

Ajami in Africa: the use of Arabic script in the transcription of African languages

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Introduction

Although the script of the Holy Qur'an has played such an important historical role in the transcription of the languages of certain Islamised African peoples, this field has aroused little interest among researchers – because of a lack of sources – and thus remains largely unexamined to this day. However, it is a fundamental facet of Islam's immense cultural contribution to certain African civilisations.

This arises from the fact that before the Islamisation of sub-Saharan Africa, knowledge, behaviour, historical narratives, language in its secret, selected and codified forms – in sum, everything which represents collective memory in its transmission from one generation to the next – all this was passed on orally, just as in pre-Islamic Arabia.

Of course, many older writing systems existed in Africa, of which the best known is that of Ancient Egypt. Hieroglyphics are behind a large part of modern knowledge, and they continue to communicate with us. In the beginning of the fifteenth century (*hijri*) the Bamoum of Cameroon created a somewhat crude writing system based on images. Vai (Liberia) and Ge'ez (Ethiopia) are two slightly more elaborate scripts.² The Tifinagh script, a system used to transcribe the Tuareg language, a relative of Berber, is still in limited use in some areas, but is gradually being supplanted by the Qur'anic script.³

With the introduction of Islam, a new situation developed in sub-Saharan Africa, where orality continued to be dominant. The new religion was intimately linked to a way of writing (*kitab*), and thus of reading (*al-qur'an*).⁴ These writings, which should be read in perfect accordance with the sacred message they bear, had been revealed to the Prophet Muhammad whose mother tongue was Arabic.

Opposite: A folio from Manuscript No. 6113 in the Ahmed Baba Institute. The text is written in Arabic script and the words are a mixture of Arabic and the local Hassani language.

It is thus perfectly natural that this message, which was addressed to humanity and transmitted in Arabic with its specific script, should gradually influence all aspects of the societies which subscribed to it, especially in the sphere of writing.⁵ In this way the history of writing certain sub-Saharan African languages will be interdependent with that of Islam.

Historical survey

Islam's 14 centuries in sub-Saharan Africa have been the subject of numerous studies in several languages and the subject is far from exhausted.⁶ Considering the vastness of this history, and the position it holds in a modest study such as this one, a reminder of the main points insofar as they impact on the subject will surely help us to understand and delimit our study.

The seventh to fifteenth centuries

The victorious expedition of 'Uqba ibn Nafi' al-Fihri in 666 in Fezzan then in the Kavar marks the first military contact of Islam with sub-Saharan Africa.⁷ All the same, the possibility that echoes of the new religion reached populations before this historical event should not be ruled out.

Islam thus makes contact with Africa by way of the Sahara, after having crossed the Red Sea (*al-Bahr al-Ahmar*). It crosses Egypt (*al-Fustat*), Cyrenaica (*Tarabulus al-Garb*), Ifriqiya (*al-Ifriqiyya*) and the Extreme Maghrib (*al-Maghrib al-Aqsa*). As north-south links across the Sahara Desert were numerous and very old, it was quite natural that Islam should make use of pre-existing caravan routes which linked the different commercial centres of northern Africa with those of southern, eastern and western Africa. Arabs and Berbers are often cited as having played an important part in the first phase of this process.⁸ But the diversity of customs linked to the multiplicity of ethnic groups suggests that the pace and means of the process varied in accordance with the political, economic and social history of the ethnic groups.

It thus took several centuries for Islam to gradually spread through the social and religious landscape, a process with two aspects:

- ❖ instruction from the Qur'an, of which even partial knowledge is indispensable to all believers in their duty to carry out the five daily prayers, one of the five pillars of Islam;
- ❖ education, which is inseparable from instruction in Islam, as the two complement each other. Whilst the first teaches the reading, writing and understanding of the message and the related sciences which popularise it, the second aims to take responsibility for individuals from childhood by giving them the moral and material means for the formation of their personalities with a view to their entry into the community of believers (*umma*), where they will be responsible for further developing the faith.



These basins used for hand washing are typical and distinctive of the West African culture.

The place initially implicated in this fundamental task was the mosque (*masjid*), which served as a place of prayer and debate affecting community life. Some mosques in time became important centres of learning in disciplines other than the religious sciences.⁹ These centres served as beacons from which Islamic culture and knowledge were spread throughout sub-Saharan Africa by itinerant scholars and their students. Certain merchants and important rulers began to encourage the scholars and students in their efforts.

