

**Beyond African Orality:
Digital Preservation of Mandinka ‘Ajamī Archives of Casamance**

Fallou Ngom

Eleni Castro

Boston University

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their archives. Needless to say that the views in this article are those of the authors. They do not represent the views of the organizations mentioned above.

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Abstract

This article focuses on the digital preservation of African sources written in Mandinka ‘*Ajamī*, i.e. the enriched form of the Arabic script used to write the Mandinka language for centuries. ‘*Ajamī* writing has been utilized to document intellectual traditions, histories, belief systems, and cultures of non-Arab Muslims around the world. ‘*Ajamī* texts have played critical roles in the spread of Islam in Africa and continue to be used for both religious and non-religious writings. However, African ‘*Ajamī* texts such as those of the Mandinka people of Casamance in southern Senegal are not well known beyond local communities. ‘*Ajamī* texts in Mandinka and other Mande languages are among the least documented. Only a few Mande ‘*Ajamī* texts are available to scholars. Thanks to the British Library’s Endangered Archives Programme (EAP), Africa’s rich written heritage in ‘*Ajamī* and other scripts previously unavailable to academics is being preserved and made universally accessible.

Keywords: Africa, Mandinka, Ajami, digital preservation, Arabic, Casamance

Background

The article reports the work conducted in Project EAP 1042: Digital Preservation of Mandinka ‘Ajamī Materials of Casamance in southern Senegal.¹ ‘*Ajamī* is the Arabic term for non-Arabic, or foreign, and is also used to refer to non-Arabic languages and literatures that are written with the modified Arabic script. There have been numerous ‘Ajamī traditions across Africa for centuries (Boyd & Mack, 1997; Hassane, 2008; Jawondo, 2010; Luffin, 2014; McLaughlin, forthcoming; Mumin & Verteegh, 2014; Ngom, 2016; Ngom & Kurfi, 2017; Salvaing, 2003; Sanni, 2001; Tamari & Bondarev, 2013). Just like the Roman alphabet was modified to write many European and non-European languages and traveled around the world through Christianity, so too the Arabic script was enriched to write numerous languages in the Muslim world. Arabic and ‘Ajamī texts of enslaved Africans have been discovered in the Americas (Austin, 1997; Dobronravin, 2004, 2009, 2014; Turner, 2007; Wilks, 1967). Afrikaans in South Africa was first written in ‘Ajamī by Malay slaves (Haron, 2001; Versteegh, 2014).

‘Ajamī writing systems have initially emerged as tools for learning and spreading Islam. Many texts were intended for recitation and the religious education of less literate members of the community. Some ‘Ajamī texts have also been used for people who are already literate in Arabic (Dell, 2018). African ‘Ajamī manuscripts uncovered to date include translations of Quranic passages, commentaries on classical texts in the Islamic sciences, stories of Prophet Muhammad’s life, praise poetry and homilies about Muslim obligations. As literacy in ‘Ajamī increased over time, it was increasingly deployed for a wide range of purposes, including more secular uses such as letter writing, bookkeeping, and chronicling.

While it is common knowledge that languages such as Urdu and Persian are written with enriched forms of the Arabic script, less well known is the fact that many African languages also

have well-established ‘Ajamī traditions. Today, millions of African ‘Ajamī literates are omitted in official literacy statistics because literacy is generally defined as the ability to read and write in Roman script in most of sub-Saharan Africa. As a result of this Eurocentric definition of literacy inherited by postcolonial African governments and international organizations, ‘Ajamī literatures that hold a wealth of knowledge on the histories, politics, cultures and intellectual traditions of Africa, are unknown to many academics and the general public.

As Lüpke & Bao-Diop (2014) note, African ‘Ajamī literacies are nearly invisible to many Western-trained individuals for several reasons. This is partly because owners of ‘Ajamī manuscripts are not usually willing to share their materials with outsiders they do not trust, which explains why many Western-trained scholars lack access to the rich funds of African ‘Ajamī sources. Additionally, the Eurocentric definition of literacy, which groups sub-Saharan Africans into Francophones, Anglophones, or Lusophones, gives the wrong impression that, if Africans are literate at all, they must be literate in colonial languages (especially French, English, or Portuguese). This legacy of the colonial interpretation of literacy in sub-Saharan Africa has greatly contributed to making ‘Ajamī imperceptible to many Western-trained scholars until recently. In reality, Francophone, Anglophone, or Lusophone Africans represent the minority Western-trained ruling elite. The vast majority of Africans are neither literate nor fluent in European languages. They primarily speak local African tongues. While there are many who do not have literacy competence in any script, there are also many who regularly use the Roman script, Arabic-based systems (Arabic and ‘Ajamī), or other locally created writing systems.

By the late 19th century, European missionaries, who recognized grassroots literacy in West Africa, were showing interest in writing passages from the Bible and sermons in ‘Ajamī in their efforts to capitalize on its use to create Christian converts in Africa (Hodgson, 1857). Some

missionaries later adopted the Arabic script to translate Genesis, the Psalms, the New Testament and other parts of the Bible into African languages (Decker & Injiiru, 2012; “Deftere Futtorde”, n.d.; Warren-Rothlin, 2009; “Injiil Kitaaboo”, 1999). More recently, some cell phone companies have begun to use ‘Ajamī to market their products in areas with high rates of ‘Ajamī literacy (Ngom, 2015, p. 157-159). Despite similar origins in spreading Islam, each ‘Ajamī system followed its own trajectory shaped by specific cultural, social and political factors.

