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African Language Archives and the Decolonization of African Studies

Fallou Ngom

Boston University

Abstract

Since colonization, studies on Africa have primarily been conducted through European approaches, as reflected in the widely accepted understanding of what "Literacy in Africa" and "African Literature" mean. Most Western-educated intellectuals now equate "Literacy in Africa" with literacy in European languages or the Roman script. Similarly, "African Literature" is generally understood to be oral, or literature written by Africans in European languages or the Roman script. This widespread conception of what "Literacy in Africa" and "African Literature" mean is symptomatic of the persistent intellectual subordination to European frameworks in African studies, even though those frameworks do not reflect African realities. Following Cheikh Anta Diop and Aram Fal, I show how African language archives challenge these conceptions and can help to decolonize African studies so that the knowledge produced about Africa better incorporates better African realities, preoccupations, and knowledge systems.

Key words:

African languages, African literature, Ajami, archives, decolonization, Europhone, literacy, orality, script.

If you can't be a perfume to those around you, then don't be a thorn to them instead!

Bird, if you want to hear that you are beautiful, only pass by your admirers once!

Source: El Hadji Kemo Drame's Mandinka Ajami archive

Colonial Legacies and African Language Archives

Since the advent of European colonization in the 19th century, sub-Saharan Africa has been regarded as "the land of orality par excellence," i.e. a region of the world devoid of noteworthy writing traditions which are construed as hallmarks of "human civilizations." Similarly, African languages and cultures were regarded as exotic, atavistic, and simple, a simplicity that allegedly reflected the simplicity of "the African irrational mind."[1] Numerous studies in African orature, linguistics, history, anthropology and other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences have now falsified these colonial misconceptions about Africa, which were used by European imperial nations to justify their domination and so-called civilizing mission in Africa. The stereotypes they developed about Africa informed colonial educational institutions that post-colonial African governments have inherited.

The schools that resulted from colonization and many of the former students who were trained in them have continued to overemphasize African oral traditions while omitting equally precious African language archives produced by writers that Ousmane Kane refers to as non-Europhone African intellectuals.[2] The omission of sub-Saharan Africa's rich non-Europhone archives and the overemphasis on oral and Europhone sources in academia have given the pervasive misleading impression that the region is an exceptional part of the world that has produced no noteworthy written literary tradition before the arrival of Europeans.

Similarly, for many Western-trained intellectuals, African Literature refers primarily to either "Oral Literature," "Francophone Literature," "Anglophone Literature," or "Lusophone Literature," i.e. literatures written in European languages. Thanks to the works of literary giants such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Boubacar Boris Diop, and others, African languages written with the Roman script are being incorporated in the broader canon of African Literature.

However, the rich pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial African literatures written in African languages using enriched forms of the Arabic script known as *Ajami* and texts written in African languages using other locally invented scripts have been largely made invisible and excluded in general academic conversations about African Literature. With respect to African Ajami texts, their exclusion in these conversations is partly rooted in the assumptions that such texts only deal with religious matters as they resemble Arabic texts and are produced by graduates from local Muslim learning centers. While many Ajami texts deal with religious subjects, many address non-religious preoccupations of their writers. These texts are rich and varied, and they contain all sorts of work.[3]

The continuous discoveries of centuries-old written archives in Arabic and Ajami in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa demonstrate that writing did not begin in the region with European colonization.[4] Writing systems were developed in many parts of Africa centuries before European colonization, including non-Arabic based scripts such as the Ethiopic syllabary known as Ge'ez and the Berber Tifinagh writing system, among others.[5] What European colonization did to African languages, writing traditions, and knowledge systems has had devastating consequences. In *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986), Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's captures the damaging impact of colonization on African languages eloquently: "The bullet was the means of the physical subjugation. The language was the means of the spiritual subjugation."[6]

Colonization suppressed and deviated Africans from their intellectual trajectories and knowledge systems through the imposition of European education systems in which African subjects, languages, cultures, and preoccupations were ostracized and caricatured. In these education systems, European cultures, languages, and knowledge systems are to be acquired and mastered. They are elevated, given overt prestige, and made the restricted pathway for socioeconomic mobility.

