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For My Children

From Africa, In Ajami

سنة ١٠٠٠

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

الحمد لله رب العالمين

والصلاة والسلام على من لا نبي بعده

وبعد فقد حضر

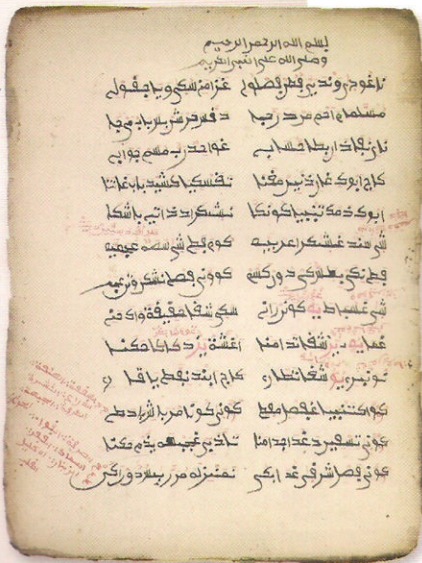
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"In the Hausa country, all chiefs of any position whatever have Arabic writers for conducting their correspondence. . . . Zaria at the present day is an exception. The ruler, Aliu dan Sidi, has a personal preference for writing in the Hausa language, using Arabic characters, of course. Hausa so written is locally called Ajami, an Arabic word meaning simply "foreign.""

— Frederick William
Hugh Migeod, 1913



WRITTEN BY Tom Verde
MANUSCRIPTS Courtesy of the Melville J. Herskovits
Library of African Studies, Northwestern University
PHOTOGRAPHED BY Dick Doughty



When the 19th-century Senegalese religious leader and patriot Amadou Bamba wrote poems urging his countrymen to shrug off French colonial rule, he penned his stirring verse in his native tongue: Wolof.

When the Nigerian writer Nana Asma'u composed her elegiac portrait of the Prophet Muhammad in the early 1800s, she did so in what remains West Africa's predominant language: Hausa.

And when the 18th-century court poet Sayyid Aidarusi honored his master with an adaptation of the Arabic epic "Umm al-Qura," he wrote in the prevailing tongue of some 50 million East Africans: Swahili.

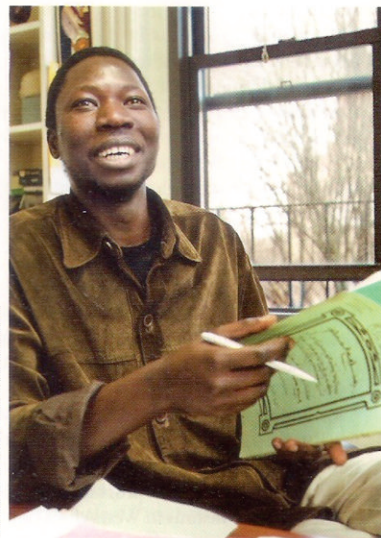
While all three wrote in their native languages, the scripts they employed each bore a close resemblance to Arabic. They were using Africanized versions of the Arabic alphabet, collectively called "Ajami."

Much as the Latin-based alphabet is used to write many languages, including English, Ajami is not a language itself, but the alphabetic script used to write a language: Arabic-derived letters to write a non-Arabic—in this case, African—language.

"Ajami" derives from the Arabic *ajami*, which means "foreigner" or, more specifically, "non-Arab." Historically, Arabs used the word to refer to all things Persian or non-Arab, a usage they borrowed from the ancient Greeks. Yet over the last few centuries, across Islamic Africa, "Ajami" came to mean an African language written in Arabic script that was often adapted phonetically to facilitate local usages and pronunciations across the continent, from

the Ethiopian highlands in the east to the lush jungles of Sierra Leone in the west.