African ‘Ajamī sources have much to offer to scholars interested in African historiography, anthropologists, linguists, Islamicists, and specialists of world literatures and civilizations. They provide unique windows into the histories and lived experiences of millions of Africans. These histories and experiences have generally been available to scholars and students only through a European lens—whether in European languages or African languages written in the Roman script.

Mande Scholars in Casamance

The Mande people have built West Africa’s most powerful empires, which have shaped the region’s history for over a millennium (Camara, 2010; Innes, 2001; Niane, 1960). They are among the first groups to embrace Islam in West Africa. They have spread their Islamic education, culture, language, popular griot (bard) tradition, and Arabic and ‘Ajamī writing system throughout West Africa (Donaldson, 2013; Niane, 1989; Ogorodnikova, 2016, 2017; Tamari, 1994, 2017; Schaffer, 1975; Vydrine, 1998, 2014; Vydrine & Dumestre, 2014).

The ‘Ajamī tradition in Mande languages goes back to the early arrival of Islam in the Mali Empire, which flourished from about 1200 to 1600 CE. The famous pilgrimage to Mecca of the Emperor of Mali, Mansa Musa (ca. 1280-1337), is one of the many historical testimonies of the

early arrival of Islam among the Mande people. Mansa Musa is remembered as one of the world's richest man who ever lived. It is widely reported that the amount of gold he distributed in Egypt during his pilgrimage to Mecca caused the value of gold to drop. News of his enormous wealth that reached European courts led a Catalan cartographer in the service of the King of Aragon to draw him holding a scepter ornamented with fleur-de-lys and a gold disc on a map; he was known to control a large part of Africa, from the Gambia and Senegal to Gao on the Niger, and had access to some of its richest gold deposits.²

The stories of Mansa Musa and other Mande leaders before and after him show that Islam has been present in the Mande world for over a millennium. The empire spread in several directions and implanted colonies of traders, scholars, and settlers through a considerable portion of West Africa, including in Senegal, the Gambia, and Guinea (Niane, 2000; Sanneh, 1979, 1989; and Wilks, 2000). Southern Senegal, the Gambia, and Guinea Bissau were part of the Mandinka Kaabu Empire (1537-1867), which was a province of the Mali Empire. Kaabu became independent following the decline of the Mali Empire (Camara, 2010; Dramé, 2009; Giesing & Vydrine, 2007; and Niane, 1989). While many speakers of Maninka (spoken in Guinea Conakry) and Bamanankan (spoken in Mali) increasingly use the N'ko writing system for Mande languages that Souleymane Kanté invented in 1949 (Donaldson, 2018), Arabic and 'Ajamī texts dealing with religious and non-religious subjects continue to be produced in Mande communities across West Africa.

The Mandinka people, the Mande subgroup who now live in Casamance, the Gambia, and Guinea Bissau have shaped the history of the sub-region in meaningful ways. Mandinka scholars have played a critical role in the spread of Islam in the area (Dramé, 2009; and Niane, 1989). They are largely responsible for training generations of scholars and Muslim community

leaders in Casamance, the Gambia, and the Bijini area of Guinea Bissau. A large number of the Jóola people of northern Casamance embraced Islam as a result of Mandinka proselytizing.



Figure 1. Map of Africa showing Casamance in Senegal in dark green with Casamance circled red. Retrieved from <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=7423597> By “Alvaro1984 18”. Copyright: Public Domain.



Figure 2. Map of Senegal with fieldwork sites circled red: Ziguinchor, Sédhiou, and Kolda.

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The famous Mandinka scholars who spread Islam in Casamance and authored important texts in Arabic and ‘Ajāmī include: (1) Fodé Herba Dramé who founded the well-known religious and learning center of Karantaba (1680-1775); (2) Mouhammadou Syllaba Sylla of Pakao-Darsilame (1701-1797) who was born in Mali and immigrated to the Sédhiou area in

Casamance where he led a jihad against the local Bainunk population; (3) Arfang Sitokoto Fodé Dramé of Karantaba (1705-1799) who was one of the most eminent scholars of his time; (4) Arfang Sitokoto Dabo of Diao-Ba (1857-1971) who was the greatest Mandinka ‘Ajamī poet; (5) Cheikh Mahfouz Aïdara of Binako (1855-1919); (6) Cheikhna Aïdara of Diatourcounda (1850-1970); (7) Cheikh Moussa Fadéra of Diana-Diabancounda (1870-1960) who educated the children of Cheikh Mahfouz Aïdara and many members of the sharifian community of Dar Salam-Chérif; (8) Thierno Sylla of Djinani (1875-1967) who educated prominent scholars from Casamance, the Gambia, and Guinea Bissau; (9) Al-Hajj Ndiaye Sanka of Salikégné (1876-1955) who also trained scholars from Casamance, the Gambia, and Guinea Bissau; and (10) Al-Hajj Mbalfodé Gassama of Tasliman (1901-1980). These scholars who lived between the 17th and 20th century and their colleagues founded over seventy Islamic learning centers in Casamance. According to local oral sources, these learning centers also served as refuge for runaway slaves in the region.

