

BENEATH THE SURFACE? CONTEMPORARY
AJAMI WRITING IN WEST AFRICA,
EXEMPLIFIED THROUGH WOLOFAL

Friederike Lüpke
SOAS, London

Sokhna Bao-Diop
INALCO, Paris
Université Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar

Introduction

Despite being (near to) invisible to educators, language planners and development activists, a pre-colonial literacy tradition continues to be practiced throughout those areas of Africa that are in the sphere of influence of Islam. This writing tradition uses Arabic-based scripts (also called Ajami) for the writing of African languages. The historical role of the most influential Ajami scripts – e.g. for Hausa, Fula, Swahili, and Wolof – is well-documented. Their contemporary weight is less well understood, partly because of their survival in informal and religious contexts only, and partly because of dominant ideologies of missionaries, language planners and official bodies that insist on literacy in Roman scripts (see Pasch 2008 for a good overview).

In this chapter, we provide an overview of the main Ajami scripts used in present-day West Africa and what functions they assume. Examples from our own fieldwork in Guinea, Cameroon and Senegal illustrate how Ajami writing becomes visible as soon as a Eurocentric perspective on reading and writing is abandoned. A case study on Wolofal (the name for the Ajami tradition for the *de facto* national language of Senegal, Wolof) focuses on its importance for the linguistic landscape of Senegal, especially in the religious and commercial city of Touba. In contrast to the Ajami writing of Pulaar, which is in decline in Senegal (see Humery this

volume), Wolofal continues to thrive. Although Arabic-based scripts have been officially harmonized and recognized in Senegal in 2002 (Anna-Marie Diagne and Mbacké Diagne, p.c.), in practice they still remain in informal contexts and defy standardization, which does not hamper their success.

The dynamics between minority African languages, vehicular African languages and official languages in the spoken and written modalities can be seen as complex and nested diglossic and digraphic relationships. (Note that we use the terms multiglossic and –graphic to designate the mere coexistence of several languages in the spoken and written domain respectively, without any implication of a hierarchical relationship and complementary domains of use; for these cases, we reserve the terms diglossic and digraphic, for which we do not distinguish diachronic and synchronic relationships here for simplicity; see also Lüpke 2011).

We focus on the different facets of identity – social, religious, linguistic – that can be expressed through different scripts and languages in writing in a multilingual and multigraphic environment. In our conclusion we argue that, particularly in the light of low official literacy rates and the failure of most literacy campaigns in the concerned areas (see Dumestre 1997; Mc Laughlin 2001 and Skattum 2010 for a discussion regarding Senegal and Mali), these existing and persisting literacy traditions deserve to inform educational policy and practice.

Setting the scene: Ajami writing traditions in West Africa

The master narrative on literacy in Africa can be illustrated with the statement below – that Africa was a blank slate prior to colonization:

In other regions such as Sub-Saharan Africa there was no previous literate tradition and the colonial languages [...] tended to be propagated. (Olson and Torrance 2001: 6)

Yet, the scholarly view, which has not reached the general public, states the contrary, painting flourishing precolonial writing traditions, one of which used Arabic characters:

“Ajami” is used in particular to refer to the writing of non-Arabic languages in Arabic characters. This practice is attested in practically all Muslim areas of West Africa, including at least Senegal, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Mauretania, Mali, Niger, Ghana, Nigeria and Cameroon. It continues to the present despite being propagated almost exclusively through traditional religious instruction, usually without government funding or recognition; in this sense, it might be called a non-governmental literacy, as opposed to

literacy whose norms are passed on through a government-organized school system. (Souag 2010: 1)

The contradictory pictures on literacy in Africa painted by the two statements above provide the ideal introduction to this paper, since they illustrate the total discrepancy present between West African writing practices (as acknowledged by most scholars) and their perception by education planners and researchers, government institutions, aid organizations, etc. Despite the existence of longstanding and widespread Ajami traditions, there is an overwhelming tendency to describe African societies as “oral” or “lacking written traditions” in pre-colonial times. In order to redeem this misconception, and by way of providing a background for the detailed investigation of one particular Ajami tradition, that for Wolof in Senegal, we present a brief overview of this often overlooked or marginalized literacy practice in some other West African societies, in past and present, and we explore the reasons for its continued invisibility to outsiders.

A brief history of Ajami

Ajami scripts are based on a modified Arabic alphabet introduced in the wake of Islam in West Africa and disseminated through Islamic scholars. These Arabic-based scripts are used throughout West Africa; Figure 1 shows the distribution of those of their uses that have been attested in the literature (Bondarev 2006, in press, Hunwick and O’Fahey 2003; Mumin 2009; Norris 1982; Souag 2010; Vydrine 1998). The earliest document showing an African language written in Arabic characters, featuring Songhai, dates from the 13th century (Moraes Farias 2001); documents testifying a conventionalized Ajami writing system are attested from the 16th century onwards. From then on, a wealth of religious and profane literature in Hausa, Fula, and Wolof, (Caron 2000; Dalby 1986; Philips 2000, 2004; Seydou 2000) is visible proof of this literary tradition. As shown in Figure 1, in addition to these *linguae francae*, Ajami writing is reported for an important number of other languages, and it is to be expected that more occurrences of Ajami writing in smaller languages will emerge once more research interest in this domain is ignited.



Figure 1: Map of languages for which Ajami use is attested (Souag 2010:1)

The following paragraphs give a brief overview of two well-documented cases of West African languages written in Arabic-based scripts. For the Chadic language Hausa spoken in Nigeria and Niger, the use of Ajami is attested as early as in the 17th century (Philips 2000: 19). As Philips remarks, however, “absence of evidence is not evidence of absence”, and even earlier writings in Ajami cannot be ruled out, given the difficult climatic conditions for the preservation of manuscripts and difficulties of dating them. Over 20,000 manuscripts in Ajami in the Nigerian National Archives (Philips 2000: 27) are proof of this long and flourishing culture of writing in Hausa. Similar observations as for Hausa hold for the Ajami used for the Atlantic language Fula, spoken throughout the entire Sahel. Not for all countries and dialect areas accounts on the historical importance of writing in Arabic letters are available. Nevertheless, it can be safely stated that pre-colonial Fula literature in Ajami covered religious, political, administrative, poetic and personal texts and was most prolific wherever Fula states existed, as in Senegal, Guinea, and North Cameroon (Seydou 2000: 64–65). For some areas, such as the Futa Jalon in Guinea, a brief history, a catalog of texts ranging from the 18th to the 20th century and a partial evaluation of the contemporary role of the script are available (Salvaing and Hunwick 2003).

