

***Ajami* writing practices in Atlantic-speaking Africa**

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1 Introduction

The Atlantic-speaking populations of West Africa comprise a substantial number of Muslim communities who have long been familiar with the Arabic writing system from study at Qur'anic schools and the practice of reading the Qur'an. Historically, one of the most important developments that has arisen out of Arabic literacy in West Africa is the establishment of a tradition of writing African languages in the Arabic script, a practice known as *ajami*, from the classical Arabic word for foreign or non-Arab, and which refers more generally to the writing of a language other than Arabic in the Arabic script.¹ The tradition has its origins in Qur'anic schools, and continues to be a practice that is transmitted primarily in sites of religious learning. There is little formal teaching of literacy in Atlantic languages in the Arabic script, and *ajami* is always learned in the shadow of Arabic, which can be considered the "lead" language (Lüpke & Bao-Diop 2014). Within the geographic area that comprises Atlantic Africa, Mande speakers have also played a very important role in promoting the use of *ajami* (Lüpke 2004; Vydrine 1998, 2014). Mande speakers often speak Atlantic languages and vice versa, giving rise to cases of exoglossia where Atlantic speakers write in Mandinka *ajami* or Mande speakers write in Atlantic *ajami* (Lüpke 2004, 2005). Despite recent efforts by ISESCO (the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) to standardize West African *ajami* scripts², there are few formal venues through which to enforce such standards, even if such a goal were desirable, and *ajami* continues to flourish in certain communities as a non-standardized yet locally conventional literacy. Alongside literacy in the Roman script, writing in the Arabic script is a robust practice in many communities of the Atlantic-speaking area today, particularly among Wolof speakers in Senegal and Fula (Pular)³ speakers in northern Guinea, and is used for letter writing, record-keeping, and other private daily activities, as well as for writing in the public sphere where former colonial languages such as French also occasionally appear in the Arabic script.

¹ *Ajami* writing is also sometimes referred to by the Spanish term, *aljamiado*, which originally designated Spanish written in Arabic script, a common practice in Moorish ruled Andalusia.

² <http://www.isesco.org.ma/standardized-quranic-script/> Last accessed June 27, 2016.

³ The Fula language is spoken across West Africa from Senegal and Mauritania in the west to Chad and Sudan in the east, and there are a number of different glossonyms for the different dialects. Western dialects more often than not go by a p-initial variant of the name for the language: Pulaar (Senegal), Pular (Guinea), Pël (Wolof, whence Peul(h) in French), while the eastern dialects are more often f-initial: Fulfulde (Mali, Nigeria, Cameroon, etc.) or Fulani (from Hausa).

In his study of the graphic environment of Dakar, a conceptual precursor of the field now known as “linguistic landscape,” Calvet (1994) points to the seemingly indiscriminate use of Roman and Arabic scripts to write Wolof, French, and Arabic in public space in the Senegalese capital as indicative of a society between orality and literacy, where the relationship between language and script is not yet fixed, implying a trajectory of progression from unfixed to fixed. This chapter presents an alternative perspective on multigraphism or the use of more than one writing system, namely that linguistic plurality, including multiple ways of writing, can be an active and useful strategy for participating in social life (Mc Laughlin 2015:238), and that the choice of a writing system carries social meaning (Sebba 2007:59). In the absence of a robust regime of literacy, ajami writing has flourished at different times and places in the history of West Africa. It is an important literacy practice which continues to serve as a dominant or secondary form of writing for many speakers of Atlantic languages, as this chapter will show. After providing a brief background on the introduction of the Arabic script in West Africa as a byproduct of islamization and the multiple meanings and functions associated with the script, this chapter will concentrate on contemporary ajami literacy practices, focusing on two case studies, one the better known *wolofal* system for writing Wolof in Senegal, and the second a relatively undocumented case of writing Seereer in the Arabic script.

2 Islam in Atlantic-speaking West Africa

Islam was first introduced to the Atlantic-speaking communities of West Africa through trans-Saharan trade networks following the Arab expansion into North Africa in the 7th century CE. Merchants and their families, both Arab and Berber, established themselves primarily in towns, often in neighborhoods that came to be known as Muslim quarters. This first phase of Muslim presence in West Africa has been called quarantine or minority Islam (Robinson 2004:28). The first Atlantic speakers to convert to Islam were Fula or proto-Fula speakers, evidenced by the early conversion of War Jaabi, ruler of Tekrur, a kingdom located along the lower Senegal River in current day Mauritania and Senegal. Historical accounts indicate that War Jaabi converted to Islam in the 1030s CE and ordered his entourage to do the same, an example of the second phase of Muslim presence, known as court Islam. The establishment of Islam in the Senegal River Valley eventually gave rise, in the 18th century, to a socially differentiated clerical class of religious specialists, the *toroobe*, who count among their numbers the 19th century Muslim reformist, Al-Hajj Umar Tall (Robinson 1985, 2000; Dilley 2004). The Fulani, along with the Mande-speaking Mandinka, have historically been the main proselytizing groups in the Atlantic-speaking areas of West Africa. Although adoption of Islam was at first restricted to

merchants and the ruling classes in the quarantine and court phases, subsequent waves of large-scale conversion spread the religion to rural areas as a consequence of jihad and the implantation of Sufi orders, to make it a majority religion (Robinson 2004:28). European contact, which led to great social upheaval in the form of the Atlantic slave trade and the concomitant dissolution of pre-colonial political structures (Barry 1988 [1998]) also played a role in the spread of Islam, especially among the Wolof in Senegal. As some scholars have argued (e.g.: Cruise O'Brien 1971), the social structures associated with Sufi brotherhoods provided an alternative type of stability to which disenfranchised populations turned during this turbulent period, especially as charismatic leaders such as Shaykh Amadou Bamba Mbacké (d.1927 CE) came to be associated with resistance to colonial rule (Robinson 2004:184).

Widespread conversion to Islam in West Africa continued well into the 20th century, and a majority of Atlantic-speakers today consider Islam to be a dominant factor in their religious and social identity. Although there is increasing religious diversity among West African Muslims, the practice of Islam among Atlantic speakers falls primarily within the Saharan model of adherence to various Sufi orders (Trimingham 1971; Robinson 2004) such as the Qadiriyya and the Tijaniyya, among others, that emphasize the role of the spiritual leader or shaykh, often referred to by the French term *marabout*. The Sufi orders constitute vast social networks of patron-client relationships and many aspects of social and cultural life, including pilgrimages and prayer ceremonies, are organized around them.