In contrast, African cultures, languages, and knowledge systems are downgraded, made peripheral, and their mastery leads to minimal or no social mobility in official spheres dominated by European languages. Thus, while European languages serve as the medium of instruction, African languages are marginalized in public schools, or "incarcerated," to use my colleague John Mugane's words.[7] While some post-colonial African governments have made efforts to correct and update the colonial educational institutions they inherited, many of the structural problems still endure. This is because the policies and curricula of the colonial education system remain the foundations of most contemporary African educational institutions. The situation is more serious in former French colonies where the direct assimilation rule was fully enforced and where cultural and linguistic alienation is more deeply ingrained and widespread as a result.

Despite the suppression of African languages and cultures and pre-colonial African writing traditions in educational institutions by colonial and post-colonial administrations, Africans have continued to read and write major texts in Hausa, Mandinka, Yoruba, Nupe, Amharic, and other languages without using the Roman alphabet. Besides the literatures in African languages in the Roman script, African scholars have produced rich corpora of texts using various Ajami scripts. In the same way the Roman script was enriched to produce a variety of writing systems for European languages, the classical Warsh-based Arabic script was also

enriched by native Africans to create Ajami writing systems for over 70 African languages.[8] In some parts of Africa, scholars have invented their own scripts to write their languages as in the case of the pan-Mande N'Ko script invented in Guinea in 1949, which is now widely used in Guinea and Mali, and the Bamum script invented in the 19th century in Cameroon.[9]