Ajami today

From the mid-19th century onwards, Ajami writing was placed in a context of competition with the Roman script, as missionary activities became concerted and culminated in the Church Missionary Society devising “Rules for Reducing Unwritten Languages to Alphabetical Writing in Roman characters, with reference especially to the languages spoken in

Africa” and Richard Lepsius creating a standard alphabet in the 1850s (Dalby 1986: 2, see also Mumin 2009; Pasch 2008; Bendor-Samuel 1996) to serve their goals of producing Bible translations in local languages and create a literate population able to read them. In the propagation of the Latin script, they were joined by colonial administrators who, if aware of the existence of Ajami writing rather than misperceiving it as writing in the Arabic language, were often deeply suspicious of this script they did not master and that had such a close connotation with Islam (see also Cissé 2006 for similar observations regarding Ajami in Senegal). Hausa Ajami for example was officially replaced with Romanized Hausa by the British colonial administrators. However, different policies were adopted in French and British colonies regarding not only the role of African languages but also the interference with existing writing traditions. So, in contrast to the British policy regarding Hausa, whose Arabic script was actively discouraged and replaced, the French colonizers of Guinea for instance ignored indigenous Fula writing traditions, since their goal was to create a population literate in French (Salvaing and Hunwick 2003; Salvaing 2004). This divergence resulted in different contemporary weights of the Ajami traditions for Hausa in Nigeria and Fula in Guinea respectively. In Nigeria, where Hausa Ajami survives, it is flanked by a very visible use of Romanized Hausa, particularly in formal contexts and in publishing, although

[t]he informal use of Ajami in manuscript by scholars, merchants and others continues today wherever there are Hausa speakers (Philips 2000: 27),

And there are still books and newspapers produced in it. In contrast, for the Futa Jalon region of Guinea, the facts point to a continuing popularity of Ajami: Despite a standardized Roman orthography created for the Fulfulde variety of Fula in Guinea and used in adult literacy campaigns, the Ajami tradition persists until today, seeing the birth of new genres, and resulting in a flourishing written environment. Salvaing and Hunwick (2003) remark

Today, even slightly educated folk are capable of reading and writing Fulfulde in ajami script, at least for matters of everyday life and private correspondence. The great spread of written Fulfulde does not seem to have been hindered by the abandonment of teaching Fulfulde in public schools fifteen years ago, when the government, based on the work of the Military Committee for National Recovery, gave preference to French. (Salvaing and Hunwick 2003: 503-4)

This assessment is matched by fieldwork experience of the first author in the Futa Jalon: there, speakers of the minority language Jalonke, who

are all bilingual in Jalonke and Fula, use an exographic (Lüpke 2004, 2011) writing practice and write almost exclusively in Fula Ajami. Yet, this literacy is nowhere officially documented or instrumentalized in formal education or adult literacy in Guinea – almost unbelievable since it seems to be the form of literacy that is the closest to UNESCO's definition of literacy as

the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts (UNESCO 2005: 21).

Remarkably, Ajami writing in Fula is persistent and dominant in the Futa Jalon in Guinea and in the Adamawa region in Cameroon, but not in another area where an influential theocratic Fula state existed, the Futa Tooro in Senegal. There, as described in detail by Humery (Humery-Dieng 2001; Humery 2010a, b, forthcoming; Schmitz and Humery 2008), the Ajami tradition is only marginally practiced (but see Cissé 2006 for a different viewpoint), while a new Latin-based orthography is widely used. This shift is grounded in a different way of dispersion and scope for Ajami, but seems to be additionally motivated by the wish to demarcate Fula writing clearly from Wolof writing, which has a dominant and very visible Ajami practice.

Apart from formalized uses of Ajami and Wolofal, the Arabic script is used for letter writing. Even for languages lacking a conventionalized Ajami tradition, informal and even ad hoc writing in Arabic characters is attested, so for instance for the Mande languages Soso (Guinea), Mogofin (Guinea) and several varieties of Manding spoken in Mali, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Ivory Coast, and Senegal (Vydrine 1998). Figure 2 illustrates the use of Arabic for a story written in Mandinka, a Manding variety.

composed in West Africa but the uses of literacy for the purpose of government were few. While Hausa and Fulani were later written in Arabic script, even with the establishment of the Sokoto caliphate [according to Davidson (1998: 156) between 1804-1811] the language of state remained Arabic. The use of writing was restricted as a result of its origin in the word of God. (Goody 1986: 112)

There is indeed a wealth of African literature whose language and script is Arabic – the four volumes of Hunwick and O’Fahey (2003) are an impressive testimonial of the importance of this literature. (And the sheer volume of their compilation of works in Arabic from all over the continent casts even more doubt on the classification of Africa as a continent of oral traditions, even if it presents an exographic literacy tradition.) Goody’s assessment of the restricted scope of Arabic and Ajami literacy equally holds for present-day contexts of writing, which contributes to the continuous invisibility of Ajami writing, as Islam, Qur’ānic scholarship and Qur’ānic schools are not generally on the radar of language planners and official bodies, and the literacy practiced in their realm not officially recorded. In addition, his quote nicely summarizes a reservation held even by those who are aware of Ajami writing: that there is no formal path to acquire this literacy. As also remarked by Souag (2010) and Humery (2010), Ajami literacy is more a side effect to acquiring literacy in Arabic than an explicit educational goal and an independent literacy practice, a fact we will explore in more detail below. As a consequence, there is little standardization apart from regional conventions on grapheme inventories (see below), another often voiced criticism of this script. However, it should already be noted that despite the existence of standardized Latin-based orthographies throughout West Africa, writing in these languages mostly does not conform with them but uses an informal way of spelling based on the spelling rules for the colonial languages, a phenomenon that needs to be placed in the multiglossic and multigraphic context of West Africa (see Juffermans 2011 for an example from Gambia).