Most pertinent to the case study presented below in §5.1, regarding Wolof ajami, is the founding of an indigenous Senegalese Sufi order known as the Mourides or Muridiyya. The spiritual leader and founder of the Mourides, Shaykh Amadou Bamba Mbacké, was a Sufi ascetic, known for his piety and his extensive corpus of devotional writing, including his *Khassayids* which are widely recited in religious ceremonies, and believed to induce trances, a phenomenon known as *daanu leer* (to fall down in illumination) in Wolof. Bamba's primary message was directed not only towards intellectuals who were literate in Arabic and to whom he recommended a contemplative life of prayer and study, but also towards the peasantry who were urged to devote themselves to work as a way of fulfilling their religious duties. This opened a space in the Islamic landscape of Senegal for those with little or no formal education to be pious Muslims, and inspired a wave of conversions among the Wolof peasantry. Additionally, Bamba's most ardent follower, Shaykh Ibra Fall, founded a mendicant subsect of the Mourides, known as the Baye Fall, notable for their devotion to hard work as a substitute for prayer and fasting (two of the five pillars of Islam) and for their patchwork clothing and disheveled hair, translated into contemporary fashion statements for urban Baye Fall and others. The Mouride Sufi order is a

vibrant indigenous Sufi order with a particular devotion to the founder, whose image, inspired by a single photograph (Roberts & Roberts 2003), is often displayed in public. The order has created a space for the local practice of Islam, centered on the city of Touba, where they have built an impressive mosque that is purportedly the largest in sub-Saharan Africa. The local orientation of the order provides a supportive context for the use of Wolof in spoken and written form.

3 Arabic in West Africa

West Africa is home to an elite arabophone intellectual tradition that dates from the middle ages. Among other types of cultural production, this tradition has given rise to a substantial body of West African literature in Arabic (alongside a parallel tradition in African languages), a corpus that consists of devotional poetry that employs classical Arabic literary conventions as well as many other genres and themes (Hunwick & O’Fahey 2003; Kane 2003; Samb 1972). Arabic continues to be a language of an elite that includes Muslim clerics and other Arabophone intellectuals, but the vast majority of the Muslim population of Atlantic-speaking West Africa acquires only a rudimentary knowledge of the language through an elementary Islamic education. Elementary Islamic education in West Africa takes place in the Qur’anic school (see Fig. 1) under the tutelage and guidance of a teacher, usually a marabout, who is responsible for forming children as Muslims by imbuing them with the word of God in oral and written form. Ideally, the teacher instills religious knowledge, mental and physical discipline, self-control, and respect for authority primarily through rote memorization and recitation of Qur’anic verses (Brenner 2001; Moore 2006; Ware 2004, 2014).⁴ Although Brenner’s (2001) distinction between the esoteric episteme of West African Islamic education and the rational episteme of western style formal education, treated within the context of ajami by Lüpke & Bao-Diop (2014), is problematic in that it leaves little room for other ways of being both Muslim and modern (Soares 2014:32), it is nonetheless true that since the 19th century there has been a continuous tension between the social and political acceptability and relative dominance of the state school versus the Qur’anic school as the primary means of education (Bouche 1975).

While most Muslim children in West Africa attend Qur’anic schools from a young age, only a small minority go on to receive a more complete advanced Islamic education that consists of subjects such as Arabic grammar, Qur’anic interpretation (*tafsīr*), the theory of Qur’anic recitation, and Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), because most parents opt to send their children to

⁴ Cheikh Hamidou Kane’s classic 1961 novel, *L’aventure ambiguë* [*Ambiguous adventure*], gives a vivid fictional depiction of Qur’anic school education and the relationship between teacher and pupil in northern Senegal during the colonial period.



Fig. 1: A bilingual panel advertising a Qur'anic school in the Senegalese village of Palmeo Fall in the region of Louga. In Arabic and Wolof (2015)

public school where the medium of instruction is the official language, French or English (or Portuguese). So while almost every Muslim in Atlantic-speaking West Africa has been exposed to Arabic through attendance at Qur'anic school, the daily recitation of prayers, or rote memorization of at least parts of the Qur'an, most have little practical knowledge of the language. Arabic is also taught as an elective subject in many public school systems in the Atlantic-speaking area, and in certain countries, such as Mali and Senegal, a more recent development has brought an increase in both private and state-run Franco-Arabic schools that promote bilingual education.

As the language of Islam and the Qur'an, Arabic has long enjoyed high status through its association with prestige and authority in West Africa. Certain pre-Islamic practices have naturally been incorporated into the local practice of Islam among Atlantic-speaking populations, seminal among which is the conflation of the role of the marabout as Islamic savant and teacher with healer and sometimes even diviner. This has in turn led to the use of spoken and written Arabic and Qur'anic verses as instruments of healing and protection, and many popular practices involving the perceived mystical power of the Arabic script fuse Islamic practices with those that have their origins in pre-Islamic knowledge and belief systems. These include the manufacture of protective talismans and amulets (*téere* Wlf; *talkuru* Ful) that contain written verses of the Qur'an, along with other materials such as plants, powders, or animal matter (claws, fur, horn)

that are encased in sewn pouches of leather or plastic and worn on the body or hung within or near the entrance of a house to protect inhabitants. Amulets may also contain writings based on esoteric Sufi knowledge associated with the arrangement of Arabic letters in squares or other geometrical patterns. The use of such figures or magic squares (*xaatim* Wlf; *haatumeere* Ful) for protection or other personal advantage is a widespread practice in the Sahel and Sahara, and tunics, vests, and wrappers inscribed with such squares are worn in order to provide the wearer with strength, power, protection, or blessings (Epelboin et al. 2007). Tunics such as these (Fig. 2) are favored by Senegalese traditional wrestlers, who wear them before their matches to help them vanquish their opponents. Another material practice involving the written word in Arabic is the



Fig. 2: Senegalese wrestler, Tapha Guèye wearing a talismanic tunic (Kassé 2009)

production and consumption of holy water. Under the supervision of a marabout, Qur'anic verses are washed from a wooden board (*àlluwa* Wol; *alluwal* Ful) and the water is collected and used for healing purposes: the afflicted person may either imbibe the water or bathe in it, according to the marabout's instructions. Finally, there are a number of practices involving written Qur'anic verses that are associated with stages of childhood, such as weaning and teething, detailed in Mc Laughlin (2008).