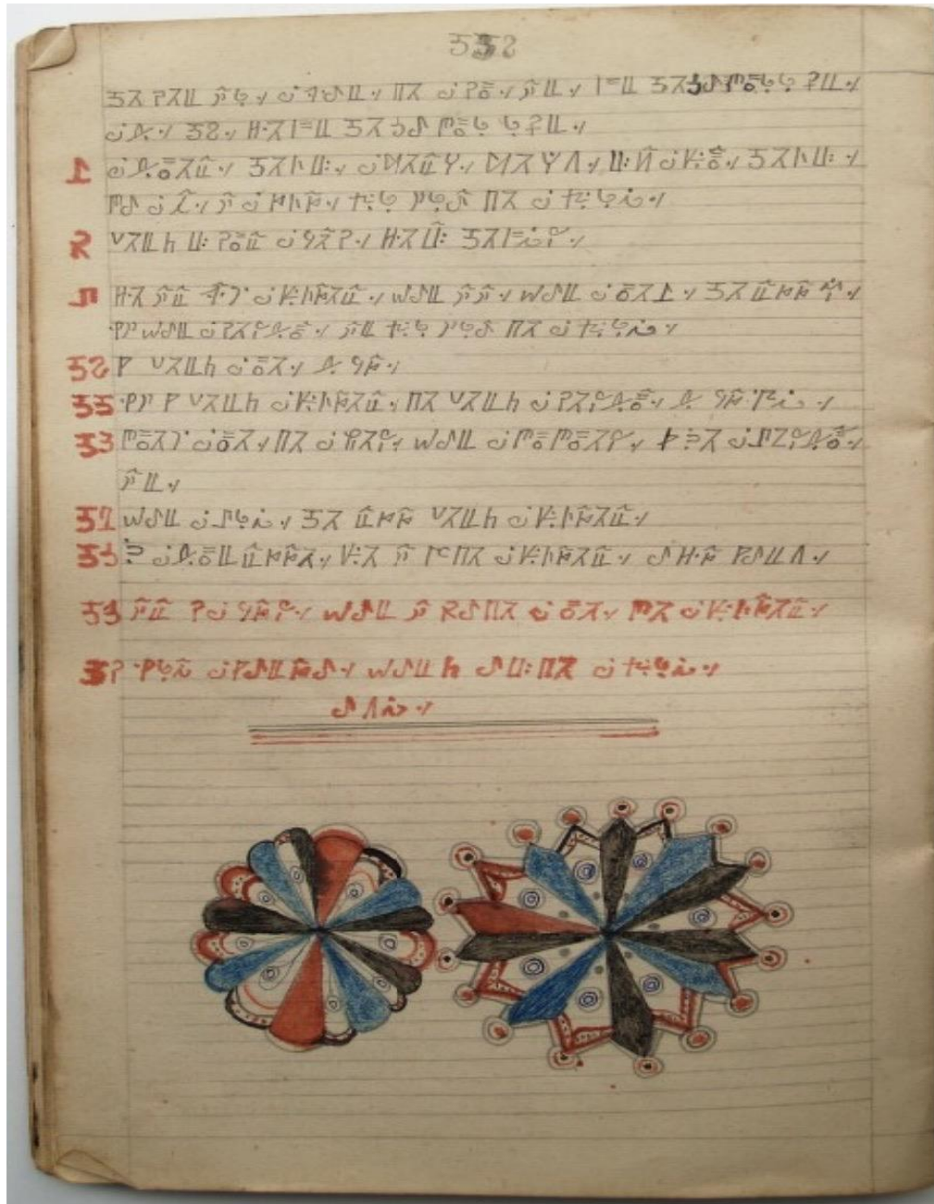

Image 1: Source: Cameroon Bamum Text from Konrad Tuchscherer, Bamum Script and Archives Project, EAP 051: https://eap.bl.uk/project/EAP051.

Just like Ajami texts, these Bamum documents are precious sources of knowledge about Africa. According to Konrad Tuchschere, they deal with both religious and non-religious topics. They capture Bamum people's ingenuity and their own perspectives on various subjects. The documents provide an account of the arrival of the first German military officer and trader in the Bamum kingdom, the founding of the kingdom, the invention of their religion, traditional medicine, beautiful maps of the Kingdom with toponyms, and even the art of love.[10]

Such texts highlight the wealth of knowledge recorded in the scripts invented in Africa. Similar to the Bamum documents, African Ajami documents are rich in content and form. They deal with religious and non-religious issues in prose and poetry. They include historical documents, texts on morality and ethics, records of birth and death dates, texts dealing with war and peace, population migrations, biographies, speeches, texts dealing with local healing traditions, properties of plants, calendars, private and official correspondences, business and commercial records, bureaucratic archives that document the innerworkings of local institutions, and land transaction documents, among others.[11] These African language archives are critical records of the past and current preoccupations of millions of Africans. They represent mines of rarely accessed African perspectives in academia.

However, the information they contain has largely been ignored in the educational systems in post-colonial African states and academia. This is partly because most Western-trained scholars lack the appropriate linguistic and sociolinguistic skills needed to decrypt them. This means that important parts of African perspectives and knowledge systems that can enrich studies of various aspects of the continent's past and present are being silenced, and Africa's intellectual creativity, agency, and contribution to human knowledge are being misrepresented in many academic works and media that only rely on European and oral sources. Taking seriously

these African language documents, studying them, and incorporating them in the curricula of African and Western institutions must be done to correct permanently the Hegelian and colonial misconceptions of Black Africa that have deeply shaped contemporary academic disciplines.

The continued unearthing of multilingual written archives across Africa (the Timbuktu manuscripts, the numerous Ajami archives in East and West Africa, and documents written in indigenous scripts) demonstrate the falsity of the claim made by Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) that sub-Saharan "is enveloped in the dark mantle of the night, is unhistorical, and is still involved in the conditions of mere nature."[12] Obviously, Hegel did not know that Black African scholars produced before him and continued to produce vital knowledge in all areas relevant to their societies and expressing it in complementary bimodal forms: orally and in writing. One of the most damaging consequences of European colonization of Africa and Hegel's influential perspectives is that they wrote Black Africans out of human history, disrupted their trajectories and destinies, and undermined what Cheikh H. Kane called their endo-genius,[13] the genius found in every human society that provides solutions to local challenges, thus moving communities steadily forward throughout history. Colonization led to the imposition of new alien ways of thinking and seeing the world, making many Africans trained in European schools unable to think outside of Eurocentric frameworks.