Minority languages have no real role to play in education and written media, despite rhetorical claims to the contrary, and regardless of script choice and degree of formality of context. Vehicular languages have been implemented into the formal education sector in some countries (Mali, Niger) or are used in adult literacy campaigns with a standardized Latin orthography. Their fate, however, is tied to the possibility of successful transfer of literacy skills to the official language (and vice versa, since official language literacy is greatly beneficial to sustainable literacy in African languages using the Latin script). This is conforming to the observed tendency of newly acquired literacy in vernacular languages to be short-lived because ultimately, the new literates shift to the official

language as the language of writing. The trend to use vernacular literacy merely as a step towards reaching official language literacy has been demonstrated extensively by Mühlhäusler (1990) for the Pacific area. For the Malian context, Dumestre (1994a, b, c, 1997) and Skattum (2010) have shown how for Bambara speakers, literacy in French is the desired outcome of any literacy programme conducted in the Roman alphabet, and that at the same time literacy in French is a prerequisite for learning Latin-based orthographies of Bambara. Learning to write Bambara in Latin characters is thus viewed as a waste of energy by most speakers. Accordingly, mainly the official languages of colonial pedigree dominate writing in Latin scripts; use of national languages in the Latin alphabet is restricted to limited domains, and in contexts not controlled by the government the use of non-standardized or conventionalized spellings inspired by French/English norms prevails. These contexts, examples of which dominate the linguistic landscape, are billboards, shop signs, proverbs and religious blessings. In a similar vein, Mc Laughlin (2001) observes for Senegal:

Although a standard Wolof orthography exists in the Roman alphabet, it is not widely used, being almost uniquely the domain of linguists or educators working in literacy programs, as well as a handful of Senegalese authors who write in Wolof. Wolof written in the Roman alphabet, whether in the official orthography or in a French orthography, presupposes knowledge of French, however basic, on the part of the writer, and for most people who know French, that is the language they will write, thus relegating Wolof or other indigenous languages to the oral domain. To summarize the general situation, those Wolof speakers who are literate in French normally write in that language; those who are not write in wolofal. The writing of Wolof in the Roman script is thus by far the least used of all written possibilities [...]. (Mc Laughlin 2001: 165)

To this, it could be added: and even in the rare instances of writing Wolof in the Roman script, it is more likely to be written with French orthographic norms than respecting the official Wolof norm. It can thus be safely stated that the writing of West African languages both in Arabic and in Roman characters is of secondary rank compared to the writing of the respective “lead” languages, Arabic and the official language of colonial heritage respectively.

In addition, literacy and the written environments for the official and national languages in the Roman script are as specialized as Ajami writing, albeit for different domains (which are not in the scope of this chapter). For the purpose of our argument it must suffice to stress that all types of literacy in West Africa are “restricted” in analogous fashion. The fact that Ajami and national language literacy is secondary has an impact on its

visibility and the attitude of both practitioners and outsiders towards them. Their restricted and complementary nature must be acknowledged, since it has an impact on inventory of graphemes and spelling conventions that are likely to succeed, and on the design of successful national language programmes in the formal and informal sector, as we will argue in more detail below.

Uncovering Ajami

Admittedly, because of its particular social context, discovering Ajami writing is not an easy task for outsiders, particularly in those of its uses that are of the foremost interest for this paper: the writing of personal letters, of grocery lists, of financial accounts, of moral, religious and social pamphlets. These domains are outside those contexts of Ajami writing that are in the scope of literary studies, and in consequence most accounts of Ajami systems focus on the historically rooted literature traditions, whose works, be they religious or poetic (two closely interlinked domains), are still widely circulated today.

In order to illustrate the difficulties surrounding the discovery of Ajami writing, we cite an example of the conflation that is often made between Arabic language and Arabic script, resulting in a dramatic misapprehension of Ajami writing. The following quote is from a background paper for the Education for all global monitoring report 2006 circulated on the UNESCO website on the literacy environment in Senegal. The document presents a thorough case study of the linguistic landscapes in two communities in the suburbs of Dakar, but does not take into account Ajami literacy at all. Rather, and astonishingly, given the limited competence in Arabic acquired in the informal Qur'ānic schools and the recency and limited number of pupils in Franco-Arabic schools, the author reports the use of Arabic:

Arabic is found mainly in religious materials, but it is also used in some shop signs – the proprietors say that their intention is to attract pious customers. Some shop proprietors keep account books in Arabic. I interviewed a woman who writes her shopping list in Arabic and sends her children with the list to a corner shop, where the list is read by the proprietor. This, however, is an unusual case for a woman in that she learnt Arabic from her father, who was a Koranic teacher. (Shiohata 2005: 8)

The second author as well as all Senegalese in her acquaintance were adamant in ruling out that the language of shop signs and account book could be Arabic – but the script undeniably is. As mentioned, Shiohata apparently has no knowledge of this literacy tradition. She is, however,

aware of the limited knowledge of Arabic acquired in Qur'anic schools, stating about its status:

Arabic: A religious language, learnt by many people in *Daara*, the Koranic School. Some learners become competent enough to write in Arabic for mnemonic purposes, but the language is rarely if ever used as a means for oral communication. (Shiohata 2005: 8)

Yet she is not surprised to see Arabic used in these contexts. Of course, this is not just an accidental oversight. It is difficult to detect a literacy the existence of which one is unaware, and whose practitioners do not count or reveal it, following the powerful ideologies that determine literacy as reading and writing in the official language, and a Latin scrip, or as religious and in Arabic language and script.