Besides the local esoteric and healing uses to which Arabic is put in West Africa, it is used, as it is in Muslim communities throughout the world, as a religious language in which people pray. The Arabic language is an object of respect and reverence and commands great

authority and prestige; consequently, a sizeable number of Arabic loanwords have entered the lexicons of many Atlantic and Mande languages. These loanwords fall into a number of semantic fields, including but not limited to religious, theological, and philosophical terms, time expressions, and given names derived from titles (king, shaykh, hajj, etc.). Differences in the phonemic inventories of Arabic and Atlantic languages contribute to the making of social meaning since the Arabic-educated Islamic elite may pronounce loanwords as they are pronounced in Arabic, while most people simply use them as integrated loanwords that conform to the phonology of their own language. A notable exception to this is the adoption of a new phoneme, [ɢ], a voiced uvular implosive stop, in the Pulaar dialect of Fula spoken in the Senegal River valley. This phoneme is used as the equivalent of the Arabic voiceless uvular stop [q] in loanwords words like *ɢuraana* ‘Qur’an’ and does not otherwise occur in the language, although implosive stops in other places of articulation (labial, alveolar, palatal) are part of the Pulaar phonemic inventory. By maintaining a distinct and not completely integrated pronunciation, this innovation clearly points to the elevated status of Islam and the Arabic language within Pulaar-speaking society.

The special place accorded the Arabic language in West Africa is nicely illustrated by the actions of Senegalese Mouride calligrapher, Elimane Fall, who retrieved from a garbage pile some Arabic language newspapers that had been used to wrap bread. He explained that he could not let the papers lie in such an ignominious setting because the words could potentially be recombined to form verses of the Qur’an.⁵ Fall’s artistic vision as a calligraphic artist who uses both Arabic and wolofal in his work, based on the power and efficacy of the Arabic alphabet, is mirrored in the numerous practices that harness Arabic in written and oral form in Atlantic-speaking West Africa.

4 Appropriation of the Arabic script for writing local languages

As far as we can reconstruct it, the adaptation of the Arabic script for writing Atlantic languages originated as a byproduct of Islamic teaching, especially in Qur’anic schools.

Sebba (2007) has pointed out that cultural interventions that result in the development of new orthographies based on old ones are almost always the work of bilinguals, and such is certainly the case here. The linguistic goals of Qur’anic education are to teach Arabic as a means to understand religious texts. Part of the task of the Qur’anic teacher was (and is) to make sure that pupils and students understand the meaning of the Qur’an and other religious teachings such as

⁵ Interview with Elimane Fall in his studio in the Dakar suburb of Pikine, June 2013. The mystical aspects of Fall’s work are discussed in some detail in Roberts & Roberts (2003).

the hadith, and there is thus a certain amount of linguistic brokering that goes on between the original Arabic, understood by the teacher, and its translation into the vernacular for students. And even when advanced students understand the Arabic, there is still a great deal of discussion and interpretation that can go on in the languages of the teacher and students, thereby contributing to the development of such languages. As Tamari and Bondarev (2013:1) state, “There is increasing evidence that Muslim scholars, expressing themselves in several African languages, developed lexical and grammatical structures fully adequate for communicating the concepts and contents of Islamic curricula.”

There is also evidence that such scholars developed a substantial metalinguistic vocabulary to talk about the Arabic language and its characteristics in their own language. A pertinent example comes from Pulaar, where Arabic letters in all their positions (initial, medial, final or standing alone) have Pulaar names, some examples of which are given here:

Arabic letter	Initial	Medial	Final	Alone
ﺕ	juburtaa	juburtaa	taajoordô	taajoordô
ﺚ	suun enndu	suun enndu	suun enndu	suun enndu
ﺝ	jaatongu	jaacewdo	jaacewdo piccudo	jaatongu piccudo

The names for these letters reflect a traditional way of learning Arabic in the Qur’anic schools of Fouta Toro in northern Senegal. Some of them are quite descriptive: *taajoordô*, for example, literally means ‘dry taa,’ while *jaacewdo* means ‘thin jaa,’ and *enndu* in *suun enndu* means ‘breast,’ referring to the three superimposed dots, sometimes written simply as a point (ˆ) that evokes the protruding shape of a breast. This tradition is several hundred years old, and reflects the Pulaar-speaking milieu of those Qur’anic schools. Arabic letters are learned not in the order of the Arabic alphabet, but in the order in which they appear in the suras of the Qur’an that students learn. Students first learn the Fatiha, which is the first sura of the Qur’an, and then they go to the last sura, An-Nas, and work their way backwards. By the time they have reached the sura Humaza, they have encountered all the letters of the Arabic alphabet. The reason they learn the suras in this order – also the canonical order for Qur’anic students in North Africa – is that the final ones are shorter, thus easier for the beginner to memorize.⁶

⁶ Information on the names and literal meanings of the Arabic letters in Pulaar and the way in which they are learned in traditional Qur’anic schools comes from multiple interviews with Thierno S. Sall in June of 2016.

Brenner & Last (1985:433) point to Fula and Hausa (a Chadic, Afroasiatic language) as examples of what they usefully call “languages of religious explanation.” These languages of religious explanation were among the first to be written in Arabic script, and they often appear in translations or exegeses in the margins of Arabic religious manuscripts. Put to this use, such languages gained considerable status and were even considered holy languages themselves by some. Brenner & Last report that in Fula-speaking Fouta Djallon in northern Guinea, sections of the religious curriculum at Qur’anic schools “were devoted to ‘Fulfulde [sic] studies’, and advanced students were examined publicly on their ability to translate and comment on the Koran in Fulfulde” (1985:434). This would be true, one should note, also for students who are not primarily Fula speakers, but who were sent to study in Qur’anic schools run by Fula-speaking marabouts. The imprint that Arabic left on the prestigious way of speaking associated with the Fula-speaking clerical class throughout West Africa has yet to be thoroughly investigated, but it is certainly immense. By way of example, in his (1982) grammar of Pulaar, Yèro Sylla presents two distinct structures for noun phrases that contain cardinal numbers as simple variants of each other, without mentioning their origins. On further probing, however, it turns out that one of those structures is modeled on Arabic and is “the way we learned to speak Pulaar in Qur’anic school.”⁷ The influence that Arabic and the social milieu of the Qur’anic school, as well as the linguistic brokering that goes on there, have had on languages of religious explanation in West Africa remains, in light of some excellent recent studies of linguistic practices in sites of Islamic education (e.g.: Moore 2006; Tamari 1996), a particularly fruitful territory for future research.⁸

4.1 Ajami script

Turning now to ajami writing practices, it is not a conceptually difficult leap to make from writing Arabic to writing languages of religious explanation in Arabic script. This kind of writing often remained hidden to western scholars who assumed that what they were looking at was Arabic. Ethnographer and colonial official, Maurice Delafosse, notoriously (Vydrin 1998; Mumin 2014) went so far as to write “les Musulmans de l’Afrique Occidentale ne se servent pas des caractères arabes pour écrire les langues indigènes” (1904:259), even as his contemporary and

⁷ Interview with Thierno S. Sall, April 2013. The specific example we discussed, taken from Sylla’s grammar, was ‘eleven people.’ Normally in Pulaar the phrase would be *yimbe sappo e goo*, where the word *yimbe* ‘people’ is in the human plural *be* noun class and appears in initial position, as opposed to the partial calque on Arabic أَحَدُ عَشَرَ شَخْصًا, namely *sappo e goo neddo*, where it remains in the singular and is the final element in the noun phrase. (‘person/people’ is suppletive in Pulaar, hence the vastly different forms). The number itself retains a Pulaar structure however: *sappo e goo* ‘ten and one’.

