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Introducing the Ajami Literatures of Islamic Africa

by Fallou Ngom

Ajami ('ajamī or a'jami) comes from the Arabic word for non-Arab, or foreigner. It also refers to the practice of writing other languages using a modified Arabic script. Although written records are rarely regarded as part of sub-Saharan Africa's intellectual heritage, important bodies of Ajami literature have existed in Oromo, Somali, Tigrigna, Kiswahili, Amharic, and Malagasy in East Africa, and Bamanakan, Mandinka, Kanuri, Yoruba, Berber, Hausa, Wolof, and Fulfulde in West Africa for centuries. In South Africa, the first written record of Afrikaans was produced in Ajami by Muslim Malay slaves (Pah 2008, 2). Ajami developed in communities with a long history of practicing Islam, and who sought to adapt the Arabic alphabet to their own tongues, first for religious purposes such as prayers, writing magical protective devices, and disseminating religious materials and edicts, and later for secular functions such as commercial and administrative record-keeping, writing eulogies and family genealogies, recording important events such as births, deaths and weddings, and writing biographies, poetry, political satires, advertisements, road signs, public announcements, speeches and personal correspondence. There are also Ajami documents describing traditional treatment of various illnesses, the properties of plants and ways of using them and occult sciences; translations of works from Arabic into African languages; and texts on administrative and diplomatic matters (correspondence between Sultans and provincial rulers), Islamic jurisprudence, behavioral codes, and grammar (Hassane 2008, 115-17). This adaptation of the Arabic script to write African languages was not easy; the Arabic consonants and vowels reflected by the Arabic script do not necessarily correspond to those in specific African languages. Therefore scholars within each community devised systems of transcribing their languages by modifying the Arabic script, thereby allowing speakers to learn to write, read and recite Ajami texts. The early development of Ajami in African Muslim societies is not well documented, but is thought to have its roots in the pedagogies for teaching the Qur'an and other religious texts in the local mosques which typically served both as places of prayer and debate and as important learning centers in disciplines other than religious sciences (Hassane 2008, 111).

The development of Ajami probably also reflected a desire to put cultural traditions in writing, and to have a practical mode of written communication. The local language, being grounded in local realities, was a better vehicle for these purposes than Arabic. Evidence suggests that most of these Ajami literatures sprung up some 300 years ago; there is evidence, however, that the Touareg of the Sahara and Sahel developed an Ajami system for writing their language some 500 years ago. The recent discovery in Niger of a 500-folio Tamasheq Ajami manuscript dating from the 10th/16th century may be one of the most significant of the past decade (Gutelius 2000, 6-7). Together with other Tamasheq Ajami documents, the manuscript raises a number of interesting questions for historians—questions regarding 16th century desert society, Touareg culture, and the state of politics and trade in the Southern Sahara during a pivotal period in Saharan history. The manuscript deals with pharmacopoeia and other topics, and the work calls into question the assumption that Ajami was used exclusively for the purpose of proselytizing (Gutelius 2000, 6-7). More Hausa and Tamasheq Ajami documents are available at the Human Science Research Institute (IRSH) in Niamey. As Gutelius (2000) notes, the most recent find in Niger, combined with other Tamasheq manuscripts (both Ajami and Tifinagh, another Touareg indigenous writing system), provide an unparalleled opportunity for scholars piecing together pre-modern Saharan history from the perspective of nomadic and semi-nomadic Tamasheq speakers. Gutelius correctly notes that when used in conjunction with the extensive collections of oral histories collected over this century, these manuscripts can help describe changes in Saharan societies over time from a different perspective—a perspective that is most often denigrated in the Arabic manuscripts of the region. Kanuri, the language of the people of the Kanem-Bornu Empire surrounding Lake Chad, is also said to be one of the first African languages to have been written in Arabic script, followed by Fulfulde, Hausa, Wolof, and Yoruba (Hunwick 2006, 5).