The resulting consequences are serious, continuous, and psychologically deep with observable symptoms across contemporary Africa. For instance, the Japanese, Chinese, and other peoples have education systems that are rooted in their cultural heritage and designed to connect them better to their languages, cultures, lands, and material and immaterial resources and to foster excellence in their endo-genius in all areas of human knowledge. In contrast, the more educated and immersed in European cultures and languages post-colonial Africans are, the more

likely they will be uprooted and disconnected from their languages, cultures, and endo-genius, exactly as it was intended by the colonial masters.

Thus, many contemporary Western-trained Africans are prouder of their knowledge of European literatures, cultures, and histories that they studied at school than they are of their own. They often cite European thinkers and writers such as Socrates, Plato, Voltaire, Victor Hugo, René Descartes, William Shakespeare, and others in their speeches with ease and pride, while they are oblivious of equally prominent figures in their societies. Some are ashamed if they make minor grammatical mistakes in European languages in public, but they do not care when they make more serious mistakes in their own local tongues. Some even pretend to speak European languages better than their own to highlight their socialization in a Westernized culture and their elite Western-educated status. This phenomenon is common in former French colonies where some people hypercorrect their French by overusing the subjunctive mood or by artificially exaggerating their pronunciation of the metropolitan French uvular fricative consonant *r* [ʁ], a practice commonly called "rouler les R."

Sometimes, the French uvular fricative pronunciation of *r* [ʁ] is transferred to their African languages in order to borrow the prestige associated with the French language, even though their African languages lack the *r* [ʁ] sound and use the alveolar trill *r* [r]. In contrast, it is uncommon to find metropolitan French native speakers who make unnatural efforts to change their uvular *r* [ʁ] to the trill *r* [r] when speaking African languages. The prestige borrowing phenomenon is therefore unidirectional, i.e. it is generally performed by African language speakers who see value in sounding like metropolitan French speakers who see no value in sounding like Africans when speaking African languages. The mimicry of metropolitan French speakers' pronunciation by Africans clearly results from the French-based education system that

is centered on the French language, culture, and literary figures, and downgrades African languages, cultures, and great literary figures. Many of these Africans have become strangers to their people due to the alienating Eurocentric education systems that have molded them.

This is why, for example, it is not uncommon to find highly Western-educated Africans who are unaware of the widespread use of Ajami writing in their own communities, cannot read basic Ajami texts or write their native languages using their standard Roman orthographies. In Senegal, for example, many written advertisements in public and on TV, the names of several major political parties, billboards, and the names of some major TV shows written in Wolof are filled with spelling errors. Generally, the hegemonic French orthography is used to write Wolof, even though the language has its codified standard Roman script orthography since the 1970s.[14]

Such errors reflect the lack of knowledge of the standard Wolof Roman alphabet among some of the most educated class of the Senegalese people, including journalists, advertisers, politicians, teachers, and government officials. Additionally, many Western-trained Africans are fully knowledgeable about European writers and thinkers, but unaware of the works of great literary figures of their own societies. This is evidently because literary figures in their societies are excluded from the educational systems that produced them. So, they know well and celebrate the works of European writers, but unaware of similar towering literary figures in their own societies. This is a reminder that the drawbacks of *le mal colonial* (the colonial wrong) that Cheikh Anta Diop sought to undo is very much alive. Today, the school systems that many post-colonial African governments have inherited prepare their citizens to know better Europe and Europeans better than they know Africa and themselves and to mimic Europeans in virtually all aspects of human life.

The solution to the enduring alienation of Africans begins with teaching African languages in public and private schools in order to connect Africans with their past, their thinkers and non-Europhone literary figures such as the Mandinka Ajami poet Arfang Sitookoto Daabo (ca.1705-1799), the Wolof Ajami poet Mbay Jaxate (1875-1954) of Senegal, the Ajami master poet Cerno Samba Mombeya of Guinea (1755-1852), and other scholars elsewhere in Africa. As Cheikh Anta Diop noted, the works of these African scholars are to Africa what classical European literatures are to Europe.[15] Including their works in educational institutions is critical in the decolonization of African studies and in undoing the tangible and psychological harm of alienation that continues to lead many Africans to value only what Europeans value and to be eternal imitators of European frameworks, even though as the Wolof Ajami poet Muusaa Ka (1889-1967) taught us, “mimicry can never surpass the original!” (Wolof: roy du raw piir!).