"If you go to the Kano Kurri market, in the heart of Kano city [in Nigeria], you will find thousands and thousands of books written in Ajami. They are everywhere," says Abdalla Ūba Adamu, professor of science education and curriculum studies at Kano's Bayero University in northern Nigeria, home to the majority of the country's Muslim population. However, Adamu goes on to observe, many of the people reading those books are officially counted as "illiterate" by the Nigerian government, which excludes Ajami from its public school curricula. Though research has shown that as many as 80 percent of the estimated 50 million Hausa-speakers in Africa can read and write Ajami, they are considered "illiterate" because, Adamu explains, in Nigeria and other West African nations, literacy is equated with proficiency in Arabic or one of the Latin-alphabet-based colonial languages, usually French or English. As a result, such surveys overlook tens of millions of Africans whose vernacular may be Hausa, Wolof, Fulfulde or any of nearly two dozen other African languages. "This is a population that



VERNON DOUGETTE / BOSTON UNIVERSITY

Ajami adaptations of Arabic have parallels not only among Asian scripts, but also among European adaptations of the Roman alphabet, observes Fallou Ngom, above right, assistant professor at Boston University and a 2011 Guggenheim Fellow. Opposite and above left: This Ajami manuscript page describes constellations in Hausa, which is spoken by some 50 million people today.

needs to be recognized," says Senegalese-born Fallou Ngom, director of the African Language Program at Boston University's African Studies Center.

Ngom and Adamu are among those attempting to change this through a combination of activism, education and scholarship. To them, it is galling that the Arabic alphabet was adapted over centuries for use in other parts of the Muslim world, just as the Roman alphabet was adapted for use in, say, German and Turkish, yet Germans and Turks who can read their respective adaptations are considered literate, whereas Africans who read and write Ajami often fall below the official literacy radar.

"The spread and development of Ajami is not, if you really look at it, different from the spread of Latin in Europe," says Ngom. Latin "was a church language, but its letters were adopted for use in French, German, Spanish, English and other languages."

Similar orthographic migrations and adaptations took place throughout the Muslim world. In Pakistan, for example, the literary language Urdu is written in Perso-Arabic, a script adapted from Arabic in much the same way as Ajami. In Malaysia, there is Jawi script; in Iran, Farsi; and up until the early years of the republic in Turkey, Ottoman.

In addition to a kind of literacy enfranchisement, Ngom and others also feel that a wider understanding and recognition of Ajami could shed light on whole new chapters of African history, told from local points of view, which have yet to be examined by scholars outside the region.

Reading in Ajami, "you will learn, for the first time, how people of West Africa perceived themselves in local accounts of history, as opposed to colonial records," Ngom suggests. Indeed, it has been his experience in his native Senegal that colonial-era French and Ajami sources each paint distinct pictures.

"It is like you are looking at two very different accounts of the same events through different pairs of eyes," he says.

"What the Ajami texts provide us with is access to what Muslims in West Africa hundreds of years ago were thinking and saying in their own vernaculars, using their own idioms," says Bruce Hall, assistant professor of history at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina.

The story of Ajami is intertwined with the stories of how Islam came to Africa some 13 centuries ago and how European colonization followed a millennium later.

Islam reached Africa first in Egypt, within a decade of the Prophet Muhammad's death

Ajami and Other Scripts from Arabic



in 632 CE. By 750, it had spread over North Africa and across the Mediterranean into the Iberian Peninsula and southern France.

By contrast, Islam came to sub-Saharan Africa more gradually, flowing south along

the network of long-established trade routes that tied littoral Mediterranean lands to the Niger Delta in the west and the ports of the Indian Ocean in the east. Traversing these famed, trans-Saharan trade routes on the



ies where they conducted business became synonymous with exotica and riches: Gao, Djenné, Koumbi Saleh and—the most fabled of all—Timbuktu.