Usman dan Fodiyo (1754-1817), who established the Sokoto Caliphate in Northern Nigeria (1804-1903), effectively used Hausa Ajami to make the Sokoto jihād a mass movement (Bobboyi 2008, 123-30). His daughter, Nana Asma'u Fodiyo (1793-1864), was also a revered Ajami poet and teacher whose work is regarded by some as exemplifying the potential role of women in education within an Islamic society (Mack and Boyd 2000). While the most celebrated intellectual literary tradition in West Africa is that of Timbuktu, little attention has been given to other centers of learning that thrived in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa in which Wolof, Hausa, Fulfulde, and other black African scholars developed rich Arabic and Ajami literary traditions. The insights in Robinson et al.'s (1994) translation of excerpts from a Fuuta Tooro Pulaar Ajami manuscript dealing with the war campaign of Al-Hājj Umar Taal (1797-1864) is illustrative of the significance of Ajami in investigating African history. Robinson, Hunwick, and Mack and Boyd's works on Ajami underscore the need for further studies of this largely neglected terrain of human knowledge that is at the heart of knowledge production about Africa and the world.

Unfortunately, although Ajami has a long tradition in Muslim societies of sub-Saharan Africa, stretching from Senegambia in the West to the Horn of Africa, it has been largely overlooked in teaching and research outside of the region. Although it continues to serve as a primary means of spreading Islam into non-Arabic speaking areas and an important tool for written communication, American scholars and students have no direct access to the rich materials written in Ajami.

The neglect of Ajami in academia is due to a number of factors, including the lack of an Ajami public depository, the limited number of individuals with the linguistic skills and cultural background required to analyze Ajami documents, and a lack of interest on the part of the few qualified scholars. Kane (2002, 8) notes that the writings of black African authors have long been neglected due to prejudice, as both Europeans and Arab scholars with the necessary linguistic competence to study their works have often deemed their insights of little or no scholarly interest or benefit, and most assume that sources of knowledge on Africa are either oral or written in European languages. These are some of the principal reasons for the current dearth of scholarship on Ajami literatures of Islamic Africa.

In West Africa, waves of Fulani religious revivals swept across the region in the 18th and 19th centuries, fostering the emergence of local Arabic and Ajami literary traditions. The first Muslim revival (of the 18th century) produced a renaissance of writing in the Arabic language; the second wave (of the 19th century) resulted in the emergence of Ajami writing. These movements produced centers of Islamic learning where both Arabic and Ajami were used for mnemonic, devotional, and didactic purposes. The best known communities where Arabic was used alongside Ajami were among (1) the Hausa-Fulani of Northern Nigeria; (2) the Fuuta Jalon Fulani in Guinea in the area of the ancient Islamic theocratic state founded during the jihād of 1727 (Salvaing 2004, 111-32); (3) the Adamawa Fulani in Northern Cameroon; (4) the Toorooo Fulani in Senegal and the Wolof, particularly the Murīds; and (5) the Hausa and Jula traders in Northern Ghana (Gérard 1981, 47). Ajami offers a unique window into the way the Islamic faith has been Africanized for centuries and the local historical, cultural and political perspectives of Muslim communities in West Africa.

The exact literacy rate in Ajami throughout Islamic Africa is unknown, but the available evidence suggests that it is much higher than the literacy rate in Latin scripts, especially in rural and religious areas. Cissé (2006, 77) notes that about 80% of people in Hausa areas can read and write Ajami. Many Hausa speakers from rural and religious areas who are illiterate in the Latin script, European languages or Arabic are literate in Ajami. However, they are regarded as "illiterate" because "literacy" has been arbitrarily equated with proficiency in colonial European languages or Arabic. The Latin script inherited from colonial languages severely under-valued the pre-existing forms of literacy practices, and continues to place them at the bottom of the literacy pyramid (Alidou 2006, 64). Ajami users acquire Ajami writing skills through their exposure to the Arabic script in Qur'ānic schools, the primary and often the only institution of learning in their rural and religious communities. Government and international aid-funded literacy and education programs in Hausa-speaking areas continue to exclude this important segment of the population, which has no vested interest in learning the promoted Latin-based scripts for their language because they already have their own system deeply rooted in their traditions and used effectively for their written communication needs for centuries.