To further illustrate this difficulty, and the added issue of observer's paradox, the first author will very briefly draw on her personal experience of conducting fieldwork in Cameroon in 2004 in order to find out to what extent Ajami writing as a grassroots literacy was present – extremely multilingual and multigraphic Cameroon serving as a testing ground to gain a feeling for the contemporary scope of this writing practice. The research project was designed as a survey, and hence interviews with teachers of Qur'anic schools and Muslim dignitaries were planned in the towns of Bamenda (North Western province), Foumban (Western province), Ngaoundéré (Adamawa province), Maroua (Northern province) and Garoua (Far Northern province), where Islam is present. In the first two locations, the researcher was accompanied by a young, female, Christian assistant originary from the Western province. It turned out that the presence of a European woman with a non-Muslim woman in tow only triggered negative responses regarding the ongoing use of Ajami writing as well as on the reach of Qur'anic schools – predominant answers were that all children attended the state school and learned to read and write in English (North Western province) and French (Western province) respectively, and that only a few backward people sent their children to Qur'anic schools. In Foumban, capital of the sultanate of Foumban with its own writing tradition, a syllabary devised in the 19th century, an additional answer (and also the one given by the minister of education) was that in addition to the state school, children attended the palace school in which the Bamoun syllabary was taught. This information seemed to clash with realities even to our outsider eyes, since tell-tale signs revealed the presence of Qur'anic schools in these towns – recognizable through a heap of children's shoes at the entrance to many compounds and the rhythmic sound of children chanting suras emerging from them. It was only after we pointed out the existence of these schools, demonstrated some rudimentary

knowledge in the Arabic script, stressed our interest in Ajami, and vigorously assured interview partners that we were not sent by a government body or an NGO that the first author and her assistant were given access to these schools and had the chance to talk to children and teachers.



Figure 3: Girls at a Qur'ānic school in Ngaoundéré © F. Lüpke 2004

Only a dramatic change in methodology – employing a male, Muslim guide and assistant who made contact in the absence of the first author – helped overcome the extremely strong observer's paradox triggered by the assumptions on our vested interest in official language literacy (as opposed to Ajami literacy). Through this intermediary, it was possible to gain the trust of a number of stakeholders of Ajami writing in Ngaoundéré, Maroua and Garoua, and to have access to a number of leaflets, documents and personal letters using this script, in Ngaoundéré, the former capital of the Adamawa Fula empire, mainly in Fulfulde, in Maroua and Garoua mainly in Hausa, but also in Fula. Observer's paradox (from both sides) might also explain in parts the strong divergence between Humery's (2010) and Cissé's (2006) assessment of the scope of Fula Ajami in Senegal. Figures 4-5 provide some visual evidence for Fula and Hausa Ajami.

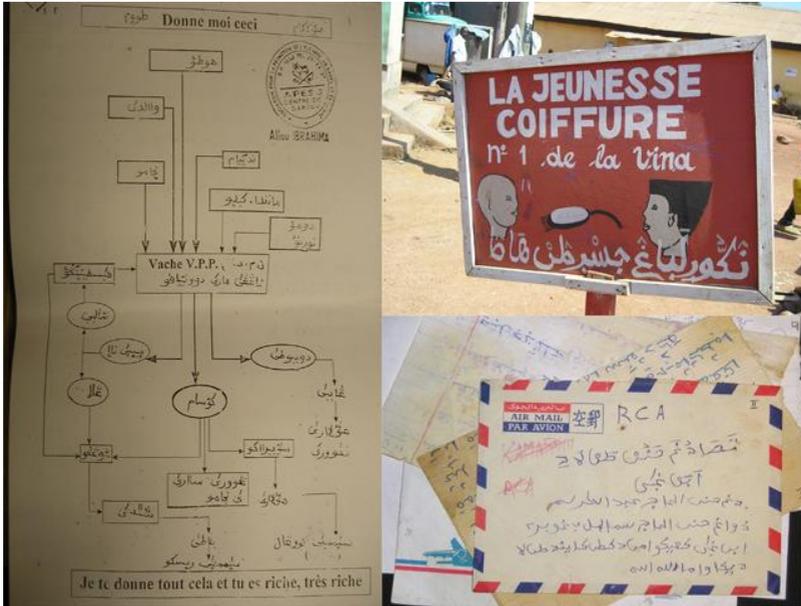


Figure 4: Use of Ajami in Cameroon © F. Lüpke 2004

The figure above shows a bilingual and biscriptual advertisement in Ngaouanderé in the top right, a diagram illustrating the many benefits of cattle in Fula Ajami (APES Garoua) on the left, and finally a collection of personal letters in Fula and Hausa Ajami from Garoua in the bottom right.

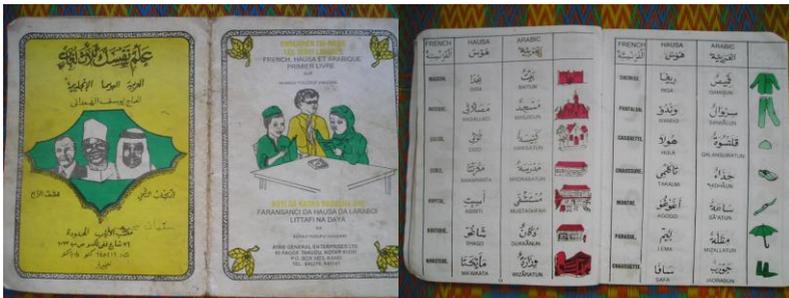


Figure 5: Front and content pages from a primer in three languages and two scripts, Maroua, Cameroon © Friederike Lüpke 2004

Given these experiences and – so far anecdotal – evidence, it can be expected that the semiformal to spontaneous uses of the Arabic alphabet for the writing of African languages are much more widespread than reported so far, for two reasons: There is first the important role of Islamic education, leading to literacy in Arabic, throughout the concerned West African countries. The second reason is the marginalization of the role of Islamic education by most governments and education planners and the failure to take the resulting non-Latin-based and grassroots literacy into account. An informal survey among fellow fieldworkers complemented by observations of the authors in several West African countries showed that we all had come across people writing letters to their family in an African language but using an Arabic script. If more reliable studies both on literacy rates in Arabic language and script and usage of Arabic scripts for African languages were available, it is a fair guess that they would reveal not only societies and individuals far more literate than expected, but also literacy in different languages (and scripts) than assumed so far.

