be included in research on manuscript studies (and not just in footnotes).³⁴ Similarly, the social practice of

32 Dagenais, *The Ethics of Reading*, xvi.

33 Ibid.

34 Buskens writes: “Often archival practices existing in modern Western societies, with considerable historical roots, are taken for granted instead of studied as specific cultural phenomena”, “Trash to Treasure,” 182.

cataloguing manuscripts is a fruitful avenue of inquiry in this regard. A case in point is Ignace Krachkovsky's *Among Arabic Manuscripts*, a philologically thick description of his time spent in libraries in the Middle East and Russia in tsarist times.³⁵ The detailed fashion in which Krachkovsky reflects on his positionality within these libraries, and his personal agency and closeness to the manuscripts, is what makes the work a social codicological study *avant la lettre*.

As a study in social codicology, this article has demonstrated the tension inherent to the encounter between what people do with texts, whether printed or handwritten, and how the social informs the philological and vice versa. From birth to decay, the various life cycles of manuscripts described above illustrate how the social lives of Bohra manuscripts can both be reconstructed codicologically, through the identification of paratextual features in the margins of incipits, colophons, fly leaves etc., and witnessed through ethnographic observation and participation in ceremonies and scribal rituals. Such an approach, in which both perspectives are considered, is an example of how codicology has the potential to be practiced as a social science.

As the Bohra's practices of secrecy *vis-à-vis* their living manuscript tradition shows, manuscripts can exist without being read, as they are used instead for healing, as aids for oral transmission, and as a means of legitimation of political power, a textual tradition that can only be accessed by a select few. In other words, being secret and not being read is as much a social role as being read. Other examples in this regard are manuscripts that fulfil the social role of being collectors' items, diplomatic gifts, symbols of cultural heritage or cultural capital, museum pieces, and so forth. Through the lens of social codicology, it becomes clear that manuscripts are *commodities* that are subject to consumption (through reading, among other things), agency, veneration, looting, travel, exchange, demise, termites, human violence, etc. In short, they have multiple *modi vivendi* that we need to engage with, decipher, observe, deconstruct, read, and—if possible—participate in if we want to understand how texts work and why these social lives matter. It is not the manuscript that

35 Ignace Krachkovsky, *Among Arabic Manuscripts: Memories of Libraries and Men* (Leiden: Brill, 1953). See for a similar account, Farhad Daftary, *Fifty Years in the East. The Memoirs of Wladimir Ivanow* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015). An edited volume on "going to the archives": Antoinette Burton, ed., *Archive Stories. Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History* (Duke: Duke University Press, 2005). See for the discussion on collecting practices in archives and museums in the modern Arab world Sonja Mejcher-Atassi and John Pedro Schwartz's edited volume *Archive, Museums and Collecting Practices in the Modern Arab World* (London: Routledge, 2012).

has agency, but the agency people attribute to texts as objects, that a study in social codicology is interested in.

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