The fifteenth to eighteenth centuries

From the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries these combined efforts began to catalyse a political and economic renaissance which was felt in the emergence of a local lettered class, which extended the work of scholars from the north. After the disappearance of large centres like Awdaghust, Koumbi Saleh and Walata, places such as Niani, Jenne, Timbuktu, Gao, Tigidda and Agadez in turn became very vigorous and prestigious hubs in the cultural and religious spheres. Scholars trained in Fez taught in mosques which had become veritable universities. *Imams*, *qadis* and secretaries (*katib*) were mostly natives of the Ghana Empire and the Mali Empire in the west and of the Kanem Bornu Empire in the east. Islam became a fully fledged African religion and the Qur'anic schools became wholly integrated with African social structures and adapted to their needs.¹⁰

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries

These centuries were characterised by an Islam that had been re-energised under the banner of reformist Sufi brotherhoods, of which the oldest was the Qadiriyya. This brotherhood emerged in Algeria and then spread into sub-Saharan Africa, firstly to

Timbuktu. Later the Tuaregs and the Moorish Kunta, who were very influential at the time, spread it further south. Its crowning achievement was the creation, in the nineteenth century, of theocratic states like the Dina of Humdallahi, the Sokoto Caliphate and numerous principalities under Islamic *shari'a* law.

The colonial period

Muslim culture had been established in all the large urban centres of sub-Saharan Africa by the time Europeans arrived in these territories. Islamic sciences and Arabic script were fairly widespread but geographically uneven because the importance of the centres of Qur'anic education varied in accordance with the size of the villages where they existed.

Moreover, the pre-eminence of the Muslim religion caused no small concern for the colonial administration, all the more so as the territory to which the latter aspired had been under the influence of Islamic scholars for several centuries. It was at this time that the brotherhoods of Qadiriyya, Tijaniyya, Sanusiyya, Khalwatiyya and their offshoots were busy reinvigorating Islam.¹¹ Of course, there still existed pockets of ancient or syncretic animist practice. However, in all regions, Islam was present in the systemic machinery of political and social administration and served as a cement to unify ethnic groups who were all the more disparate because of their divergent interests. The predominance of Islam can be seen in the resistance conducted under its banner by some Islamic scholars.¹²

Consequently, it is understandable that in order to establish its policies and realise its occupational ambitions, the colonial administration should devote itself to destabilising the centres which disseminated religious knowledge, centres which it viewed as training recalcitrants hostile to its presence.

To do this, it adopted a three-pronged strategy:

- ❖ to undermine the foundations of the religious culture by attacking traditional Qur'anic schools, thus marginalising Arabic as the language of learning, and simultaneously installing its own educational model with an arsenal of accompanying laws and decrees;
- ❖ to systematically control anyone considered indifferent towards the colonial administration, in this case marabouts, who were considered charlatans and vagabonds despite their social standing;
- ❖ to incorporate anyone who could be considered 'understanding' into the colonial project, and also to reprimand and deport the most openly hostile and resistant elements.¹³

This practice of control and repression nonetheless did not shake the spirit of Islam. Certainly, the level of education declined strongly over time, but for reasons better linked with its own dynamics and the living conditions of Islamic populations than

with the success of colonial policy. Thus, during the colonial period it has been observed that religious instruction grew horizontally via the enlargement of its foundations, but declined vertically with the slackening of the brotherhood element.

The Qur'an's linguistic contribution to languages

Islam has been a fully fledged African religion for several centuries. It goes without saying that its message has gradually impregnated the social fabric, beginning with the ancient religious conceptions of communities. Islam has consolidated their existing conception of an omnipotent God who exists above everything else, but whom they used to associate with other secondary deities capable of protecting or threatening the family or tribe. Islam thus recentred belief in 'the only God' by gradually obliterating the idea of secondary gods. I believe it then introduced a new social philosophy by peacefully erasing differences due to linguistic barriers, and promoting the creation of supra-tribal communities (*umma*) inspired by the model of Islam.

The social domain was also reorganised by means of the different Islamic sciences, notably that of jurisprudence (*fiqh*). All social philosophy and traditional practices (marriage, birth, education and instruction) were influenced to differing degrees. Some practices were totally Islamised, others only partially, but the process was under way. If one looks at it closely, this influence was only possible in some cases because of the similarity of the Islamic contribution to the standards in force in certain evolving communities. Even today there exist centres resistant to the Qur'anic message, but a large part of their social practice has been gradually infiltrated by Islamic norms.