⁸ For an appreciation of the extent of Islamic scholarship in African languages, particularly *tafsīr* or Qur’anic commentary, see the special issue of the *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 15.3 (2013), including the introduction and annotated bibliography by Tal Tamari and Dmitry Bondarev.

homologue, Henri Gaden, was busy describing the ajami writing system for Pulaar (1913). In contemporary West Africa ajami literacy is often just as invisible to governmental and non-governmental organizations alike who measure literacy in terms of Roman-alphabet literacy in the official (former colonial) language. Happily, however, the tide appears to be turning, and there is currently a small but robust and growing scholarly interest in ajami writing in Africa as evidenced in work such as Bao-Diop 2011; Bondarev 2014; Cissé 2006; Diallo 2012; Donaldson 2013; Jeppie 2016; Huméry 2001, 2010; Lüpke & Bao-Diop 2014; Lüpke & Storch 2013; Mc Laughlin 2001, 2015; Mumin & Versteegh 2014; Ngom 2009, 2010, 2016; Pasch 2008; Souag 2010; and Vydrin 1998, among others. This interest in ajami has also coincided with a revival of interest in the manuscripts that were housed in the Ahmed Baba center and other libraries in Timbuktu before the Malian crisis that began in 2012, evidenced by the appearance of two important volumes on Timbuktu libraries (Hunwick & Boye 2008; Jeppie & Diagne 2008).

In the Atlantic-speaking areas of West Africa ajami writing has been attested as a literacy practice – sometimes a robust one – for a number of languages, including Fula, Wolof, Seereer and Balanta, according to Mumin (2014:44), and for the Mande languages spoken in the Atlantic area (Vydrin 1998, 2014). Besides Mande ajami, Fula and Wolof ajami are the most visible and certainly the best documented cases, but it must be emphasized that beyond these two examples we really do not know the extent of Atlantic ajami writing. West African ajami generally follows Maghrebi writing conventions for Arabic. These differ from the standard eastern tradition in some distinctive ways. Most notably, the letters *fā'* [f] and *qāf* [q] differ in the two traditions, as illustrated below, and a final *nūn* [n] can be written in word-final position without the dot.

	Eastern (Standard) Arabic	Maghreb and West Africa
f	ف	ب
q	ق	ف
n	ن	ن / ن

Wolof (Touré 1964) and Fula (Gaden 1913) ajami orthographies also make use of at least one diacritic from the Warsh sytem of annotation used in the practice of reading and reciting the Qur'an, namely a dot below a letter to mark the sound [e:] (Souag 2010:3). Technical details of the writing system are outlined in Souag (2010), to which the interested reader is referred, and specific details of other languages can be found in Mumin & Versteegh (2014). Perhaps the most important observation about Atlantic ajami writing is that it employs diacritics for full vocalization. As Souag succinctly explains:

The Arabic script marks long vowels through full letters, while optionally marking short vowels through diacritic marks, termed *tashkīl* or “vocalisation” placed above or below the letters. In Modern Standard Arabic, vocalisation is rarely used except in pedagogical texts or to prevent ambiguity in specific words. However, Qur’ān texts have normally been fully vocalised since a very early period, because of the religious importance attached to their correct pronunciation.

West African Ajami typically follows the latter model, with every letter fully vocalised (2010:3)

There are many phonemes in Atlantic languages, such as implosive consonants and prenasalized stops, that are not part of the phonemic inventory of Arabic, thus the adaptation of the Arabic alphabet for writing Atlantic languages has involved some innovation as well as some ambiguity. As Sebba (2007) has argued, orthography is a social practice, and orthographic systems rarely evolve into the perfect phonemic systems that language technologists (e.g.: linguists and missionaries) envisage. Happily, writers are seldom perturbed by the ambiguities of their writing systems, since these can always be resolved through context. Individual systems for writing Atlantic languages in ajami script have not been standardized, standardization being a function associated with authoritative regimes of literacy while ajami remains in many ways a type of grassroots literacy (Fabian 1990; Blommaert 2008) as we shall see below, but they are fairly conventionalized as one might expect if they are to be useful.

Accounts of scribal activity from Pulaar and Wolof speakers in Senegal in the religious milieu of the Qur’anic school attest to a context in which students were able to learn and practice their ajami skills. As is well known, many religious scholars produced devotional religious poetry in Arabic, as documented by Samb (1972), but they often also produced this kind of literature in Pulaar and Wolof (and no doubt many other African languages of religious explanation), a practice that is less well documented. Qur’anic school students transcribed or copied these poems in African languages as well as in Arabic as part of their religious training, giving them substantial practice in writing ajami script. In so doing, they gained a practical literacy for their own languages that could then be transferred to more banal everyday practices of record-keeping and letter-writing. Ajami thus spread from its religious origins into the secular domain, as the examples in the following section will illustrate.

5 Two case studies

This section presents two case studies of ajami literacy practices in Senegal. The first involves *wolofal*, as ajami Wolof is called. The form of the word, which consists of the stem */wolof/* plus the causative suffix */-al/*, indicates in a precise way the use to which the Arabic script has been

put: it has been made Wolof, a clear statement of appropriation. Wolofal is a robust literacy practice in contemporary Senegal and serves as an important resource for the many Wolof speakers who either do not know the Roman alphabet or simply choose to write in the Arabic script for other reasons. The second case study comes from the island of Niodior in the Saloum Delta in Senegal, and involves a sample of ajami writing in Seereer. There has been no systematic study of ajami Seereer, and it is little documented beyond a brief mention here and there in the literature.