Decolonizing the Methodology of Studying African Ajami Texts

The first step to decolonize African studies is for academics to overcome what I have called the linguistic paradox in academia[16] and to invest in learning African languages and writing systems in the same way that they are investing in learning European languages and writing systems when studying European societies. It is remarkable that one can become an expert of any African society with little or no competence in the local languages or writing systems. At the same time it is unthinkable to become an expert of France, America, China, Russia, etc. without a well-established competence in their languages and writing systems.

This double standard is rooted in the Eurocentric education of academics and the misleading division of Africa into “Francophone,” “Anglophone,” and “Lusophone” linguistic zones, as if the majority of Africans speak French, English, and Portuguese. The reality is that

these linguistic zones are misleading because these European languages are primarily spoken by the Western-educated elites who consist of no more than 30% of African populations. Therefore, most Africans are not "Francophones," "Anglophones," or "Lusophones." They are Africaphones (Wolofophone, Mandinkaphone, Swahiliphone, Hausaphone, Joolaphone, Yorubaphone, etc.). Thus, a specialist of any African society should speak the local African language(s) and capable of reading texts in any local script in the same way a specialist of France or Russia, for example, are expected to have listening, speaking, reading, and writing competence in their respective Roman and Cyrillic scripts. This must be a requirement in the training of the new generation of students, teachers and researchers of Africa. Otherwise, the knowledge produced on African societies will continue to be limited and exclude the perspectives recorded in local African texts.

In order to access the knowledge buried in African Ajami texts, specialized linguistic, cultural, and ethnographic knowledge of the communities in question is necessary, which many Western-trained scholars do not possess because it is not included in their training. The first problem that Western-trained scholars who attempt to read Ajami texts face is the set of assumptions they make, and the Eurocentric approaches they use, which do not work. For example, the lack of consistency in the spelling of vowels and consonants in African Ajami texts which are often decried by Western-trained scholars reflects their assumptions that Ajami texts follow the linguistic and orthographic conventions of European languages. This is obviously not the case. In fact, African Ajami texts resist imposition of European conventions, assumptions, and methods because they are produced by autonomous African writers who have their own logic, conventions, and preoccupations, speak African languages, and are rooted in different

epistemological traditions. Thus, the first step that Western-trained scholars need to take in order to decipher African Ajami texts is to avoid using top-down methods designed for European texts.

Deciphering Ajami characters for vowels and consonants requires using a bottom-up approach that is independent from the methods used to decrypt European languages and writing systems. Because Ajami writers have their own orthographic conventions, worldviews, knowledge systems, preoccupations, and audiences, methods designed for European languages are inappropriate to decrypt their works, as the excerpt below illustrates.