The Qur'anic script or *ajami*

The Qur'an did not only contribute to social and religious philosophy; it also affected the field of language which, as we know, continually evolves in accordance with the position of its speakers. The cases of Swahili, Fulfulde, Hausa and Songhay are instructive. Numerous languages of African Muslim communities in West Africa resorted to borrowing Qur'anic terms to express certain previously unencountered situations and ideas, to replace little-used terms, and enriched their vocabulary with new words. The original meaning was kept in some borrowings, but in many other cases was either extended or restricted. Phonetically, furthermore, some borrowings from Arabic remained identical, whereas others underwent the phenomenon of accommodation which allows a language to borrow by integrating suffixes and prefixes, or by bending certain sounds to its own characteristics. This borrowing phenomenon operated directly from Arabic to the African language, and sometimes came via a third intermediary African language.

Scholars eventually resorted to the Qur'anic script in order to transcribe their languages. The adapted Qur'anic script is known as *ajami*; in the Arabic language it is

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In order to spread religious knowledge and learning it was thus necessary to find a method that was comprehensible to the believer. Local scholars (particularly those in the brotherhoods) versed themselves in the composition of texts in local languages. To liberate people's minds the Qur'anic script was their only resort. This script was thus utilised in accordance with the uniqueness of each individual language, taking into account those languages that possessed variations in dialect.

a relative term which applies more to the transcribed language than to the script itself. In fact, etymologically *ajami* is used to describe anything modified by incomprehension or 'barbarism' (*'ujma*); thus its application to all languages incomprehensible to the Arabs. The latter contrasted it with eloquence (*fasaha*), which in their opinion was the very characteristic of the Arabic language.

Historically, this idea existed prior to Islam, as it preoccupied poets of the pre-Islamic period. At that time, *ajami* was used more generally for the languages of neighbouring peoples, namely the Persians (*al-furs*) whose language was incomprehensible to the Arabs, and later the Berbers (*al-barbar*) for the same reason.¹⁴ Consequently, one need hardly note that the meaning of the word is dependent on its user and context.

Thus, in the pre-colonial Bilad al-Sudan *ajami* was very commonly used alongside Arabic in all intellectual activities carried out by scholars, and also by the literate masses in particular for correspondence during the colonial period.

With our current knowledge we cannot state with certainty the period in which scholars felt it necessary to resort to this script and to develop this literature in the Bilad al-Sudan. Nor do we have sources allowing us to state if it was in imitation of other Muslim communities (Persians and Berbers) who probably adopted it much earlier than the peoples of Central Sudan.

The hypothesis put forward by oral tradition is that the use of the Qur'anic script is ancient and goes back to the seventeenth century, but only became widespread in the eighteenth century when Islam had gradually spread to the non-literate strata of society. It thus became necessary to find a method of instruction suited to the fact that the majority of believers did not know Arabic, which remained the language of learning.¹⁵

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In addition, we also know that the *ajami* literature was methodically used as a means of combat in the religious *jihad* undertaken by Shaykh 'Uthman dan Fodio and in the political consolidation of the Sokoto Empire (see Chapter 9 of this volume).

At first each scholar would have had his own method of transcription, and because some letters – like the 'ayn, sad, sin, dad – did not figure in certain African languages, not all letters would have been retained. Other letters – such as g, p, mb, nd, nh, nj, c, yh – existed in the African languages but not in the Qur'anic set. It was necessary to invent them by adopting similar letters and integrating distinctive markings. But this

apparent anarchy in no way constituted a barrier between authors, since they could understand each other intuitively.

Disciplines dealt with in the use of the script

The *ajami* manuscripts bequeathed to us by our predecessors allow us an idea of the disciplines dealt with in this sort of script. Of course, one must be careful of generalising in such a vast and unresearched field but our sample can be considered reasonably representative.¹⁶

In fact, *ajami* concerned all fields of scholarly activity. We thus find treatises in the following fields:

- ❖ *al-tib al-mahali* (the description and traditional treatment of various illnesses);
- ❖ *al-saudala* (the properties of plants and ways of using them);
- ❖ *'ilm al-asrar* (texts dealing with the field of the occult sciences);
- ❖ translations of works and texts from Arabic into an African language;
- ❖ numerous texts exist on administrative and diplomatic matters (correspondence between sultans or provincial rulers, and between literate people).