5.1 Wolofal

While ajami writing in Africa is often popularly believed to be either a thing of the past or a practice that is falling into desuetude, wolofal is widely used both in the rural Wolof heartland as well as in urban areas, centered on the holy city of Touba, seat of the caliphate of the vibrant indigenous Mouride Sufi order. There are a number of different writing systems for Wolof, including the Roman script orthography made official by governmental decree for the transcription of national languages in the 1970s, but which few people use. When Wolof is written in the Roman alphabet it is more often written in accord with the rules of French orthography, since knowledge of the Roman alphabet in Senegal goes hand in hand with learning the official language, French. Just as the lead language (Lüpke & Bao-Diop 2014) for ajami writing is Arabic, so is the lead language for writing Wolof in the Roman script French. Sebba (2007:59) remarks that orthographies are almost inevitably predicated on prior orthographies, and this is evident for Wolof in the Roman alphabet, which many people write as if they were writing French. Thus, vowels such as [u] and [ə] (schwa) are depicted as <ou> and <eu> in words like <kou> [ku] ‘who’ or <keur> [kər] ‘(at the) house (of)’ rather than in the official orthography, which would prescribe <ku> and <kër>, respectively. Wolof in a French-influenced Roman orthography is widely used, mostly in an unsustained way, as for example in signage in public space, but it is also currently used quite extensively in social media, text-messaging, and other forms of digital writing, especially among youth (Lexander 2011, 2012; Mc Laughlin 2014). The official, standardized orthography for Wolof in the Roman alphabet is less widely used than is the system influenced by French orthography, and it tends to be the domain of linguists and Wolof intellectuals and writers, including playwright, novelist and poet Cheik Aliou Ndao, mathematician and writer Sakhir Thiam, and Boubacar Boris Diop, who has written at least one contemporary novel, *Doomi golo* [The monkey’s children], in Wolof.

Besides Roman and Arabic script writing in Wolof, there is a third writing system, known as Garay (Dalby 1966,1986; Mafundikwa 2004; Everson 2016), which was developed and

published by a Wolof-speaking intellectual, Assane Faye, the founding president of the African Language Teachers' Movement in Senegal, in 1961. Like many indigenous West African scripts that are created from within Muslim communities, often by Sufi mystics, Garay is obviously inspired by Arabic script. Its orientation is from right to left, although characters are never joined together as they are in Arabic. Moreover, each Garay character is associated with a numeric value, harking back to long-standing West African and Islamic mystical traditions based on numerology. As far as is known, the Garay script is little used and is known to only some two hundred or so people.

Turning now to wolofal, which may well be the most common form of written Wolof, there are several conventions common to other forms of West African ajami that characterize the writing system, as documented most recently by Souag (2010), Bao-Diop (2011), and Ngom & Zito (2010). These include the use of the Maghrebi conventions mentioned above, vocalization marks, and the more innovative positioning of dots above or below Arabic characters to depict Wolof phonemes that are foreign to Arabic. Among these are palatal and velar nasal stops as well as a full range of prenasalized stops, from labial to velar. In the Atlantic ajami tradition innovations occur primarily through the positioning of dots. Souag points to a distinction in wolofal between the dots normally used to distinguish letters in the Arabic alphabet, as in the letters *sīn* س [s] and *shīn* ش [ʃ], and three consistently far smaller dots which can co-occur with the regular sized dots, and which mark, in Souag's words, "the Ajami diacritic" (2010:7). By way of illustration, he takes the case of the letter *jīm* <ج>, which in wolofal represents the voiced palatal stop [j]. Three additional Wolof sounds, the voiceless palatal stop [c], the palatal nasal [ɲ], and the prenasalized palatal stop [ɲj], are based on ج and include the ajami diacritic, namely the three small dots. Consequently, the wolofal characters for [c], [ɲ], and [ɲj] are identical, leading Souag to provide a "best functional definition" of this small diacritic, given as follows: "any Wolof sound not found in Arabic whose closest Arabic equivalent is the letter underneath" (2010:7). The small dot diacritic is also used in Pulaar ajami in the Fouta Toro of northern Senegal, revealing some interesting facts about the phonology of the language. For example, [p], which does not exist in Arabic, is based on Arabic [f] rather than [b] (Gaden 1913:59; Souag 2010:7), illustrating the relationship between [p] and [f], which are counterparts in the system of morphologically conditioned consonant mutation which permeates Pulaar; no such relationship exists between [p] and [b] in the language.

Many of these conventions are illustrated in the examples presented here, taken from a public health poster (Fig. 3) issued by the Senegalese Ministry of Health and Prevention displayed in Touba during the Grand M'aggal, an annual pilgrimage to Touba that commemorates



Fig. 3: Hygiene recommendations from the Senegalese Ministry of Health in wolofal

Cheikh Amadou Bamba's departure into exile in Gabon. The poster is from the early 2000s, and reminds people of basic hygiene, such as proper hand washing and food preparation techniques, to prevent diarrhea or an outbreak of cholera at the màggal. The wolofal is not typeset, but rather reproduced from a handwritten version. Given the left to right orientation of the narrative pictures, it is probable that they were originally done to accompany a Roman script text.

Fig. 4, taken from the poster's second recommendation, shows a (left to right) progression of the treatment of water from a well to a basin to the addition of bleach (with a

bottle labeled in French), reads *Ñaar: Ngaay naan ndox mu set*⁹ “Two: You should drink clean water.” Vocalization marks are apparent throughout the sentence, including the *sukūn*, an Arabic convention which shows that the consonant is not followed by a vowel. While the nature of the handwriting makes it difficult to know whether the “ajami diacritic,” namely the three little dots, are actually meant to be smaller than the other dots, they are apparent in the palatal nasal segment <ñ> [ɲ], written as the letter *jīm* <ج>, with three dots on top in the word *ñaar* ‘two.’

Interestingly, however, in contradistinction to Toure’s (n.d.) orthography, upon which Souag (2010:6) bases his analysis, the two prenasalized stops <ng> [ŋ], and <nd> [ɲ] are written as sequences of two characters, rather than simple stops with three superimposed dots, intimating that the writer may also know how to write Wolof in the Roman alphabet, where those sounds are written as digraphs. This convention for writing prenasalized stops is consistent throughout the poster.¹⁰



Fig. 4: *Ñaar: Ngaay naan ndox mu set* ‘2: You should drink clean water’

Fig. 5, the poster’s fifth recommendation, shows a man vomiting and a woman cleaning up afterwards (again in left to right orientation) and reads *Raxasal barab ya ñuy tuur dem àll ba ya ak waccu ya*. “Clean the places where there is [lit. they pour/spill] excrement [referred to by the euphemism ‘go to the bush’] and vomit.” Of interest here is the word *waccu* ‘vomit’ which contains a geminate voiceless palatal stop [c:], rendered identically to the palatal nasal [ɲ] which occurs in the word *ñuy* ‘they’ in the same sentence, and in the word *ñaar* in Fig. 4, as the letter *jīm* <ج> with three dots above it. The only difference is that the geminate [c] is written with a *shadda*, an Arabic convention for marking geminates, above it, with a superimposed vocalization mark. There is thus no difference in spelling between the sounds /ɲ/ and /c/, and possibly other sounds like /ɲj/ which is written with the same ajami character in other wolofal texts (Souag

⁹ I use the standard Roman orthography when transcribing Wolof.