Mandinka Manuscript Owners: A Diverse Community of Scholars

Our research team successfully digitized over 16,000 pages of Arabic and ‘Ajamī texts from over 50 manuscript owners in Mandinka learning centers in the Ziguinchor, Kolda, and Sédhiou areas of Casamance. The bulk of the manuscripts were digitized in the homes of their owners in the Mandinka heartland of Sédhiou, including Pakao which has been a hub of Mandinka scholarship for centuries. The manuscripts are generally kept in trunks in private libraries of local scholars and heirs of their authors where they are exposed to termite, water, mice, and fire hazards. Their owners are descendants of the authors or descendants of former students of the scholars who wrote them. Many manuscript owners trace their family origins to Mali. Some trace

their origin to Bijini in Guinea Bissau, which was part of the Kaabu Empire (1537-1867). Others trace their origin to the Gambia, Guinea Conakry, and pre-colonial Wolof kingdoms of Senegal.

Current Mandinka manuscript owners of Casamance belong to the three major Sufi orders in the region: Qadiriyya, Tijaniyya, and Muridiyya. The majority follow the Qadiriyya Sufi tradition. The ethnic, spiritual, and intellectual diversity of Mandinka scholars of Casamance results from migration, trade, intermarriage, and above quest for Islamic education and spiritual knowledge. Mandinka manuscript owners serve key roles in their communities. They are Imāms, healers, Quranic teachers, educators, poets, historians, and public speakers. Most are also farmers.



Figure 3. Imām Alphousseyni Mandiang of the village of Moricounda in Sédhiou, Senegal.

Picture taken by Fallou Ngom on December 29, 2018.

As an Imām, Mandiang is also committed to Mandinka historiography. His ‘Ajamī manuscripts include texts dealing with the history the Kaabu Empire (1537-1867), its legendary rulers, conflicts, the fortresses of Kansala (the Capital of the Kaabu Empire), and key warriors who fought heroic battles in the pre-colonial and colonial era. Besides being custodians of the written heritage of their ancestors, scholars like Imām Mandiang continue to document their own lives and preoccupations both in Arabic and Mandinka ‘Ajamī following their ancestors’ footsteps.

Dual literacy in classical Arabic and Mandinka ‘Ajamī is the norm among them as it is among the Wolof scholars and others (Ngom, 2018, p. 143-164). The few scholars who have traveled overseas or have lived for an extended period of time in urban areas where European languages are commonly used are tri-lingual and tri-literate, i.e. they have some level of fluency and literacy in three languages, generally Arabic, Mandinka, and a European language. Despite the fluency and literacy in European languages that some might have, their archives are primarily written in Arabic and ‘Ajamī following the local tradition. They continuously increase their archives with their own productions. Their archives document the lives and preoccupations of multiple generations.

Mandinka written archives encompass four major types of manuscripts: (1) Arabic texts; (2) Arabic texts with glosses in Arabic; (3) Arabic texts with glosses in Arabic and local languages (Soninke and Mandinka); and (4) Mandinka ‘Ajamī texts. These manuscripts document the preoccupations and intellectual traditions of the Mandinka people of Senegambia and beyond. The glosses in the texts play a key pedagogical function. Many important documents are written with extra spaces in the margins and between the lines so that explicative comments in Arabic, Mandinka, or Soninke could be added. Glosses in Arabic are for readers with advanced literacy in Arabic while those in Mandinka and Soninke are made to ease

comprehension for folks with less advanced Arabic fluency. Thus, a text could contain multilingual glosses. This is because some multilingual scholars opt to write certain comments in a highly advanced Arabic, if they think that the students or readers have the necessary advanced level competence in Arabic. They may write other comments in Mandinka or Soninke ‘Ajamī in the same document, if they deem that these languages would be more effective to convey specific points. Mandinka scholars share the tradition of extensive didactic glosses with their colleagues in other parts of West Africa (Bondarev, 2013, 2014, 2017).

Besides documenting aspects of Mandinka pedagogy, the glosses are key to understanding local intellectual and spiritual genealogies. Soninke glosses are found in the oldest manuscripts, including in copies of the Quran with book covers made with lion, antelope, and cow hides. Some manuscripts contain interlinear and marginal glosses made by members of distant generations. Many old manuscripts are passed down from generation to generation through inheritance, and members of different generation often add their own comments on some documents. According many manuscript owners, most of the Soninke glosses in the oldest texts were made during the time when Soninke scholars dominated Islamic education in Casamance. This was the time when the Mandinka people were being Islamized and educated by Soninke scholars.

Just like Fulfulde, the language of the Fulani Muslim teachers in northern Nigeria, had to be learned by Hausa-speaking new Muslims (Brenner & Last, 1985), early Mandinka Muslims also had to learn Soninke, the language of their teachers, which was second to classical Arabic as the language of Islamic instruction in Casamance. The Soninke glosses are therefore important historical testimonies of the leadership role Soninke scholars once played in Islamic education in Casamance. They document intellectual, familial, and spiritual genealogies between the Soninke

and Mandinka people, from the time when the first generation of Mandinka scholars were students to their emergence as an independent body of scholars in their own rights who produced their own documents and didactic glosses in Mandinka 'Ajamī.