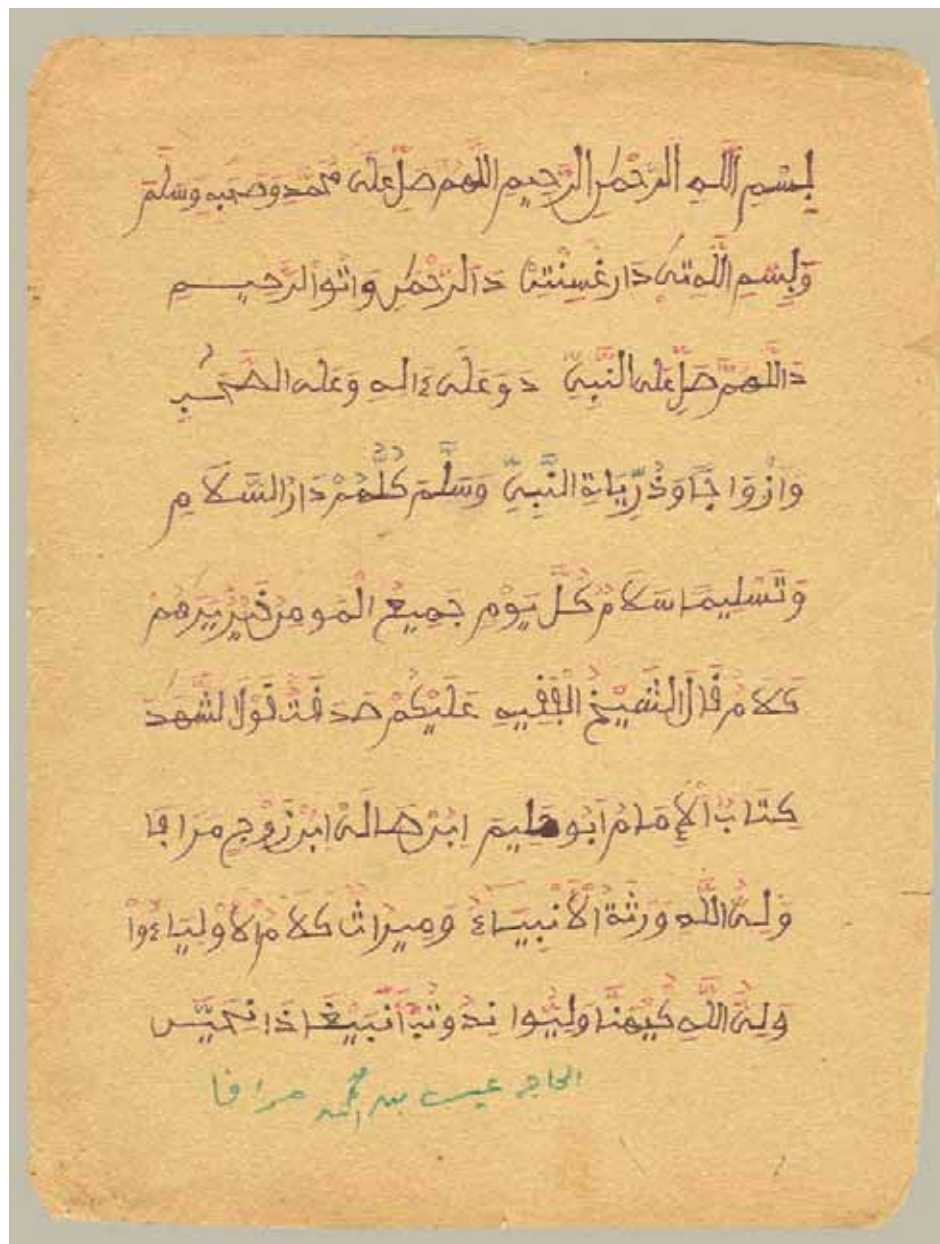
But the script was used primarily for religious matters and includes calls for the purification of the faith, comment on the necessity of strengthening relations between different rural and urban communities, and of developing a conscious Muslim character able to discern social rifts and religious problems. The texts are in prose or in verse (*mandhuma* or *qasida*) and the sources from which they are composed are the Qur'an; the biography of the Prophet (*sira*); educational, historical narratives; extracts from biographies of messengers and prophets (*qisas al-anbiya*); and Prophetic traditions (*hadith*).

In our context, the above disciplines are all the more important as the authors of these texts are addressing believers who in many cases remain attached to ancestral practices which they integrate with Islam. The themes are products of their context and milieu, they keep their didactic characteristics as simplified teaching tools accessible to the public at large. A few key trends can be seen in these texts.

Tawhid

The science of the unity of God (*tawhid*) is one of the disciplines which is dealt with in numerous texts – their aim is to bring syncretist believers to carry out the practices set out in the Qur'an and Prophetic tradition. These texts are written from the observation that, whilst the idea of 'the only God' did not present difficulties for fresh converts who were still attached to ancestral traditions, this was not so in the case of the secondary gods that pervaded everyday life. These gods varied with tradition and were supposed to provide protection from calamities, to intercede with the ancestors to control the ecological environment, and to shield them from famine and epidemics, phenomena which populations experienced cyclically.