¹⁰ Familiarity with the conventions for writing prenasalized stops in the Roman script is probably quite widespread, given that there are many very common surnames and place names that begin with these sounds (e.g.: Mbaye, Mbacké, Ndour, Ndiaye, Mbour) that appear on identity cards, names of businesses, road signs, etc.

2010; Bao-Diop 2011). There is little ambiguity, however, for the reader, since a writing system does not have to be technically perfect for it to be useful and meaningful to its users.



Fig. 5: *Raxasal barab ya ñuy tuur dem àll ba ya ak waccu ya*
‘Clean the places where there is excrement and vomit’

Rather than illustrating wolofal though an elite learned tradition of religious texts, this poster shows its application to the concerns of everyday life and its use by ordinary people. As an important public service message that is written uniquely in wolofal with accompanying drawings, the poster assumes a sizeable reading population literate in Wolof ajami, including women, whom the poster depicts as taking the primary responsibility for hygiene.

An additional example, Fig. 6, illustrates the everyday use of wolofal in a rural area. The photograph depicts a wall painting to the right side of a gate, advertising broilers (*poulets de chair*). The name of the establishment, no doubt a religious one given the Arabic name, is written in black (Darou Khoudouss Nasroune min Allah ‘Place of Sanctity, Victory from God’). Then in red, under the (live) chicken, is the Wolof word *jaay* ‘sell.’ The wall on the other side of the gate has the same information in French, and rather than a verb, the noun *vente* ‘sale’ appears. The Wolof equivalent of ‘sale’ would be the prenasalized form, *njaay*, so it is possible that the writer intended the letter *jīm* <ج> to represent the sound [ɲ], typically written with the ajami diacritic of three dots, rather than the plain stop [j]. Stylistically, it is also possible that the three prongs of the chicken’s foot represent or evoke the ajami diacritic, or at least take up space so that it becomes impossible to include the three dots. In any case, the semicolon after the word leads the



Fig. 6: Wolofal advertisement for broilers, *poulets de chair* (2015)

reader to what is being sold, namely *poulets de chair*. The phrase is written in Arabic script, and is ostensibly in French, but one could also make the argument that it is a common borrowing for which there is no equivalent in Wolof, and that it is thus a Wolof expression as well. The first sound in the expression, [p], is depicted by the Arabic letter bā with three dots on top, <ب>.



Fig. 7. Emergency entrance at Hôpital Le Dantec in Dakar. The wolofal reads *Ku yàkkamti fii la* ‘Whoever is in a hurry, it is here’ (2016)

Two final examples of wolofal come from the capital, Dakar, and attest to the fact that its use is not limited to the Wolof heartland nor to rural areas. The first is from the Hôpital Le Dantec in downtown Dakar, shown in Fig. 7. Although the French message here (*Pavillon d'accueil*) suggests that it is simply the reception area, the wolofal message, *Ku yàkkamti fii la* ‘Whoever is in a hurry, it is here,’ suggests that it is also the entranceway for emergency cases. The use of wolofal in this context of potential life or death situations makes an important concession to a sizeable reading public who may not be literate in French. The last example of the use of wolofal in Dakar is from a tailor’s shop. Here the tailor has taken the customer’s measurements and hastily written them down on a piece of masking tape that he has attached to the cloth to be sewn (Fig. 8). The words are in urban Wolof, characterized by numerous French borrowings whose somewhat careless spelling nonetheless shows them to be phonologically integrated loanwords, and the measurements (in centimeters) are depicted in Arabic numerals. The measurements read as follows:

<i>dënn</i> (Wol)	‘chest’	86
<i>hanches</i> (Fr)	‘hips’	105
<i>épaules</i> (Fr)	‘shoulders’	40
<i>longueur jupe</i> (Fr)	‘skirt length’	115



Fig. 8. A tailor’s record of a customer’s measurements, in urban Wolof written in wolofal. Dakar (2014)

These wolofal illustrations from Dakar, along with those from the poster discussed above, show the degree to which it is a robust everyday literacy (Barber 2006) that is unlikely to disappear anytime soon.

According to scholars such as Souag (2010) and Lüpke and Bao-Diop (2014), ajami literacy is generally acquired as a byproduct of literacy in Arabic and is not formally taught. While this might seem to be the case, the actual context of transmission of ajami, such as the copying of devotional poems in Pulaar mentioned above, remains largely undocumented and merits further scholarly investigation. This is especially relevant given that there is at least one important case of a program of formal instruction in reading and writing wolofal involving the Senegalese Mouride group known as the Hizbut Tarqiyya. The Hizbut Tarqiyya is a reformist Sufi movement first founded as a *daaira* or association of disciples among Mouride students at the University of Dakar in 1975 under the leadership of Atou Diagne (Guèye 2002:239-249). It grew quickly from its inception, becoming an important organization and securing the patronage of the Mouride caliph. The movement's leaders professed a strong attachment to the founder of the order, Shaykh Amadu Bamba, while grappling with the pressure to "modernize" in light of reformist critiques circulating at the time (Villalón 2007:182). The growth and expansion of the Hizbut Tarqiyya came to a halt in 1994, when Atou Diagne incurred the wrath of the Mouride religious elite, almost all of whom were descended from the founder, by questioning the deeply enshrined notion of hereditary leadership (Villalón 2007:182), but not before it had had an important impact on the transmission of wolofal. As part of its mission to modernize Mouride education while remaining faithful to the message of its founder, the Hizbut Tarqiyya started *daairas* in schools throughout Senegal. While they required students to learn some fundamental suras from the Qur'an, the main thrust of the education they offered was ajami literacy in wolofal and the study of the life and teachings of Amadou Bamba. Thousands of students, then, were taught wolofal in this setting, and they used their skills to read and transcribe Mouride teachings including cassette recordings of sermons by marabouts. As students mastered this literacy, they were in turn engaged to transmit their knowledge to younger students.¹¹ The nativist orientation of the Hizbut Tarqiyya was reflected in the language ideology of the movement with its focus not only on Wolof but on "pure" Wolof, relatively free of the many French loanwords that characterize urban Wolof (Mc Laughlin 2001). This was not a reactionary position, but one that was consonant with the overall orientation of the movement in that it encouraged its followers to emulate Shaykh Amadou Bamba. This emulation extended to speaking (and writing) a Wolof

¹¹ This information comes from an interview with Cheikh Thiam, former student and student-teacher of wolofal in the Hizbut Tarqiyya. March 2016.

that was closer in nature to that of the founder of the Mourides, an interesting case of language ideology and religion informing each other. There are parallels to be drawn here between the role of Wolof as an instrument of piety and the status of Fula as a holy language in the Fouta Djallon (Brenner & Last 1985). The case of the Hizbut Tarqiyya schools, involving one of the most robust ajami traditions in West Africa, is an important reminder that we know little about the transmission of ajami in general and wolofal in particular. While religious settings obviously play a central role, and Arabic is generally the lead language, there may be programs of instruction besides that of the Hizbut Tarqiyya that focus specifically on the transmission of ajami.