Wolofal in Senegal

Wolof, the *de facto* national language of Senegal, is one of the West African languages with a deeply rooted Ajami writing tradition. Wolof is spoken by about 80% of the country's population as a language of their mostly multilingual repertoire. A formal Ajami tradition for this language is attested from the 17th century onwards, according to Camara (1997), although an earlier emergence of this script is very likely. Today, Wolofal is tightly linked to the Islamic brotherhood of Mourides. The Mourides are very influential in the Senegalese religious landscape, and the use of Wolofal for religious and poetic writings in their realm has resulted in an important body of literature, for the most part preserved in private libraries and copied by hand. Mc Laughin (2001), in accordance with Camara (1997), states for the present-day use of Wolofal:

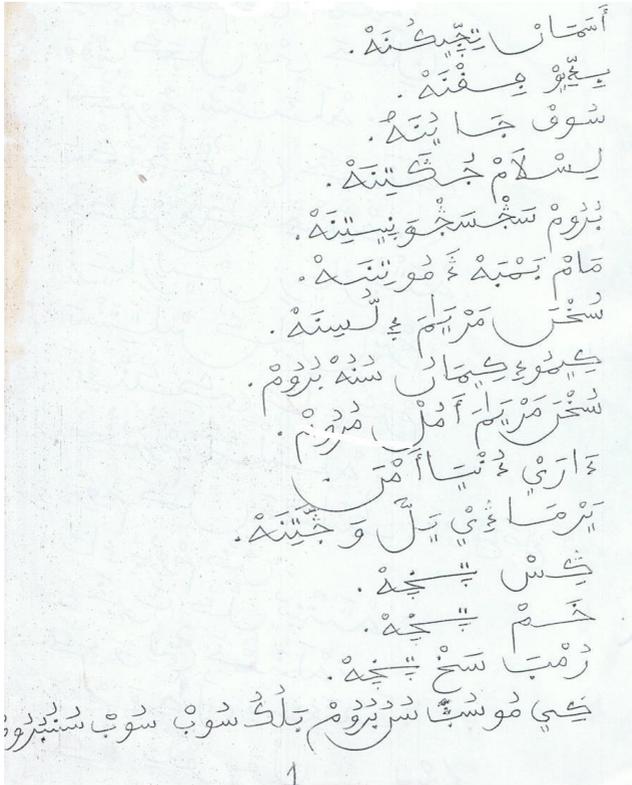
[w]olofal originated within a religious context, but it is also fairly widely used on the contemporary scene by those who are familiar with the Arabic alphabet but not the Roman, to keep records and notes and especially to write letters. The use of wolofal for writing Wolof appears to be much more widespread than the use of the Roman alphabet for the same purpose, a fact that is due to almost universal attendance by Muslim children at Qur'anic school, where they master the rudiments of the Arabic writing system. Public school education is conducted in French, and thus students who attend those schools learn to write in the Roman script – but attendance at such schools is not as high as attendance at Qur'anic schools, and was even lower in the past. (Mc Laughin 2001: 165)

Wolofal and the Mourides

The Mouride brotherhood is a Sufi order that dominates religious life in the region of Diourbel, in particular in the department of Mbacké where the order's holy city, Touba, is located, and is very influential in the entire country. Mouridism was founded in 1883 by the Seerñ Cheikh Amadou Bamba (1850-1927). He was the first spiritual guide and social reformer of the Mourides, laying the foundations for the autonomous city state of Touba that is dominated by religious practice and scholarship and constitutes an extremely successful social experiment that offers access to education, health care, and basic sanitation to its inhabitants completely independently of the Senegalese state. There is no state school (teaching French) in Touba; rather, *daara* (Qur'anic schools) prevail and offer an education based on memorizing the Qur'an and the development of social virtues and moral values deemed indispensable in order to become a good Muslim and a responsible member of society. While Arabic as the language of the Qur'an is at the centre of instruction, Wolof, the first languages of virtually all the students, is an important medium of instruction (for similar observations see Moore (2008) regarding the interaction between Arabic and Adamawa Fulfulde (a dialect of Fula), or Tamari (2009) for the division of labour between Arabic and national languages in Malian Madrasa). For Mali, Tamari states:

In the madrasa [Qur'anic schools with a formalized curriculum] as in the majilis [informal Qur'anic schools focusing on the Qur'an], local languages are employed exclusively in oral discourse. Furthermore, in the madrasa but unlike the majilis, the local language is not usually an object of study and analysis in its own right [...], and is thus in a sense 'invisible' to some of those who depend on it most. (Tamari 2009: 167)

Crucially, this situation is not matched by the one in Mouride *daara*. Here, in addition to the *khassaiids* – religious writings in Arabic by Cheikh Amadou Bamba consisting mainly of recommendations for a pious life – a number of texts in Wolofal are circulated and studied. These consist eminently of *taalifs* – poems written by poets (*taalifkat*) and recommendations in the spirit of Cheikh Amadou Bamba and his followers. Figure 6 below gives an extract from a poem; Figure 7 features the beginning of a text of religious recommendations, both with a transliteration into the official Latin orthography for Wolof and a translation into English.



Asamaan tijéeku na
Biddiiv feq na
Suuf jaayu na
Lislaam jógati na
Boroom sañ-sañ waneeti na
Maam Bamba ndamooti na
Soxna Mariyaama dellusi na
Kii moodi kéemaanu sunu boroom
Soxna Mariyaama amul moroom
Daaray dunyaa am na
Yërmandey Yalla wàccati n:
Gis texe
Xam texe
Romb sax texe
Kii moo sopp sunu boroom ba lu ko
soob, soob sunu boroom

The sky has opened
 A star has appeared
 The earth has moved
 Islam is standing again.
 A powerful man has appeared
 Mame Bamba is still victorious
 Sokhna Mariama has come back
 She is the mystery of our creator
 Sokhna Mariama has no equal
 The world exists
 The mercifulness of God has descended on us:
 Seeing him (the Cheikh) means going to paradise
 Knowing him means going to paradise
 Even crossing him means going to paradise.
 He (the Cheikh) worships God that much that all
 he desires, God will grant it.