Figure 8.1 A folio from Manuscript No. 3503 in the Institut de Recherche en Sciences Humaines (IRSH/UAM), in Niamey, the capital of Niger. The author is al-Imam Abu Halim b. Sâlay b. Zawji Marafa, and the work is entitled *Manzuma fi al-wa'az wa-l-irshad*. The text is written in Songhay-Zarma (one of the languages spoken in western Niger and the Timbuktu and Gao areas of Mali). It contains extracts from the Qur'an and prophetic tradition, Muslim jurisprudence and biographies of exemplary figures. A literary text which has emerged from the masters of the Sufi schools, it deals with themes ranging from the teaching of religious principles to a behavioural code for believers.



The *tawhid* discipline thus asserts the unity of God, a concept which many believers in West Africa struggled to accept. Certainly the vast majority regularly practised the principles of Islam, but continued to indulge in ancestral religions, forbidden in the Qur'an and in Prophetic tradition.

The authors' descriptions are drawn from those Qur'anic verses that deal with paradise, a reward for the faithful described using Qur'anic imagery which has been carefully adapted to the immediate environment. The authors also use the same methodology to threaten eternal damnation in hell for perverse syncretists. IRSH/UAM no. 3503 (Figure 8.1) gives an idea of the ingenuity of the writers.