But in addition to salt and silk, these merchants brought with them Arabic writing, language and ideas, most prominently Islam's message of unity through the

only creature suited to such a journey—the camel—Muslim merchants came in search of gold, ivory, kola nuts and slaves to exchange for salt, copper and textiles. In Arabic, they called the entire sub-Saharan region *bilad al-sudan*, or “country of the blacks,” and the trading cit-

For members of African societies where oral tradition predominated, Arabic was the first written language to which they had been exposed.

worship of one God. The earliest urban center to embrace Islam, late in the 10th century, was Gao on the Niger River in Mali. Other kingdoms along the serpentine bends of the great river eventually followed: Takrur (Senegal); Songhay (Mali); Kanem-Bornu (Chad); and Hausaland (Nigeria). By the 11th century, reports of these and other flourishing Islamic cities made their way north to Al-Andalus in southern Spain, to the aristocratic geographer and historian Al-Bakri:

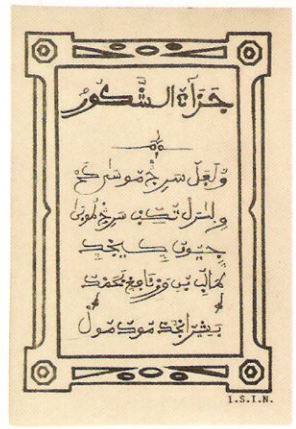
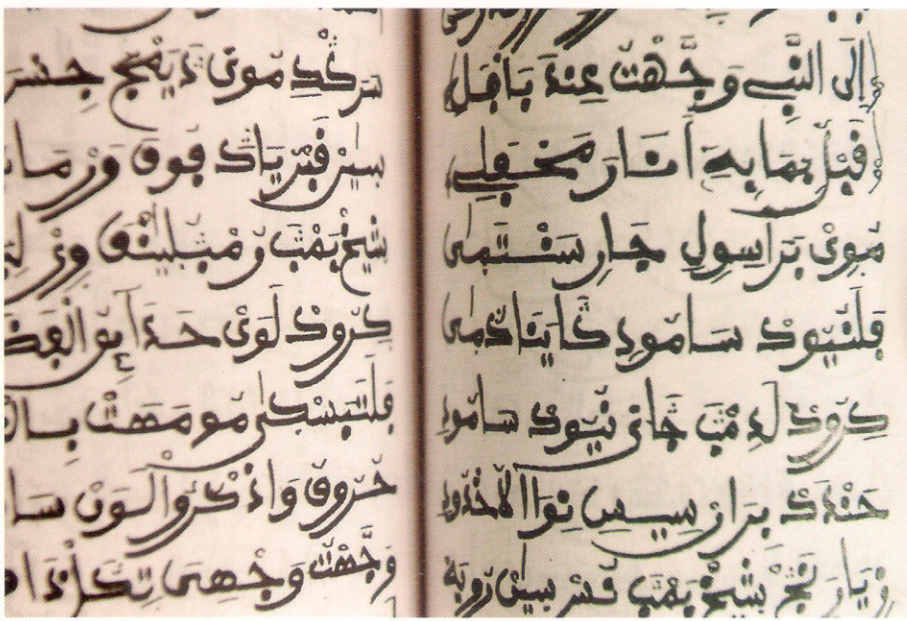
“The city of Ghana consists of two towns situated on a plain,” he wrote in his *Kitab*

al-Masalik wa al-Mamalik (Book of Highways and Kingdoms). “One of these towns, which is inhabited by Muslims, is large and possesses twelve mosques in one of which

they assemble for the Friday prayer. There are salaried imams and muezzins, as well as jurists and scholars.”

These jurists and scholars, as well as the traders, turned out to be critical not only to the spread of Islam, but also to the eventual development of Ajami.

From its beginning, Islam was a literate religion. *Iqra'* (“read”) is the first word of God's revelations to Muhammad that became the Qur'an. Knowledge of Islam meant knowledge of the revealed word of God: the Qur'an. Consequently, wherever Islam went, it established centers of learning, usually attached to mosques, where children learned to read and write Arabic in much the same way that European and American children have



Twentieth-century poet Serigne Moussa Kah of Senegal wrote and published in Wolof. Like other Ajami scripts, Wolof signals unique vowels and consonants by adding dots and other diacritical marks above and below nearly equivalent Arabic letters.

often been taught literacy by using the Bible. Thus, for the members of African societies where oral tradition predominated, Arabic was the first written language to which they had been exposed.