Figure 6: Extract from a poem on Cheikh Amadou Bamba, with transliteration in standard Wolof and English translation



Jërejéf boroom tuubaa

Amul moroom

Sëerñ tuubaa wax na ni :

*Juróom ñaar moo gën juróom
ñaar*

*Bàyyi fen moo gën jàng alxuraan
ak xam-xam te jéfé ko*

*Sämm sa juróom ñaari cër moo
gën dëkké koor*

*Fattaliku àllaaxira moo gën
fanaanee julli*

*Laabiire mbooleem jullit yi moo
gën fital jihaar.*

Bàyyi moy moo gën dëkké julli

*Diglé aw yiw moo gën barile
sarax*

*Tere lu ñaaw moo gën dëkké
ñaan*

Thank you Seeriñ Touba

He has no equal

Seeriñ Touba has said:

Seven things are of more value than seven other things.
It is better to stop lying than learning the Koran and
following its recommendations.

It is better to protect one's seven organs and senses
from sinning than spend one's life fasting.

It is better to remind oneself the last judgment than to
spend one's time praying.

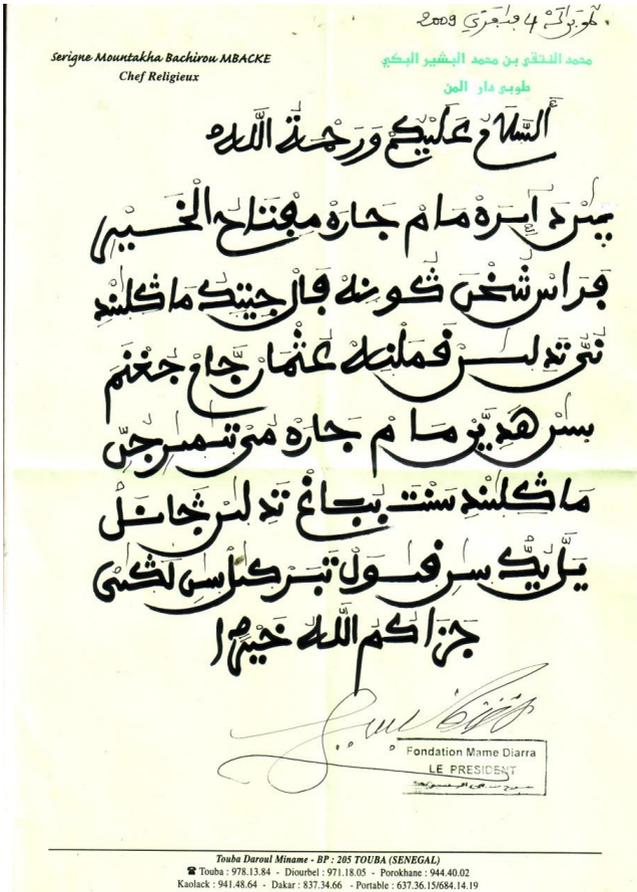
It is better to share everything with fellow Muslims
instead of waging jihad.

It is better to stop sinning than spend one's time
praying.

It is better to give good advice than to multiply
sacrifices.

It is better to forbid sinning than to spend one's time
formulating prayers.

Figure 7: Extract from a religious text, with standard Wolof transliteration and English translation



Asalaam āláykum wa rahmatu Lah
 Yéen daahira maam jaara miftaahul xayri
 farās
 Soxna Ngóoné Faal jüté ko
 Maa ngi léen di nuyu te di léen xamal ne
 Usmaan jaañ jox na ma séen àddiya
 Maam Jaara
 Muy tééméeri junni
 Ma ngi léen di sant bu baax
 Te di léen ñaanal Yàlla yokk séeni xéewël
 te barkeel séen liggéey.

Peace be with you.
 You, a member of the Dahira Miftaahul
 Khayri in France.
 Under the presidency Madame Ngone Fall.
 I greet you and let you know that
 Ousmane Diagne has given me your
 contribution to the hadiya Mame Diarra
 Which amounts to XOF 500,000
 Thank you very much
 May the Almighty give you prosperity and
 success.

Figure 8: Letter from a council official of the town of Porokhane, with standard Wolof transliteration and English Translation

Texts of these two genres are in wide circulation in the entire country. While there is no publishing house producing Wolofal publications, several printers/book stores (in Touba the *Imprimerie Librairie Cheikh Amadou Bamba, Darou Khoudos, the Maktab Cheikhoul Khadim, Daaray Kaamil* and others) sell photocopies produced in large numbers of these popular texts. Manuscripts and texts considered of value are also conserved at the Touba public library and in the *Al Azhar* Institutes and newly founded university, details of which can be found on the *Al Azhar Systems* website (www.alazhartouba.com).

Two television channels, *Touba TV* and *RDV (Radio Dunyaa Vision)* have regular programmes featuring Wolofal. To these broadcasts, poets or authors of religious and moral texts are invited to read from their work, and provide a commentary. These different media result in a great visibility of Wolofal, not just within the Mouride movement, but in the entire Senegal.

Non-religious contexts and genres for Wolofal in Touba and beyond

Given that the local government of Touba is religious, Wolofal has gained currency as a literacy used in formal contexts there as well – a context normally occupied by French and the Latin script in the rest of Senegal. By way of illustration, we provide a transliterated and translated letter from an administrator of the town of Porokhane, acknowledging a donation from a *dahira* (Mouride association) in the French Diaspora (see Figure 8).

Official and private letters are – in addition to the religious genres introduced above – an important domain for Wolofal literacy, not just in Touba but in the entire Wolof-speaking and Arabic script-writing population of the country. As is the case for French, this literacy is far from being universal. Rather, it is customary to rely on the help of fluent readers and writers in both literacies to help decipher and compose personal and official correspondence.

Wolofal is omnipresent in the linguistic landscape of Touba, and very visible in the entire Senegal. Figures 9 exemplify the prominence of Wolofal; and Figure 9 (bottom left) illustrates at the same time the preference for a French-based orthography for Wolof instead of the standard one adopted officially after independence (see Ministry of Telecommunication 2007) given in the transliteration.

The figure below shows a shop sign in Touba: *Sopp sēriñ Fadiilu Mbake* – Worship Seriñ Fadiou Mbacké! (bottom left), an advertisement in Touba: *Fii danñu fyi poose bëñu yax ak bëñu oor balā ak raxas kadam* – Here, dentures in bone and white gold and plaque removal (top left), and finally an advertisement in Touba: *Kii day ñaan ci xeeti feebar ci fajum coaan* – Knows to treat diseases with traditional medicine (right).