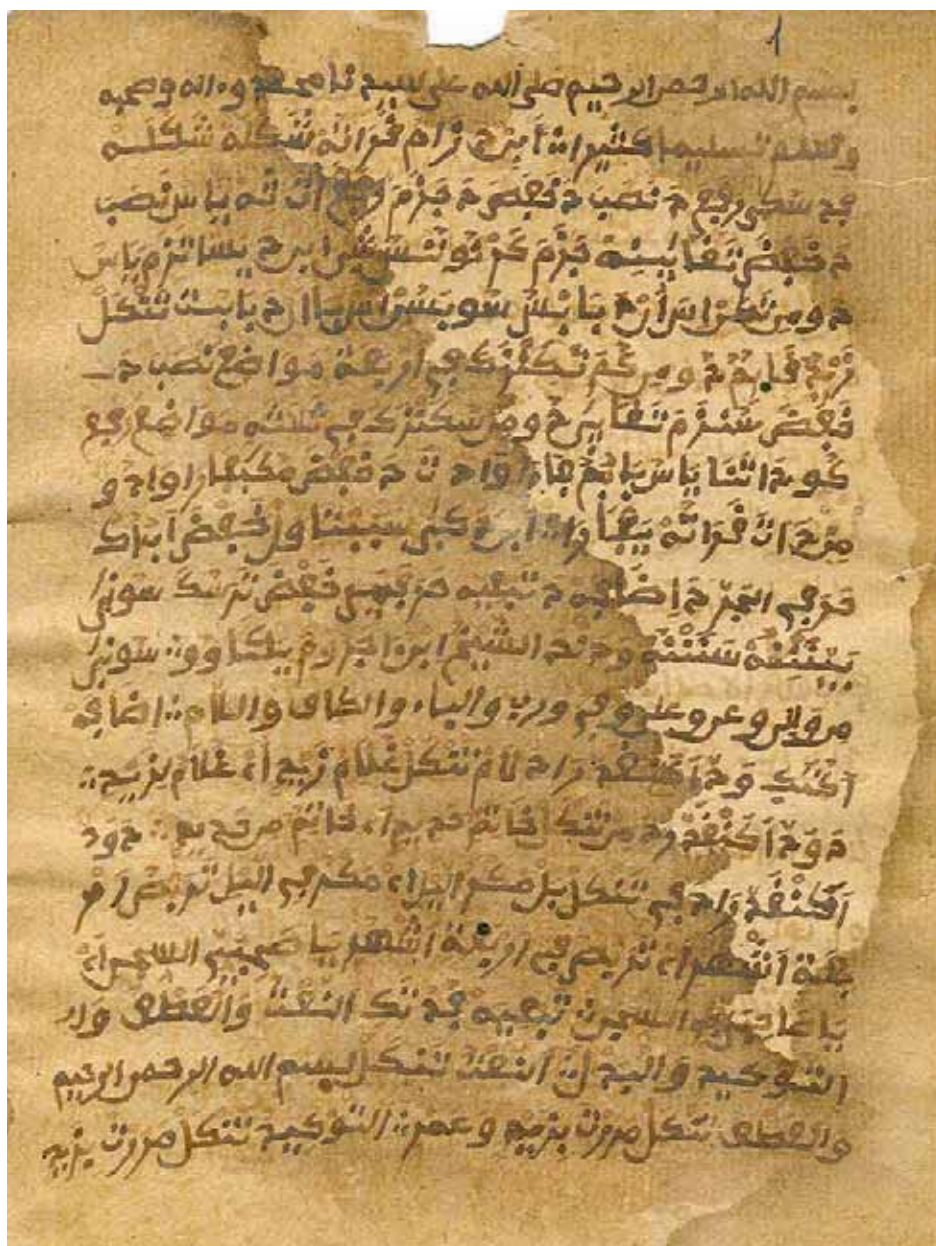
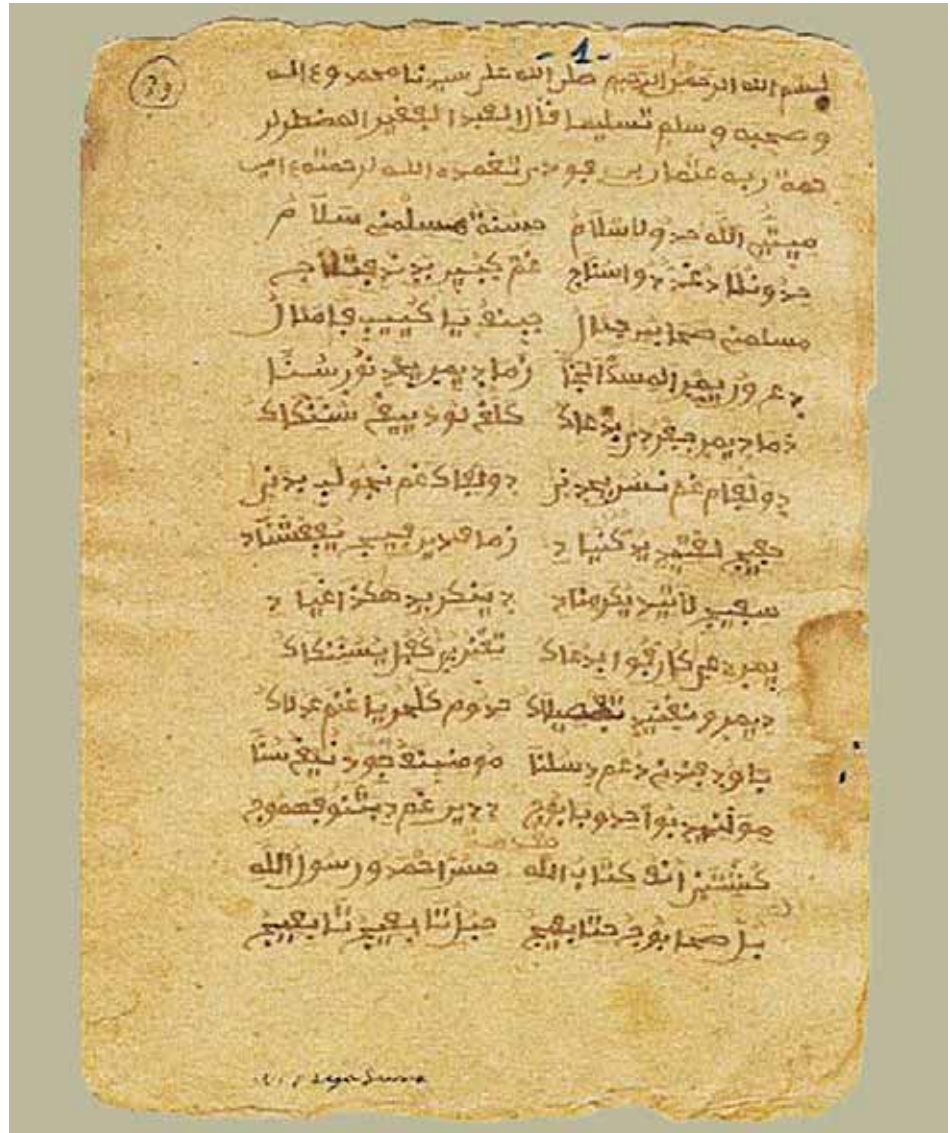


Figure 8.2 A folio from Manuscript No 367 (IRSH/UAM). This is a Hausa version of the work known as *Ajrumiyya*, a text which is particularly valued by beginner learners of Arabic grammar.