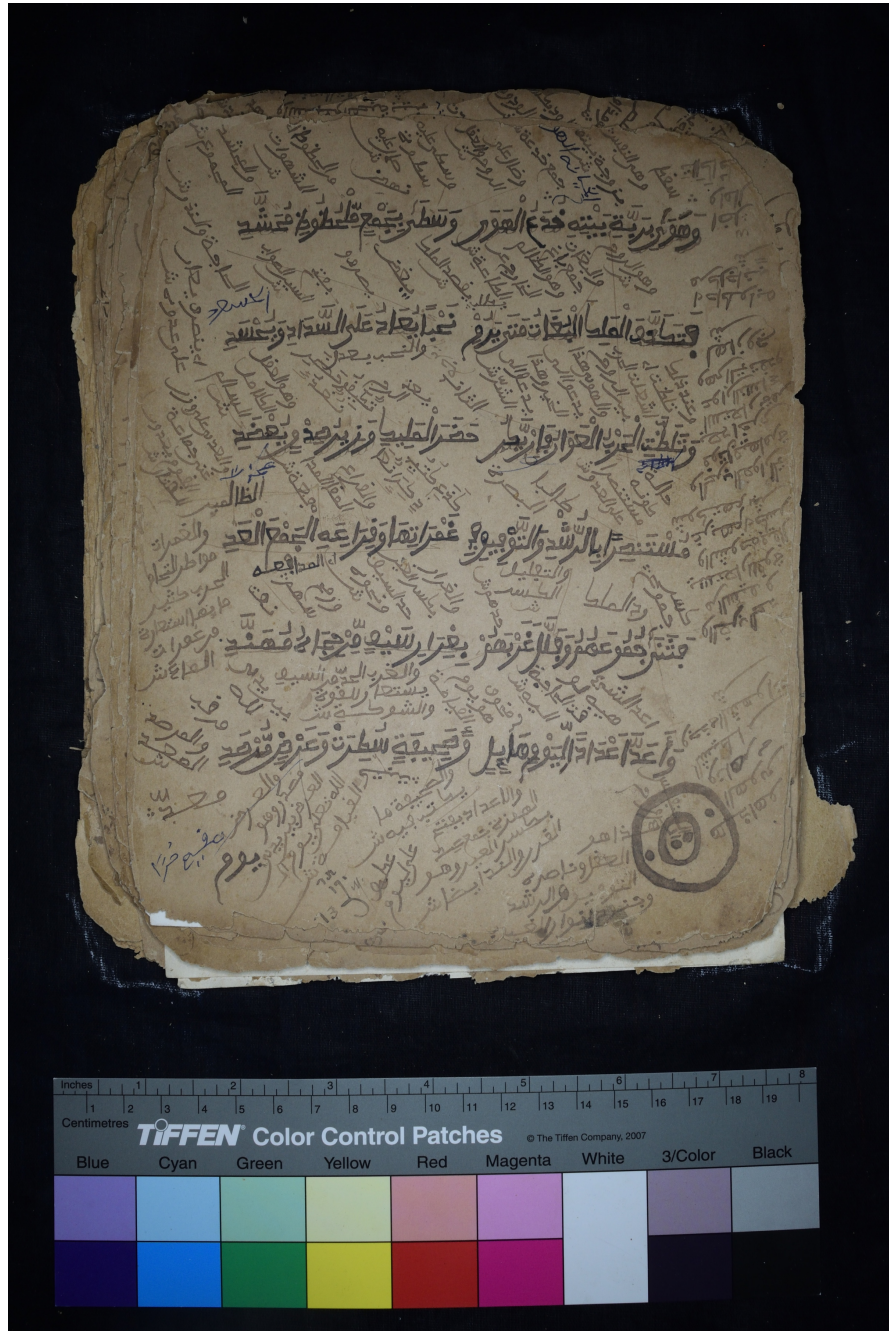


Figure 4. Excerpt from a 164-page Arabic poem celebrating Prophet Muhammad's achievements. The manuscript was digitized in the home of the owner, Abdou Karim Thiam, in

Kandialang, Ziguinchor, Senegal as part of Project EAP 1042. Retrieved from <https://open.bu.edu/handle/2144/28994>.

The 164 pages of the manuscript are written in Arabic with extensive interlinear and marginal glosses in Arabic and a few in Mandinka ‘Ajamī. Glosses in Mandinka are vocalized and can be found under verse 2 and 3 of the page in Figure 4. Members of two distinct generations have commented on this page as reflected by the original ink that contrasts with the writings with a modern blue pen visible at the start of the document, below the first verse, the scratch below the third verse, and at the left end corner below the last verse.