Figure 9: Ajami advertisements in Touba, Senegal © S. Bao-Diop 2009

The acquisition of Wolofal

Despite the recent recognition and attempted standardization of Ajami writing by the Senegalese government, no literacy statistics giving an overview of its importance are available. This is partly due to its acquisition as a by-product of acquiring literacy in the Arabic script, and connected to the goals of Qur'ānic schools, which are to "construire la personne" (the motivation given by the second author when asked why her daughter attends a *daara*). Moore (2008) has aptly described this process for the Northern Cameroonian Fula context, and it can be transferred to the Senegalese one:

Koranic schooling was meant to socialize children into reproductive competence in Arabic and traditional Fulbe and Muslim values of self-control, respect for religious authority and hierarchy, and submission to the word of God. The practice of guided repetition in the Koranic context emphasized strict discipline, reverent renderings of the text, and deference to teacher and text. (Moore 2008: 182)

It is clear that literacy is subordinate to the wider social goals of embedding children in unbroken tradition of religious and moral values, centrally symbolized by the Qur'ān. Brenner (2001) describes this form of Qur'ānic schooling as an esoteric episteme in the sense of Foucault (1969) and characterizes it as follows:

an esoteric episteme is a hierarchical conceptualization of knowledge, the higher levels of which are made available to only relatively few specialists. Knowledge is transmitted in an initiatic form and is closely related to

devotional practice. The acquisition of knowledge is progressively transformative: one must be properly prepared to receive any particular form of knowledge, the acquisition of which can provide the basis for a subsequent stage of personal transformation. (Brenner 2001: 18)

As stressed by Brenner (2001), Goody & Watt (1962), who build in turn on Mead (1943), and others, this type of education and socialization based on continuity is sharply set apart from "modern" ideologies and practices of education that emphasize discontinuity, the appropriation of new worlds, and the possibility of intellectual and social change. That this Western model of education is far removed from Senegalese (and West African) realities beyond Islam (as stressed by Brenner 2001, who identifies similar epistemes in most West African societies, independently of religion) is captured in the novel "Ambiguous adventures" by the Senegalese novelist Cheikh Hamidou Kane, who lets a father express his reticence *vis à vis* the French school in the following words:

The school in which I would place our children will kill in them what today we love and rightly conserve with care. Perhaps the very memory of us will die in them. When they return from the school, they may be those who will not recognize us. (Kane 1963: 46)

That Qur'ānic schools, in contrast to the state schools, preserve the social and religious memory and root their children in a powerful esoteric episteme explains their continuing popularity, despite the recognized potential of the state school for social mobility and access to salaried professions. The region of Diourbel has the lowest school enrolment ratio of the country (56% in primary school, 19% in middle school, and 8% in secondary school, (ANSD 2009), and the *Agence Nationale de Statistique et de Démographie* suggests to redress this situation by integrating religious education into the state school curriculum, by extending the curriculum of the *daara* (not counted in literacy statistics so far) to include French and other subjects, and by opening more public Franco-Arabic schools, thus aiming at bridging the gaps between the educational goals of the different types of schools.

Conventions and (lack of) standardization

From the ideologies surrounding Qur'ānic schooling that were introduced above, it has become obvious that literacy in the Arabic script, be it in Arabic or in Wolof, is backgrounded in the *daara*, which focus on the development of Muslim subjectivity (Brenner 2001). This, as elegantly argued by Souag (2010), explains prominent design features of Ajami scripts – most noteworthy the absence of standardized spellings. Ajami scripts are of course influenced by Classical Arabic, the language of the

Qur'ān. In West Africa, all Ajami orthographies are based on Maghrebi Arabic and exhibit Maghrebi variations for some characters, for instance the letter *fā'* ف with a dot below (فـ) rather than above as in the Eastern standard, *qāf* ق with one rather than two dots above (قـ), and *nūn* ن often written without the dot at the end of words (نـ) (Souag 2010: 2). All these characteristics hold for Wolofal as well. The reading tradition prevailing in West Africa is Warsh, and one of its special marks for the sound [e:], a dot placed under the letter, is used in Wolofal (but not in all West African Ajami scripts, see Souag 2010: 3). Wolofal and the other Ajami traditions, vocalise, that is, vowel diacritics are placed above the consonants to encode *all* vowels, not just rendering consonantic skeletons of words as falsely claimed by Ricard (1995: 13).

A number of strategies – homography, redeployment, creation of new characters and diacritics, see (Souag 2010: 3-5) are in place in order to resolve mismatches between the inventory of graphemes and the inventory of phonemes of Wolof. Not all of them are illustrated here; but one, the “Ajami diacritic” (Souag 2010: 6) is, because it exemplifies once more the importance of Arabic as the “lead” language for Ajami reading and writing. The Ajami diacritic consists of three small dots above the letter (including diacritics of an ordinary size) and it simply signals that the character should not be read as an Arabic one, its exact value being dependent on phonological similarity and contextual interpretation. Thus, for instance *ب* + 3 small dots = *ب̣* = *p*, *mb*; *eg* *ب̣م* = *bopp-am* ‘his head’; *ب̣ر* = *mbir* ‘problem’ (Souag 2010: 6). The solution of employing a diacritic that has no defined sound value is ideal for the context in which Ajami is acquired and transmitted. Since

conventions for writing non-Arabic sounds are considered as mere sidelines to the primary goal of learning to write Arabic, then the simpler a convention is relative to Arabic, the more likely it is to be successfully acquired. The “non-Arab sound” diacritic is a single element, thus maximally easily learned, and in principle doubles the script’s expressive capacity without requiring any further conventions. A language planner setting a goal of native language literacy would most likely design a system where each sound was separately represented; but this method represents a pragmatic compromise, recognising the religiously defined primacy of the goal of being able to read the Qur’ān and yet making the desirable side effect of native language mass literacy more easily attainable even with few or no printed works. It serves as an important reminder that the nature of an orthography depends not just on the structure of the language, but on the educational infrastructure supporting it and on its perceived purpose. (Souag 2010: 9)