Yet while Arabic was the language of the Qur'an, as well as of the discourses and commentaries of the several schools of Islamic law (*shari'a*), it could not meet every institutional and literary need of the region's powerful and politically complex empires. For example, when a 16th-century ruler of the city-state of Kano signed his name, he could write his given name "Muhammad" in Arabic, but he required a specially adapted script to render his Hausa surname, "Rufa." Likewise, documents pertaining to uniquely African cultural traditions, arts and sciences were also more easily written in a script that could accommodate local vocabularies and pronunciations.

"In traditional medical books, for example, you will often find the text written in two layers of script, Arabic and Ajami," says Nikolay Dobronravyn, African studies specialist and professor of world politics at the School of International Relations at Russia's St. Petersburg University. "The main text may be in Arabic, but you usually have commentaries and the names of local plants and local medicines written in Ajami."

The earliest surviving Ajami text is a tomb carving in Gao that dates from the 11th or 12th century. Paper being more

perishable than stone, the oldest Ajami manuscript dates to the 16th century: Written in Tamasheq, the language of the largely nomadic Tuaregs, it is a pharmacopeia. Other early documents from the 17th and 18th centuries survive in Wolof, Fulfulde and Hausa.

To accommodate the vocabularies and pronunciations of each language, writers of Ajami modified the Arabic alphabet, often creating new letters.

"Arabic has only three vowels, whereas

Colonial administrators viewed Ajami as nonsense at best and a threat to their authority at worst.

Wolof has seven," Ngom points out. "Similarly, there are consonants in Wolof that do not exist in Arabic, so what the writers of Ajami did was to add dots above or below letters that were their closest Arabic counterparts."

Collectively, all of these adaptations became known as Ajami—the scripts of African medical texts, botanical surveys, works on the occult and astronomy, political, commercial and personal correspondence and religious texts written well into the early 20th century. By this time, however, Ajami began running headlong into the Latin-based scripts of European languages imposed by colonial administrators who viewed Ajami as nonsense at best and a threat to their authority at worst.

"The French were very suspicious of this writing they couldn't read," says Jennifer Yanco, US director of the West African Research Association. "A lot of libraries were burned. So the local people got wise, and they began hiding books within double walls of their mud-brick houses, or they hid them in caves."

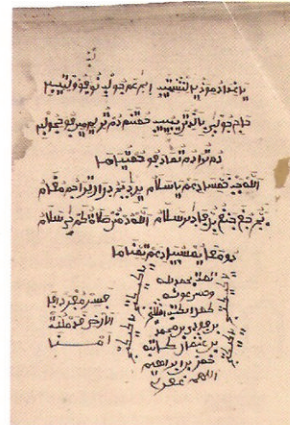
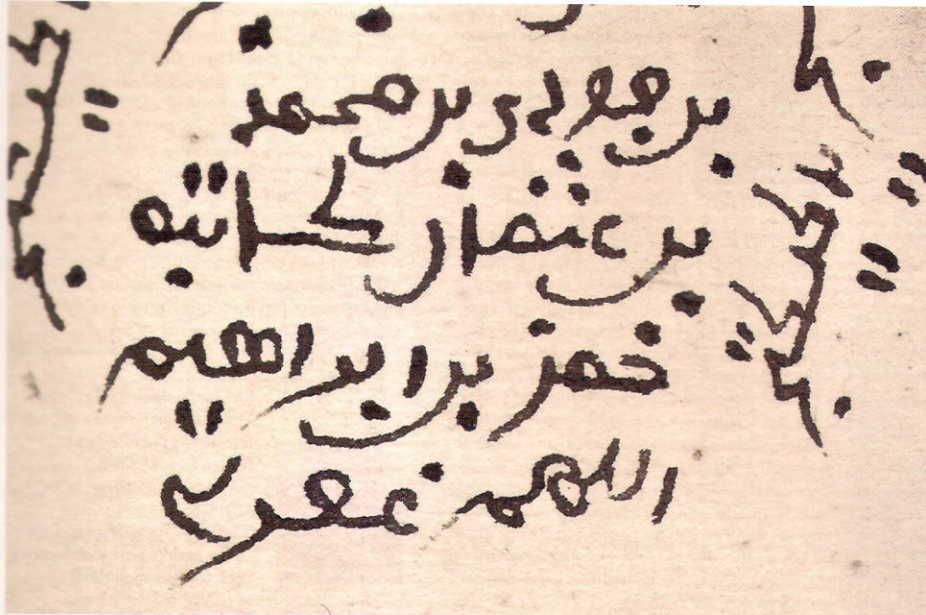
In Nigeria, the British governor general from 1914 to 1919, Sir Frederick Lugard, directed that Ajami and Arabic were both to be officially replaced by Hausa written in the Latin alphabet. This became known to locals as *bookoo* (from the English word "book"). In the face of such cultural attacks, Ajami indeed became precisely what