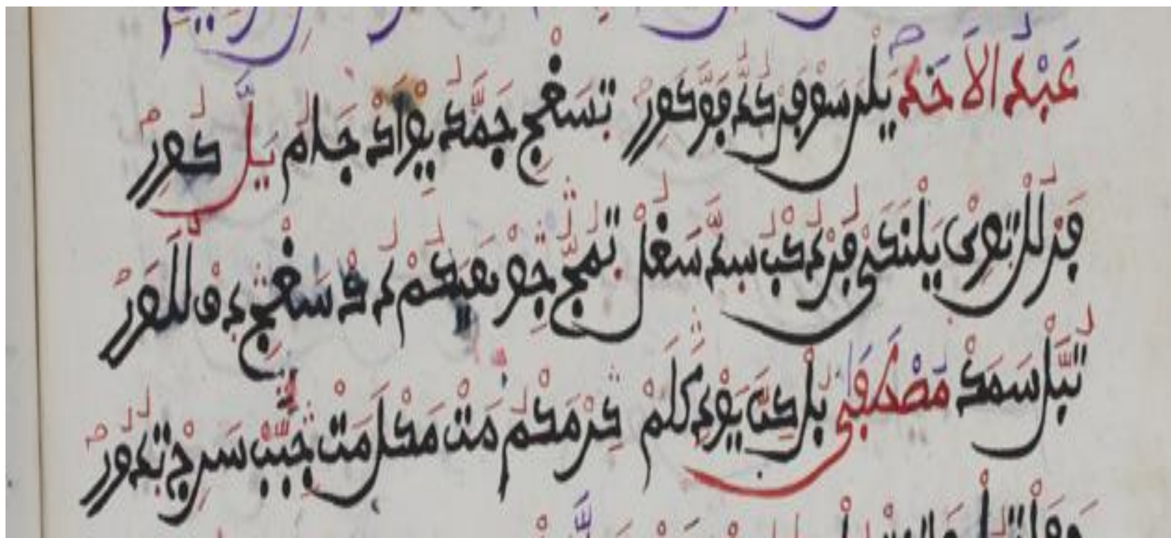

Image 2: Source: Excerpt from page 74 of a Wolof Ajami poem by Sëriñ Mbay Jaxate (1875-1954), EAP 334: Digital Preservation of Wolof Ajami Manuscripts of Senegal, https://open.bu.edu/handle/2144/2383.

Transcription

Abdul Ahad Yal na saw fan gudd fàww nga wér

Te sax ci jàmm aku yiw ak jaamu Yàlla gu wér

Farlul te wéy Yal na ngay for dog bu sedd sa xol

Te mucc ciw hay akum ndof sax ci def lu la war

Toppal sa mag Mustafaa bul génn yaw ndigalam

Ngir mag mu mat mag la mat ñéppub Sëriñ te du wor!

English Translation

Abdul Ahad, may you ever have a long and healthy life,

and dwell in peace, righteousness, and truthful worship of God.

Be resolute and carry on! May you have opportunities that bring you happiness,

save you from calamity, madness, and enable you to dwell in fulfilling your duties.

Follow the steps of your older brother Mustafaa. Do not abandon his instructions

for he is an older brother who is worthy, and a worthy leader of all who does not betray!

Technical Aspects: Writing Conventions and Segmentation Systems in Ajami Texts

In order to decipher the six Wolofal (Wolof Ajami) verses in the excerpt above, it is critical to be openminded and accept to be guided by the text. This is because Ajami authors might decide to follow strictly the writing conventions in their communities or combine them with their own individual conventions, which may be confusing for outsiders, but obvious to their readers.

Just like in Arabic, three diacritics are used in the Ajami excerpt to write the vowel *i (kasra*, a line below the letter), *a (fatḥā*, a line above the letter), and *u* (*ḍamma,* a superscript د above the letter). The writer also deploys innovative techniques to represent the Wolof vowels that do not exist in Arabic: *ë*, *e*, *é*, *o*, and *ó*. In this case, he uses *fatḥa* to represent both *a* and *ë* (in *sëriñ*, religious leader) as it is done in the local writing convention. He uses *kasra* to represent both the vowel *i* and *é* (as in the words *wér*, to be healthy; *wéy,* to carry on; and *génn,* to abandon/leave/give up).

Similarly, he uses the *ḍamma* to represent the back vowels *u* and *o* consistently. In many Wolof Ajami texts, the convention is to differentiate *u* from *o* and *ó* by representing the latter two with a *ḍamma* with a small dot inside it: ◌̥̓. He deploys strategically the *imāla* (a supplementary dot below letters), a feature of the Warsh-based classical Arabic script, to represent the vowel *e* as in the examples *te* (and), *sedd* (cold, referring to happiness in this context), and *def* (to fulfill/do). The *sukūn*, the º placed above letters representing consonants, is systematically used to indicate the absence of a following vowel as it is done in Wolof Ajami and Arabic.

Similar methods are used to write Wolof consonants in the Ajami excerpt. All the consonants that Arabic shares with Wolof are represented with the same letters. However, consonants that exist in Wolof and do not exist in Arabic are either represented with the characters that represent their closest Arabic counterparts or with supplementary diacritics.