5.2 A grassroots literacy

The case study of wolofal focuses on a well-established writing tradition embedded in a stable social context centered around the Mouride Sufi order and which involves at least one case of formal transmission, facts that bode well for the survival of this literacy practice. The second ajami case is somewhat different and much more exploratory in nature, and will involve a different set of arguments concerning regimes of literacy. This second study focuses on a digraphic panel (Fig. 9) that stands at the entrance to the port of Niodior, a predominantly Muslim Seereer-speaking island in Senegal's Saloum Delta. The panel is entitled *Taxes du Port* (port taxes), and lists the sums levied on items such as livestock, foodstuffs, appliances, building materials, etc. that arrive by boat. The list on the left-hand side of the panel depicts French in Roman script, while the right-hand side is in ajami. The two lists, each consisting of forty-five items or so, are parallel in content, but their different forms suggest that the ajami and Roman scripts index quite different relationships to spoken language. Although it falls somewhat short, the French side, in Roman script, reflects a robust regime of literacy, understood here to mean a normative set of writing practices that are backed and reinforced by authoritative texts (dictionaries, usage manuals, grammars), practices (spelling contests, Scrabble), and official bodies from educational institutions to the French Academy. The ajami side, however, more clearly reflects aspects of what Fabian (1990) and Blommaert (2008) have called "grassroots literacy," defined by the latter as a "wide variety of 'non-elite' forms of writing" (2008:7).

Fabian points to a certain freedom in grassroots literacy, a type of literacy that emerges in the absence of a robust regime of literacy. Blommaert claims that no literacy is free from constraints, and that grassroots literacy "is only locally liberating and free; translocally, however, it can be oppressive and disempowering" (2008:10). Blommaert's discussion reflects his preoccupation with globalization and the movement of linguistic resources between different

The ajami script in the Niodior panel does not show all of the same conventions found in other Atlantic ajami traditions, such as wolofal and Pulaar in the Arabic script. The first five items on the list are domestic animals whose names are given in a local variety of Seereer: *inaak* ‘cow,’ *imbaal* ‘sheep,’ *fambe* ‘goat,’ *ofaam* ‘donkey,’ and *ipis* ‘horse.’ Interestingly, the Maghrebi conventions typical of West African ajami, listed in §4.1, are not used in the panel, as evidenced by the use of ف rather than ب for the sound [f] in the words for ‘goat’ and ‘donkey.’ Further down in the list, the *nūn* is also dotted in the phrase *ofeen miziik* ‘radio-cassette player, sound system’ (Fr. *chaîne à musique*), and the final letter in the same expression, [q], is written as ق, rather than the Maghrebi ن.¹² These details seem to indicate that rather than being influenced by other West African ajami traditions, particularly Mandinka and wolofal, the writer has made a direct adaptation from Arabic as learned through Qur’anic studies. This may also indicate that writing Seereer in ajami script is not a widespread or common practice that has developed its own conventions, a hypothesis that could be verified only through more research and documentation of the practice. To complicate matters, however, there are some conventions that the ajami script on the Niodior panel shares with wolofal. Vocalization is marked throughout, as is the *sukūn*, showing that a consonant is not followed by a vowel, but this is also characteristic of Qur’anic Arabic. Seereer does not have geminate consonants, so there is no need for the *shadda* to appear in this writing. Most significantly, however, the panel illustrates the use of the letter jīm <ج> with three superimposed dots to represent the palatal nasal stop, [ɲ], as, for example, in the words *akeriñ* ‘coal’ and *igooñ* ‘hay.’ Turning now to the prenasalized stop [ᵐb], found in the words for ‘goat’ *fambe* and ‘sheep’ *imbaal*, we see that the writer has alternated between a plain ب [b], with nothing to show that it should represent the prenasalized stop in the depiction of *imbaal*, while in the depiction of *fambe* it is a sequence of two characters as it would be in the Roman alphabet. Another case of ambiguity within the system, but not of course for the native speaker, is found in the depiction of the voiceless bilabial implosive stop, [ɸ], in the word *ilif* ‘fish,’ rendered in ajami in exactly the same way as the simple stop [p] that occurs in the word *ipis* ‘horse’, namely by <پ>. As a final remark on the details of spelling, the initial sound in the Seereer word for ‘soap,’ *saafu*, is written with an emphatic <ص> rather than plain <س>, just as in the wolofal poster discussed above, possibly harking back to the Arabic origin of the word, since it is not pronounced in either Wolof or Seereer as an emphatic.

¹² The use of the letter qaf, ق, which in (Qur’anic) Arabic represents a voiceless uvular stop /q/, is interesting, since the Seereer pronunciation of this word would end with [k]. It may be that the <q> in the French spelling of the word, *musique*, has inspired the use of ق, given the rounded shape of the two letters, or as an anonymous reviewer suggests, by the Arabic cognate which contains the sound [q]. Seereer has at least one uvular phoneme, /^NG/, so one would expect the distinction between [q] and [k] to be apparent to the speaker.

What the writing conventions in these two case studies tell us is that there is both synchronic and diachronic variation involved in Atlantic ajami. The synchronic variation stems from the lack of a complete overlap in the phonemic inventories of Arabic and the respective Atlantic language, thus one Arabic character may represent more than one Wolof or Seereer sound, or different Arabic characters may be used for the same Wolof or Seereer sound; in addition, ajami writing might follow either the Maghrebi conventions or the Mashriqi (Eastern, and standard) conventions. Diachronic variation, insofar as we can tell, is suggested in the evolution from writing the prenasalized stops as single characters, enhanced by the “ajami diacritic” discussed by Souag (2010), to their depiction as digraphs, possibly influenced by French orthography. This hypothesis would, of course, demand a much more thorough investigation of the evolution of ajami practices over time. What we can retain for now, however, is that ajami writing practices in Atlantic-speaking West Africa take place in the shadow of both Arabic, which it has for a long time, and French, which is a more recent introduction into the linguistic and literacy ecology of the case studies examined here.