the colonial governments feared: a tool of resistance and reform. Writing in Ajami in the late 1940s, Fulani poet Cerno Abdourahmane Bah grimly summarized the frustration of a browbeaten population:

None of us was consulted about what we had to do.

They have been led as animals, exploited to satisfy every need, going up and down, without knowing the reason why!

Ajami also served those engaged in internal struggles. During the 17th century, a rising class of Islamic scholars in Hausaland objected to those who professed Islam yet clung to animist beliefs and customs. By the early 19th century, Shehu (Sheikh) Usman dan Fodio, founder of the Sokoto



This copy of poetry by the early 19th-century Nigerian leader Usuman dan Fodio is written in Fulfulde. "When we compose in Arabic, only the learned benefit," he wrote. "When we compose it in Fulfulde, the unlettered also gain."

Caliphate, emerged as the movement's spiritual and military leader. (His direct descendant, Sultan Muhammed Sa'adu Abubakar, remains the spiritual leader of Nigeria's 70 million Muslims.) A reluctant soldier, the Shehu preferred discourse and poetry as a means of persuasion. Throughout his life, he composed numerous political and religious poems in Hausa and Fulfulde, all penned in Ajami.

"When we compose in Arabic, only the learned benefit," he wrote. "When we compose it in Fulfulde, the unlettered also gain."

Today, many of West Africa's "unlettered" are still reading Ajami—on signs, in shops, in at least one weekly newspaper (Nigeria's *Alfajir*), as well as in locally published books that range from romance novels to religious texts. Nevertheless, Ajami remains a kind of orphaned script, abandoned not only by secular authorities but also by conservative religious ones.

"Starting in the 1700s, the use of Ajami was not approved of by many West African Islamic scholars who associated Arabic with Islam," says Ngom. "They thought it would lead to the dissolution of the language of the Prophet Muhammad, and so writers of Ajami had to defend their use of the script."

Regrettably, says Adamu, the situation has not changed in some places. "In northern Nigeria it is considered prohibited [by religious authorities] to use the Arabic script to write anything secular," says Adamu, pointing out that such is not the case in other Muslim countries. To change this in


Nigeria, Adamu has been lobbying for what he terms "the Ajamization of knowledge," which would include the establishment of Ajami departments at universities, the writing of classic Hausa literature into Ajami, the introduction of Ajami as a distinct subject in elementary schools and the development of Ajami word-processing software. He would also like to see more official support, as in neighboring Niger, where the government sponsors the publication of Ajami literature—and Ajami readers are counted among the literate.

Meanwhile, Ngom last year co-authored *Diving into the Ocean of Wolofal: First Workbook in Wolofal (Wolof Ajami)*, the first book designed to teach students with no previous knowledge of the Arabic script how to read and write Wolof Ajami.

While such efforts are the first steps toward wider legitimacy, there remain other hurdles, such as the question of the script's standardization.



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