Besides manuscripts with glosses, the legacies of Mandinka scholars of Casamance include an impressive body of mixed religious and non-religious texts in Arabic and ‘Ajamī in and prose and poetry. The materials vary from manuscripts with hundreds of pages to ephemeral documents of one page or smaller. The Arabic documents largely consists of handwritten copies of the Quran, Islamic panegyric poems (Mandinka: *Biniiboo*), and other canonical Islamic texts dealing with jurisprudence, rituals, and Sufism, among many other topics. The contents of ‘Ajamī documents include celebrations of Prophet Muhammad and local religious leaders, interpretation of dreams, divination and astrology, translations and commentaries of the Quran and other Islamic texts, sermons, Islamic rituals, prayers against disaster, recipes for happiness, talismanic protective devices, local solutions to deal with infertility, disaster, and various illnesses, and texts dealing with literacy, numeracy, and Mandinka lunar calendar and maxims.

A significant part of the Mandinka ‘Ajamī archives consists of poetry designed to be recited and chanted in their communities for broader dissemination. The poems include those of famous Mandinka poets, a poem urging citizens to avoid election crises, a poem in Soninke

‘Ajamī translated in Mandinka ‘Ajamī for Mandinka speakers, poems dealing with current issues (including war, peace, and ethics and morality), and a poem to a friend advising him to not travel far away from his family, to name only these. The themes in the Mandinka ‘Ajamī prose texts include discussions on the importance of knowledge, advocacy for grassroots literacy in Mandinka ‘Ajamī, history of the Kaabu Empire (1537-1867) and its major wars and military leaders, history of the foundation of many mosques, villages, and towns in the Mandinka heartland of Pakao, the shared history of the Mandinka people in the Gambia, Guinea Bissau, and Senegal, the de-colonization war in Guinea Bissau and key military leaders, memories of prominent Mandinka male and female leaders of Pakao, settlement patterns in Casamance of the Mande people from Mali centuries ago, biographies of Mandinka leaders, family histories, and letters written between family members, including some who lived overseas. Though these themes do not represent the entirety of the contents of the Mandinka written archives we digitized in Casamance, they nonetheless demonstrate the rich insights that scholars and students of Africa stand to gain by engaging such non-Europhone sources of Africa, to borrow Ousmane Kane’s words (Kane, 2012).

Digital Preservation of Mandinka Archives: Cultural and Technical Aspects

Successful digital preservation of African written archives requires understanding local cultures and languages, creating research teams that are trusted by manuscript owners and community members, and technical expertise in digital preservation. To establish the ideal group that is trusted in the Mandinka communities of Casamance, the members of our fieldwork team were carefully selected. The team included Shaykh Ibrahima Yaffa, a highly respected Mandinka elder from the region. Yaffa has deep and extensive connections with leading scholarly

Mandinka families across Casamance. He is among the few local elders who is educated in both the Western (French) and Mandinka Islamic traditions. He served as the project's general fieldwork facilitator and coordinated the team's field trips to manuscript owners.

The second team member is Professor Fallou Ngom (PI, Project EAP 1042). He has worked for years in Mandinka areas of Casamance and speaks Mandinka fluently. The third team member is Mr. Ablaye Diakité, a Mandinka native speaker and linguist from Casamance who served as the local project manager. The fourth member of the fieldwork team is Mr. Ibrahima Ngom who is Séeréer but was born and raised in Casamance and speaks Mandinka. He served as the digital photographer of the project. The fifth team member is Eleni Castro, a digital repository librarian, who served as the project's technical expert. She supervised all technical aspects of the project. She participated at the outset of the fieldwork to ensure that all technical guidelines were implemented. With well-prepared team members who understood the culture, expected code of conduct, and the protocols to follow in Mandinka communities, over fifty Mandinka manuscript owners in Casamance agreed to make their materials available for digitization so that they could be made accessible electronically to scholars, students, and the public worldwide without restriction.

Second to establishing a qualified team, the next essential component to any manuscript digitization project involves acquiring the necessary digitization equipment. Several months prior to our project launch, we consulted guidelines from libraries, museums and archives on standards, best practices, and recommendations for manuscript digital preservation.³ This process was made simpler through the rich documentation and guidelines provided on the EAP website;⁴ and from consulting with their knowledgeable team of curators.

In the EAP's recently published book entitled "Remote Capture," Patrick Sutherland talks about fully assessing the scope and nature of the project before purchasing any equipment (2018, p. 41). All of the manuscripts we would be digitizing were in the homes and learning centers of manuscript owners (see Figure 4), in mostly remote areas, where access to electricity was not always readily available. Due to the importance and value of these manuscripts, they could not be displaced; therefore, they would either need to be photographed inside or directly outside of a manuscript owner's home. The majority of the manuscripts were of a standard paper size (A4) or smaller, mostly unbound, with some being fragile to handle due to their age or environmental conditions they were stored in. Given the abovementioned assessment of our project, along with the EAP guidelines, the most necessary camera equipment (see Figures 6 and 7) for our project included: a Nikon D5300 DSLR digital camera with a standard kit lens, which can take fairly high-resolution images; a battery powered macro ring flash for consistent lighting; as well as a tripod and remote shutter to help reduce image blur in low-light situations. Knowing that we would be working long hours in the field, we purchased spare batteries and an additional SD memory card. We used a Microsoft Windows laptop and a 2TB portable external hard drive to backup, organize and process the RAW camera images and video interviews. As additional backup and for review purposes, all files were uploaded online to Google Drive as soon as a new collection was being worked on. All of the metadata concerning the manuscripts and their respective collections was tracked in an Excel spreadsheet following the EAP listing guidelines.⁵ Additional information on this equipment and the technology used can be found in the Appendix

section.