Fiqh

Another discipline which is dealt with in numerous texts is Muslim jurisprudence (*fiqh*), whose aim was to explain the wisdom recorded in the Qur'an and in the books of the Maliki jurisconsults (the most widely spread juridical school in western and Central Bilad al-Sudan), particularly the chapters regarding daily life and social relationships between believers. In addition, the authors drew on historical narratives (*qisas al-anbiya*), extracts from Qur'anic commentary, and biblical narratives (*al-israiliyyat*), all mixed with elements of local culture which were not openly contradictory to the above principles. The goal of this discipline was to set out an exemplary model of behaviour

Figure 8.3 A folio from Manuscript No 393 (IRSH/UAM), a series of poems composed in Fulfulde and Arabic by Shaykh 'Uthman dan Fodio in honour of the Prophet Muhammad.



which, if followed, would achieve two objectives: obedience to God resulting in a stable life here on Earth, and salvation in the afterlife which will be realised in paradise. In the Bilad al-Sudan the influence of this discipline over the centuries gradually brought different ethnic groups together, and then unified them to a certain extent. Prior to their unification, these groups of pastoral and nomadic peoples had such divergent interests that serious conflict would often result. One of the most noticeable consequences of this discipline's influence was the linguistic and ethnic mixing between Saharans and Sahelians through intermarriage. Today, community customs continue to be influenced to one degree or another; some have been forgotten, whilst others are disappearing. The fluctuating dynamics of this discipline, fed by a lack of equity in political administration, at times resulted in the demand for the full application of Islamic *shari'a* law by the populations of some ancient religious cities.

Grammar

The Hausa version of the work known under the title *Ajrumiyya* (IRSH/UAM no. 367; see Figure 8.2) is highly prized in Qur'anic schools in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly by learners beginning Arabic grammar. The author treats the different basic problems of this discipline (of grammar) in several chapters.

Eulogistic poetry

Eulogistic poetry is dedicated to the memory of prophets and messengers, called in Hausa *Yabon Annabi* and in Songhay–Zarma *Annabi Sifey*, but centres on the Prophet Muhammad. By hagiographing persons considered godly and pure, they present models to be imitated in particular ways. Like other original religious compositions from West Africa, this discipline draws on cultural referents specific to the locale, which partly explains its hold over the population. This poetry was first produced orally before being translated into *ajami*.

The poems composed by Shaykh 'Uthman dan Fodio in honour of the Prophet Muhammad are examples of this genre.¹⁷ Composed in Fulfulde *ajami* and in Arabic, these poems contain diverse elements of local culture (see Figure 8.3).

Ajami in the post-colonial period

I have only briefly considered the relationship between the colonial administration and the scholars who held religious knowledge. Whilst it is true that new directions had been taken in the teaching of the Qur'an, notably through the encouragement and promotion of *madrasas*, the administration bequeathed by the colonisers (especially by the French) nonetheless remained mistrustful towards Muslim scholars. Of course, those in power now shared the same background as the scholars and were thus culturally similar, but real power still lay in the metropole. This partly explains why the education policy adopted in the post-colonial state was largely similar to that of the colonisers. It had three main aims:

- ❖ creating a secular state in accordance with the political ideals of the colonial power, which had at any rate left its advisers in the chancelleries of the new states;
- ❖ taking into account the fact that the majority of the population of Niger was Muslim but avoiding the creation of an 'Islamic state' which would have been considered a failure in their civilising mission;
- ❖ privileging relations with Arab countries, especially the wealthiest, to obtain indispensable aid for the economic and social development of the country, thus cutting the ground from under the feet of those who could use the extreme poverty of believers to formulate demands of a political nature under the banner of Islam.

In the realm of education, at the same time as encouraging the creation of *madrasas*, these states above all encouraged the colonial model of education from which local administrative elites had derived. The trend in favour of colonial-style schooling accentuated with independence, and younger generations were completely absorbed

into western schools. The rift thus widened between a generation of parents who had grown up in the country in an Islam-influenced traditional culture, and their children, who had become the elite and had grown up in large urban centres which tended to promote western values through school. In less than a century and a half, this colonial model managed by a local administration became a source of inspiration for the class of future decision-makers.

On the other hand, with scholars who had remained attached to a culture largely shaped by Islam, people conversant with *ajami* continued to use it in correspondence, and Qur'anic schools continued to teach from the Qur'an. This duality is one of the characteristics of schooling in Islamic West Africa.