Moving now from the technical aspects of the ajami writing system on the Niodior panel to the content, what is most striking is its multilingual nature. While the left side of the panel in Roman script is monolingual and conveys information in French, the ajami side appears to depict Seereer, Wolof, French, and other languages, and in so doing, it more closely approximates the everyday repertoires of the inhabitants of Niodior. The first items referring to animals are in a local variety of Ñominka Seereer, evidenced by the proclitic noun class marker, /i-/, typical of the islands in the Saloum Delta, which has eroded to a zero marker in Seereer-Siin, and which retains a CV structure, /gi-/ in the dialects of the Petite Côte. The use of vernacularisms such as this are one of the typical features of grassroots literacy as defined by Blommaert (2008:7). The same noun class prefix can be seen on items like *isaak simaa* ‘bag of cement,’ and *ikartuun saafu* ‘carton of soap,’ phrases which have French origins, but are morphologically integrated into Seereer. A look at the other items in the list reveals that the vast majority have their origins in another language.¹³ Given the nature of the list, namely items that are imported to the island, it is hardly surprising that so many of the items are loanwords since they depict, in most cases, non-native agricultural items or manufactured items that are relatively recent introductions to the island. Mandinka influence on the Ñominka dialect of Seereer is represented by the word *tia*

¹³ The same could be said for the French side of the panel, where a great number of the words also have their origins etymologically as loanwords. The difference lies in the fact that their time depth as loans means that they are known and used by those who only speak French, and they are codified within a French regime of literacy. The Seereer side of the panel, however, depicts loanwords from languages that for the most part make up the linguistic ecology of the island.

‘peanuts;’ the influence of early European contact can be seen in the Portuguese word *fariñ*, meaning ‘flour,’ and subsequent contact with French is abundantly represented by an overwhelming number of borrowings of French origin, from *pompiteer* ‘potato’ to *matla* ‘mattress.’ Wolof, Senegal’s national lingua franca, is represented in the lexical item, *meew* ‘milk.’ Locally the word means powdered or condensed milk, both imported products, as opposed to *fosiis*, the Seereer word for unprocessed milk. But despite its linguistic heterogeneity, all of the items on the list might also be considered Seereer, and the Portuguese and French items might also be considered Wolof, since that was undoubtedly the path for at least some of them into the repertoires of Niodior residents (Mc Laughlin, forthcoming), in which case disaggregating the list into discrete languages is not particularly useful. What is more useful, however, is to see the ajami writing as reflecting the heteroglossic manner in which people in Niodior speak. Repertoires are, by their very nature, disorderly and resistant to facile analysis or regimentation, but they are real objects in the world. Perhaps the freedom that Fabian (1990) tried to identify in his initial articulation of the notion of grassroots literacy is just that, freedom *from* a strict regime of literacy and freedom *to* depict a repertoire rather than a language.

As with Wolof, there are other systems for writing Seereer, including a codified Roman script used primarily in texts and documents related to literacy and development, as well as by Christian missionaries. There is also an Arabic inspired script created by a Seereer-speaking marabout and Sufi mystic in the town of Fatick, taught to his Qur’anic school students and used to “keep secrets,” thus it is not widely known (Villalón 1995:135). Whether these other types of literacy, or other instances of ajami writing by Seereer speakers, reflect the freedom found in the ajami writing on the Niodior panel, is an open question that once again points to the relative paucity of research on literacy practices in Africa, and especially those that emerge from within communities of minority language speakers.

6 Conclusion

In this chapter we have seen how the advent of Islam in West Africa and the subsequent conversion of vast numbers of Atlantic speakers resulted in widespread knowledge of the Arabic alphabet and writing system, which were in turn adapted for writing local languages such as Fula, Wolof, and Seereer, three of the largest Atlantic languages in terms of numbers of speakers. This adaptation came about in religious contexts, primarily Qur’anic schools, where Atlantic languages often served as languages of religious explanation (Brenner & Last 1985) in teaching students the meaning of the Qur’an and other elements of the Islamic curriculum. The transcription and copying of devotional Sufi poetry in Arabic and local languages also formed

part of the curriculum, and gave students the opportunity to practice their ajami writing skills. The transmission of ajami takes place in the shadow of Arabic, which is the lead language (Lüpke & Bao-Diop 2014) in such cases, and has always been construed as secondary in both scope and purpose to the language of the Qur'an. While this may be true in the majority of cases, the example of the Hizbut Tarqiyya's nativist curriculum and focus on the transmission of wolofal serves as a counter-example of which there may be more.

It is clear from the case of wolofal that a number of elements go to make up a healthy literacy ecology in which ajami writing practices can thrive. These include an infrastructure that promotes use of the writing system and a sense of the value and utility of the practice even in the presence of other languages and writing systems. However, there are other communities, such as the geographically close Pulaar-speaking Fouta Toro area of northern Senegal, where, according to Huméry-Dieng 2001 and Huméry 2014, ajami writing is not a robust practice and is reserved for formal texts or letters that require a certain moral and religious gravitas. It is possible, however, that the copying of religious poetry in Pulaar ajami in Qur'anic schools is still a robust, if undocumented, practice, but for now we do not know. The near absence of ajami writing outside these contexts in Fouta Toro, reported in Huméry-Dieng (2001) and Huméry (2014), however, may be due to a variety of factors that have promoted Pulaar literacy in the Roman script, a politicized practice taken up by language and cultural nationalists since the 1960s.¹⁴

There are long-standing ajami writing traditions outside the Atlantic speaking area elsewhere in Muslim Africa, notably among Hausa speakers in northern Nigeria, in the Mande-speaking regions of West Africa, including those that overlap with Atlantic-speaking areas, and in Swahili-speaking East Africa, traditions like those discussed in this chapter that predate the introduction of the Roman script. Future research may reveal how different traditions, have affected each other. For example, close contact between Mande and Atlantic languages in Atlantic-speaking West Africa, and the high numbers of people who speak both, leads to complex exographic ajami practices where speakers of minority languages may not write in their own language, but may write a language of Islamic explanation in ajami script. There are also historical questions about contact between Atlantic languages and Berber, specifically Zenaga, and their respective ajami traditions. Unfortunately, ajami traditions of Africa, as many scholars have pointed out, are often dismissed as informal writing and not counted as legitimate literacy, resulting in statistics that grossly underestimate the capacity of such societies to engage in reading

¹⁴ A comparison between writing practices in the Fouta Toro and Guinea's Fula speaking Fouta Djallon, where ajami is reputedly quite robust, would help elucidate the factors that contribute to the promotion or attrition of such practices.

and writing practices, and rendering them officially illiterate. But as this chapter shows, this is far from the case.

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