Figure 5. From right to left: Project PI (Professor Fallou Ngom) holding a 1400-page manuscript, Shaykh Ibrahima Yaffa (fieldwork facilitator), and Ablaye Diakité (local project manager) holding an 800-page manuscript from the Solly family in Bounkiling. Photographed by Ibrahima Ngom (December 27, 2018).



Figure 6. Ibrahima Ngom (photographer) and Ablaye Diakité (local project manager) setting up and testing photographing manuscripts from the Abdou Khadre Cissé collection. Photographed by Eleni Castro (January 2018).



Figure 7. Ibrahima Ngom (photographer) and Ablaye Diakité (local project manager) photographing manuscripts from the Abdou Khadre Cissé collection, alongside the Cissé family. Photographed by Eleni Castro (January 2018).

As a result of working in remote areas with non-studio conditions, we encountered technical challenges and issues early on in our fieldwork, which required us to troubleshoot on-the-spot or purchase additional equipment for this project. Granted that our time in the homes of manuscript owners was so precious and limited, finding the right lighting and space to setup our digitization equipment was an ongoing challenge. In addition, the fragile condition of some of these manuscripts slowed down the amount of materials we could digitize (see Figure 8). We soon discovered that our camera would overheat and shut down after over an hour of continuous

use. By simply replacing a hot battery with a cooler one, digitization could quickly resume. When needing to record interviews about the manuscripts outdoors or in noisy environments, the digital camera's internal microphone would not be sufficient to adequately capture the interview. We therefore purchased a Panasonic EM-2800 boom microphone in Dakar, which could be connected to the camera (see Figure 9). We also purchased a mobile hotspot modem to help improve internet speed and access when uploading large files to Google Drive. Due to having a geographically dispersed team, we set up a communication channel through WhatsApp (Staudacher & Kaiser-Grolimund, 2016) to help quickly troubleshoot additional technical issues as soon as they arose.