Other often criticized non-standardized features of Ajami writing can be likewise explained with the education system into which this literacy is embedded. These reservations concern the absence of norms for spelling and word boundaries, the problematic recognition of adapted characters to write non-Arabic sounds, and ambiguity resulting from homography of different sounds (Delafosse 1912; Humery 2010a Ricard 1995). It is the very absence of rigid norms that, in the context of a system without the normative power, school system, written environment and political will to enforce them, guarantees the success of Ajami writing. That standardization is necessary for the implementation of a script is an instance of a powerful language ideology modeled on European language and educational policies but not a necessity, as illustrated by the popularity of Ajami in its diverse and unregulated forms. It is interesting to note that there are attempts to codify Ajami writing (for both Wolof and Fula) in direct analogy to the codification of Latin-based scripts (i.e. through a standardized inventory of graphemes and conventions for spelling and word boundaries), resulting in the “Caractères Coraniques Harmonisés” (Bao-Diop 2007). However, as is also the case for ISESCO efforts to create a common African Ajami inventory (Souag 2010: 2), this character sets ignores all features of regional Ajami writing, and has not been adopted by the majority of Wolofal practitioners. It is crucial to stress that the absence of a rigid standard means that anybody with sufficient exposure to Qur’ānic schooling to be able to read Arabic will be able to read Ajami; and everybody able to write Arabic will be able to write Ajami. These features are responsible for the continuing success of Ajami writing, in the absence of a dedicated system for its transmission, and they continue to create an important body of readers, and – in keeping with the much more restricted role of writing for all languages and scripts in West Africa – a smaller, more specialized, body of writers. Standardization in this context would not increase the potential of Ajami, but rather drastically reduce its adaptability and flexibility to accommodate linguistic and stylistic diversity, the main reasons for its ongoing success.

Outlook

Writing in a social context

It is a widespread assumption among linguists and education planners that orthography development and implementation of graphized languages into an education curriculum are above all technical tasks that require a standardized orthography based on the phonology of the language in question and the creation and maintenance of an infrastructure to teach and use it (see Lüpke 2011 for a criticism of this view and a detailed account

of the multifaceted nature of orthography development). This assumption fails to take into account the many social, historical and religious factors surrounding reading and writing and its scope in different societies. It also subscribes to modern Western educational goals, with a strong “graphocentric” ideology (Blommaert 2004) resulting in an emphasis of literacy.

The writing of African and official languages in Latin-based orthographies are often seen as neutral and modern tools order to achieve this goal of creating literate societies that follow a Western model of literacy through a formalized educational environment, with all its cognitive consequences (Scribner and Cole 1981). There are compelling reasons to conclude that this model of education has failed in the West African context, as school enrolment is stagnating if not regressing and drop-out rates and functional illiteracy remain extraordinarily high (see Brock-Utne and Skattum 2009; Dumestre 1994a; Skattum 2010). One of the factors that underlie the non- or only partial acceptance of Western-style educational offerings (their flailing infrastructure and price notwithstanding) is the distance of the episteme behind it from the regionally prevalent esoteric epistemes of knowledge grounded in religious and cultural contexts. It is ironic that in his last (and not entirely unproblematic) article before his death in 1943, Malinowski, drawing on the two remote cultural and educational worlds represented by these epistemes, remarks on this already:

The young African of today lives in two worlds and belongs fully and completely to neither. European education has alienated him from native traditions and imbued him with the values and expectations of European culture. At the same time, European interests exclude him from the white community and deny him the material basis for the style of life he has been taught to aspire to. Education must be transformed to close rather than perpetuate this vicious gap between expectation and reality. African schools should train their pupils for adaptation to the African environment. Respect for native values should be maintained along with the equipment for co-operation with the European community. European wealth should be used to provide the basis for fulfilling the claims and needs which Western education has developed. (Malinowski 1943: 649)

Almost seventy years later, the educational paradigm, despite some attempts of integrating African realities into course books, remains in essence unchanged, and the educational tradition and Ajami literacy that embody “native values” stays firmly unconnected to it.

The non-existence of neutral tools

Another misunderstanding arising from the detachment of literacy from its religious connotations in contemporary Western societies is the assumption that the Latin script and Western-style schooling constitute neutral tools and contexts for learning. It is often forgotten by Westerners that the Roman alphabet is no neutral alternative to religiously charged writing traditions like Ajami, but itself intimately linked to Christianity. Its adaptation to African languages happened in an explicitly religious context and was driven by missionaries. Even today, the most common and visible functions for African language literacy are reading the Bible and accessing Christian religious literature. In literacy campaigns throughout the continent, missionary organizations continue to assume a central role till today, forcefully confirming Diringer's famous dictum "alphabet follows religion" (Diringer and Regensburger 1968). To see Ajami literacy, but not Latin-based scripts, as close to a religion, can only be seen as a fallacy in the African context.

Consequences for education planning and literacy campaigns

This chapter has made a strong argument in favour of looking at all traditions and contexts of writing in their cultural, religious, and social environment. Through an inspection of the functions expressed and needs fulfilled by contemporary Ajami writing, exemplified through Wolofal, it was demonstrated that functions and needs go beyond intellectual and cognitive development, seen as central in most Western ideologies of literacy, despite the deeply ingrained and often not recognized cultural and religious values literacy serves. Successful language and script planning needs to take the epistemes underlying both Western education (in the West and as instantiated in West Africa) and Qur'anic education into account. In order to do this, several steps are in order:

1. A careful and unbiased assessment of all literacy traditions and their contexts of transmission by all stakeholders;
2. A recognition of the immense potential for observer's paradox and language ideologies to influence all investigations of cultural practices associated with literacy, and measures to minimize it;
3. Better communication between scholars (literacy researchers, linguists, anthropologists), language planners and government bodies, and communities of practice regarding the conflicting information and ideologies surrounding the construction of knowledge in this domain;
4. A true political will to embed learning into an existing cultural and social environment rather than exporting Western constructions of learning (including ideologies on standardization) to a population viewed as deficient because lacking it.

In the light of the still very low official literacy rate and the failure of many literacy campaigns contrasted with the continuing marginalized flourishing of Qur'ānic education, sixty-nine years after Malinowski's (1943) appeal seems the right moment to start this complex task.

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