But we are forced to note that today most African languages are transcribed using the Latin alphabet, and linguistics is taught in universities in Romance languages. It seems as if *ajami* will thus be gradually superseded. However, the states of the sub-region (Guinea, Mali, Senegal, Niger and Chad) have put into place national *ajami* literacy programmes with the technical and financial support of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation; the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation; and the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organisation. What is more, round-table discussions have been organised with the aim of standardising transcription systems and fine-tuning literary programmes. Preliminary results have produced an operational literacy programme in standardised *ajami*, which will serve as a tool for local community training in line with the mindset of the population.

Conclusion

The long-standing method of transmitting the Muslim community's tradition orally was supplanted by the use of the Qur'anic script which served as a tool for cultural preservation. An inestimable legacy of *ajami* documents in different disciplines has been produced over several centuries. The standardisation of *ajami* is a welcome initiative which will no doubt bring its users closer together. But its use on a grand scale as an effective community literacy tool will pose certain political problems in the current context of competition for linguistic and cultural primacy. Economically disempowered states will need to make political choices, which is why political will is the key factor in this exercise.

As for the relevant populations, they remain firmly attached to the *ajami* script which is tied to the Qur'an, their holy book.

NOTES

- 1 Translated from French by Simon de Swardt.
- 2 Ki-Zerbo (1972) – see table of different African scripts in the appendix.
- 3 Hamani (1988: 79–113).
- 4 Several Qur’anic verses (59: 21; 12: 2; 39: 28) assert that the Holy Qur’an is a text above all others, uncorrupted by any imperfection. It is designed for the purification of the soul.
- 5 See Daniel (1970).
- 6 The most remarkable project remains the *Histoire Générale de l’Afrique* carried out under the aegis of Unesco. The abridged version has been translated into kiSwahili. Hausa and Peule versions are in progress. For the classical period, see Cuoq (1975).
- 7 Moumouni (1984).
- 8 Laroui (1970: 218–219).
- 9 Thus numerous sub-Saharan Africans were trained in the famous university mosques: al-Qarawine in Fez, Zaituna in Tunis, Qayrawan and al-Azhar as-Sharif in Cairo. See El-Fasi & Hrbek (1990: 81–116).
- 10 Hamani (1981: 26–31). Note that Hamani has drawn up a list of significant scholars who played an important role in intellectual activity. See also Ki-Zerbo (1990: vol. 6, chap. Révolutions Islamiques).
- 11 For the role played by religious leaders in the face of colonial installation, see Kimba (1981).
- 12 Salifou (1971: 66).
- 13 Traoré (1983: introduction).
- 14 Gibb et al. (1975: 272).
- 15 Gibb et al. (1975: 272).
- 16 We have begun on the basis of 70 *ajami* documents preserved in the Département des Manuscrits Arabes et Ajamis in the IRSH. They originate from all parts of sub-Saharan Africa.
- 17 Manuscripts to be found at the IRSH.

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Samcoth 23 januar

لشمس العالمين
 تم انما ما شئت النبي شاد واحد منهم امر زينة ارعاد
 ينجية والنجية بالليل اجتهاد النبي عادت هو زائد تبغية
 انكنا عتدا اهله لادور شمع كسر ذلك الام اهلته اعز شوق
 واعكاهما يلهم حتى امما الدنيا ~~الاولى~~ المخلوق
 لكثير لم يمسر الا يجمع اقله من البر عاذا يادس من لقلب
 وعاد العبد اكثر اوتدب فيه النار والثامن من اجمع
 بعد الا كما يعرف حدها فاذن النبي عاد المغرب
 جات لمر كاه وانخرج وارفة، ثالث الثالث
 انش ايد كرا عدا انه من الرافة شالعه لاشعور نشوية
 افدي في النار كالوا عداه قال الله ملكا تارا بانكوا اما
 كما يلعن من الدنيا ~~والشك~~

30 januar

حمة انم ما شئت النبي عيختل امراء ورغبت اليه بشرة وحده عند موج
 والمة غلبة واخلة ولا حقد وسترقة ثالث لمرها ذاشته
 الروا شئت اكله بقعة الا بيوت الخلاب الرابع
 الصبية والرابع لعفة

Samcoth 24 januar 1915

تم انما ما شئت وضع واحد منهم اشترى النار اليه من الا صاحب
 انش واحب اهلته شتلا واندوز ~~الاولى~~ شتلا تارا اهلته
 واجبت شتلا شال لوشم وحبب مولد اليه خلفنا شال لوشم
 يادس مولد موجب شتلا شال انما اوتدب يارحبت ياركي