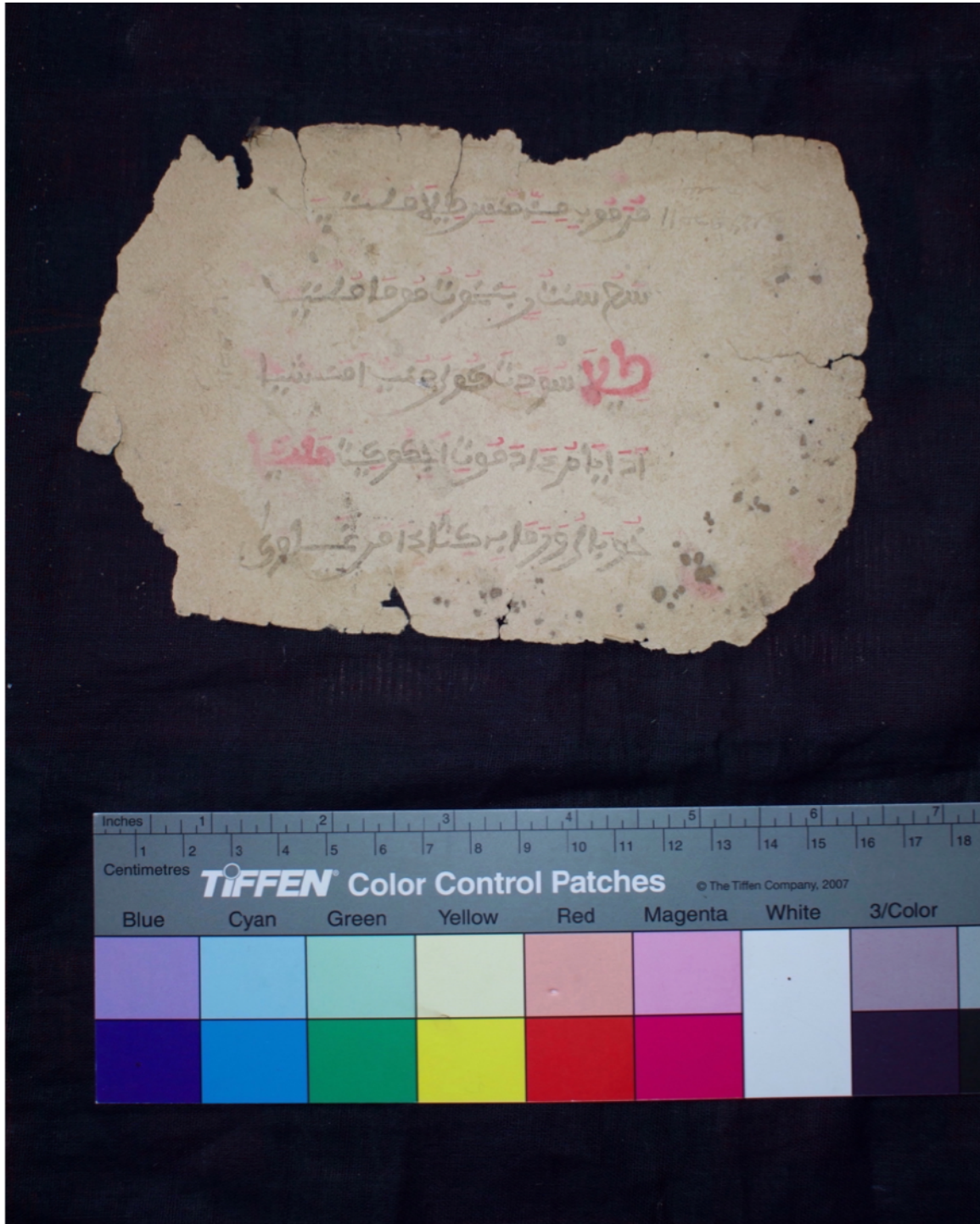


Figure 8. Example of a fragile, brittle page from a Mandinka ‘Ajamī poem. In this photo there is visible evidence of pieces of the paper chipping off. (Kalifa Faty’s Collection M001).

Photographed by Ibrahima Ngom.



Figure 9. Shaykh Ibrahim Yaffa interviewing manuscript owner Abdou Khadre Cissé and his brother Cherif Cissé. Filmed by project photographer, Ibrahim Ngom. Photographed by Eleni Castro (January 2018).

Once we wrap up digitization and curation of these manuscripts (Spring 2019), all of these materials will be made publicly available on the EAP website and in the African ‘Ajamī Library (AAL) collection in OpenBU.⁶ Furthermore, all of the digitization equipment and a copy of the digital archive will remain at our local partner, the West African Research Center (WARC) in Dakar, in order to support its digitization projects and make accessible the materials

to researchers in the region. However, there is still more work to be done to help researchers more effectively discover, explore, and study these materials. We will be looking into using a IIIF image viewer for scholars to more easily be able to view, compare, and annotate manuscripts.⁷ Since not all West African languages currently have their ‘Ajamī letters assigned Unicode characters, transcription is a long-term goal to help make these materials more accessible.⁸ Another ongoing effort – from a social and cultural perspective – is sustaining and building enduring relationships with the manuscript owners and communities where the materials originated from.

Post-custodial Stewardship and Archival Practices: Reflection from Eleni Castro

Figure 10. Eleni Castro (on the right) and Mrs. Cissé (on the left) during the digitization of her family manuscripts. Photographed by Ibrahima Ngom (January 2018). Retrieved from <https://open.bu.edu/handle/2144/28455>.

Coming from a place of privilege, as a white team member, working in a large academic research library in the United States, with originally little knowledge of African languages, histories and cultures; the African ‘Ajamī Library (AAL) and the fieldwork in Casamance has been a mind-expanding, humbling, and shared learning experience. With the guidance of the Project PI (Professor Fallou Ngom), I spent more time listening, observing and asking many

questions to learn all that I could from my team members and the manuscript owners. This project provided a concrete mechanism through which I could help to decolonize archiving and preservation of manuscripts from sub-Saharan Africa. In the field of library and archival science, this practice of decolonization is known as post-custodial (Kelleher, 2017; Shein & Lapworth, 2016) stewardship – the “idea that archivists will no longer physically acquire and maintain records, but that they will provide management oversight for records that will remain in the custody of the record creators” (Society of American Archivists, 2005). This praxis of collecting the written historical record gives agency, provides compensation for, and proper credit to the owners or authors of the physical manuscripts.

Conclusion

In his *Philosophy of History*, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) claimed that sub-Saharan “is enveloped in the dark mantle of the night; is unhistorical; and is still involved in the conditions of mere nature” (1900, p. 90-99). Similarly, the Oxford Professor, Hugh Trevor-Roper (1914-2003), noted in 1963 that “Africa has no history and that there is only the history of Europeans in Africa, and the rest is darkness, and darkness is not the subject of history” (p. 871). Obviously, due to genuine ignorance or blinded by Eurocentric myopia, Hegel and Trevor-Roper had overlooked the abundant written archives of non-Europhone Africans who lived before and during their lifetimes in Timbuktu, Djenné, Senegambia, Guinea, Nigeria, East Africa and many places in sub-Saharan Africa. They also ignored the writings of Baron Roger, the French Governor of Senegal, who noted that there were “more negroes who could read and write in Arabic in 1828 than French peasants who could read and write in French,” and Francis Moore, an employee of the Royal African Company of England, Ibn Battuta in the fourteen century, Leo

Africanus in the fifteen century, Mongo Park in the eighteen century and other European travelers who reported the significance of Islamic education and literacy in places they visited in sub-Saharan Africa (Kane, 2016, p. 1-20).

In any case, the written archives in Dagbanli, Fula, Fulfulde, Hausa, Kanuri, Malagasy, Mandinka, Songhai, Swahili, Wolof, Yoruba, and other African languages, which are now being made available to scholars and students worldwide through digital technology, force revisions of various aspects of the historiography of Africa. These archives also help us to move beyond the persistent emphasis on “African orality” and to correct the assumptions in academia that Africa’s written and intellectual traditions only resulted from the colonial encounter (Kane, 2012, p. 53-54; Kane, 2016, p. 1-4; Ngom, 2016). As the abundant and varied written archives across the continent demonstrate, Africans have and continue to produce knowledge in various areas in Arabic, ‘Ajamī, and other locally invented scripts unknown to many Western-trained academics, including in Africa.⁹ These sources demonstrate that oral traditions are not the only sources of knowledge in sub-Saharan Africa, and that orature does not necessarily exclude written traditions there. To the contrary, oral and written traditions are complementary and have been in dialogue in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa for centuries. The mutually exclusive duality between oral and written literature, which is pervasive in academia, is a European colonial legacy that does not reflect African realities accurately.

Africa’s diverse written archives in Arabic and ‘Ajamī and those in local scripts (such as Ge’ez, Bamum, Tifinagh, N’ko, and others) complement oral and European archives in Africa. Recent digital archives of these sources provide new insights on the histories, societies, cultures, intellectual traditions, religions, pedagogies, and preoccupations of millions of Africans. These

sources constitute untapped mines of new information that can improve the work of scholars, teachers, and students in ways that were not possible before the digital era.

The wealth of knowledge in ‘Ajamī materials across sub-Saharan Africa can undeniably no longer be treated as mere anecdotes or insignificant vestiges, for they constitute tangible and important sources of knowledge, without which our understanding of Africa will remain partial. Preserving and making universally available these African sources of knowledge, as initiated in the African ‘Ajamī Library (AAL) at Boston University; studying, translating their contents into major European languages and Arabic; and training new generations of scholars capable of deciphering them are part of goals of the interdisciplinary field of ‘*Ajamī Studies* (Ngom, 2016, p. 251). This field seeks to reinterpret various aspects of pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial Africa by taking advantage of digital technology and cross-pollinating oral and written Europhone and non-Europhone sources of Africa.

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Figure Legends

Figure 4. Excerpt from a 164-page Arabic poem celebrating Prophet Muhammad's achievements. The manuscript was digitized in the home of the owner, Abdou Karim Thiam, in Kandialang, Ziguinchor, Senegal as part of Project EAP 1042. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/2144/28994>.

Figure 6. Ibrahima Ngom (photographer) and Ablaye Diakité (local project manager) setting up and testing digitizing manuscripts from the Abdou Khadre Cissé collection. Photographed by Eleni Castro (January 2018). Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/2144/28454>

Figure 7. Ibrahima Ngom (photographer) and Ablaye Diakité (local project manager) digitizing manuscripts from the Abdou Khadre Cissé collection, alongside the Cissé family. Photographed by Eleni Castro (January 2018). Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/2144/28454>

Figure 9. Shaykh Ibrahima Yaffa interviewing manuscript owner Abdou Khadre Cissé and his brother Cherif Cissé. Filmed by project photographer, Ibrahima Ngom. Photographed by Eleni Castro (January 2018). Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/2144/28454>

Figure 10. Eleni Castro (on the right) and Mrs. Cissé (on the left) during the digitization of her family manuscripts. Photographed by Ibrahima Ngom (January 2018). Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/2144/28455>.

Endnotes

¹ See <https://eap.bl.uk/project/EAP1042> (<https://doi.org/10.15130/EAP1042>). The region of Casamance is also the home of one of Africa's oldest secessionist movement. Since the 1980s, the MFDC, Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance (French: Mouvement des Forces Démocratiques de Casamance) has been fighting for independence from Senegal.

² British Museum:

https://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/themes/hajj/the_journey/routes/the_african_route/west_africa.aspx.

³ Hill Museum & Manuscript Library Resources for Manuscript Digital Preservation:

<http://www.vhmdl.us/Resource/Downloads/>.

⁴ British Library Endangered Archives Programme Project Guidelines and Standards:

<https://eap.bl.uk/project-guidelines-and-standards>.

⁵ EAP Listing Guidelines 2017:

<https://eap.bl.uk/sites/default/files/Listing%20Guidelines%202017.pdf>; and EAP Listing template: https://eap.bl.uk/sites/default/files/listing%20template_1.xls.

⁶ Mandinka Ajami and Arabic Manuscripts of Casamance Collection:

<https://open.bu.edu/handle/2144/27112>.

⁷ About the IIIF Viewer, Digital Library of Medieval Manuscripts at Johns Hopkins University

<https://dlmm.library.jhu.edu/en/digital-library-of-medieval-manuscripts/the-iiif-viewer/>.

⁸ See Unicode Proposal to add Arabic script characters for African and Asian languages 2010:

<http://std.dkuug.dk/jtc1/sc2/wg2/docs/n3882.pdf>. For ongoing font development efforts for

‘Ajamī and other African writing systems, see <https://kigelia-font.com/#licensees-section>; and

http://scriptsource.org/cms/scripts/page.php?item_id=entry_detail&uid=rmqs2wsjmk.

⁹ African ‘Ajamī Library (<https://open.bu.edu/handle/2144/1896>), and Ngom, Fallou. “West

African Manuscripts in Arabic and African Languages and Digital Preservation,” in Oxford

Research Encyclopedias: African History, Thomas Spear, editor, June 2017.

<http://africanhistory.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.001.0001/acrefore-9780190277734-e-123?rskey=6FZ9Jn&result=2>.