Wolof has 43 consonants (including geminates) and the following eleven elements do not exist in Arabic: *p, mp, mb, c, ñ, nc, nj,* and *ŋ, g, ng,* and *nd.* Therefore, in order to represent these consonants in writing, the convention among Wolofal users is to use letters that represent the closest Arabic counterparts with three diacritical dots called *ñetti tomb* (Wolof: 3 dots). For example, the general Wolof convention is to represent the bilabial consonants (*p* and the prenasal *mp* and *mb)* with the Arabic *bā* with three dots placed above or below ڽ. In the Ajami excerpt, however, the writer has opted to drop the convention of adding the three dots when writing the geminate *pp*. This is because he is persuaded that his readers who are familiar with Wolofal texts would know the exact consonant he meant: the geminate *pp* written with a *bā* and the *shadda* ّ above in the word *toppal* (follow). The *shadda* is used systematically to represent all geminates in the text as it is done in Arabic and Wolofal conventions. It should be noted that

geminates are typically followed by a vowel in Wolofal texts as in the words *fàww* (ever) written as *fàwwa*, *mucc* written as *muccu* (to be saved), and *génn* (to abandon/leave/give up) written as *génna*.

The writer uses *kāf* ك (which is used in Arabic for the consonant *k)* to represent both *k* and *g* in most of the Ajami excerpt, instead of fully applying the local convention that uses the *kāf* with three dots ݢ to represent *g*. This is because he knows that his readers will understand that it is *g* that is intended in the particular words. In the words *ndigalam* (his instructions) and *ngir* (for/because), however, the writer decided to apply the local convention by using the *kāf* with three dots ݢ to represent both *g* and *ng*, as it is commonly done in Wolof communities. The general Wolofal convention is to use the *kāf* with three dots ݢ to represent *g*, *ng*, and *ŋ*.

Furthermore, the Wolof uvular fricative *x* is represented systematically in the excerpt with the word medial *ghayn* ـغـ, even though the common Wolofal convention is to write this consonant with the *khāf* خ or the Warsh *qāf* which has one dot above ڧ. This *qāf* ڧ contrasts with the Hafs-based Modern Standard Arabic *qāf* which has two dots ق. The Ajami writer also uses the Warsh *fā f* with the dot below ڢ repeatedly, which contrasts with the Hafs-based Modern Standard Arabic *fā* which uses one dot above rather than below ف. The *imala* discussed earlier, the *qāf* with one dot, and the *fā* with one dot below are features of the Warsh-based Arabic writing tradition that is the basis of most West African Ajami traditions. Thus, readers who only know the Hafs-based Modern Standard Arabic writing might need to learn these Warsh letters and their enrichments by African writers to be able to read Ajami texts. The writer of the excerpt also uses the *jīm* ج with three dots to represent the palatal consonant *c* as in *mucc* (to be saved), *sax ci* (dwell in), and *ñépp* (all/everybody). The general Wolof convention is to write all palatals with the *jīm* ج with three dots.

Furthermore, to represent the prenasal alveolar *nd* in the words *ndof* (madness) and *ndigalam* (his instructions), the writer chose simplicity by representing it with a *dāl* (د, d) without the three dots above or below as it is commonly represented in Wolofal texts. The *hā (*ه) which is used for the letter *h* in the word *hay* (calamity/trouble) indicates the rural Bawol-Bawol Wolof dialect of the writer. In this and other rural Wolof varieties, the pronunciation of many words starting with the vowel *a* are preceded by an *h* as in *ca hat moomee laa juddu* (Wolof: it was in that year that I was born). Some diacritics that are obvious to the readers are dropped by the writer as in the case of the word *sëriñ* which is written as *sërin* in the Ajami text. With or without diacritics, any Wolof Ajami literate can read this word due to its frequent usage in their local communities. [17]

Besides the technical skills required to decrypt vowels and consonants in Ajami texts, the second set of challenges that outsiders face to access the knowledge embedded in Ajami texts relates to the way Ajami writers divide their words and phrases, which contrasts with the approach used in analytic European languages such as French and English. Phrases with multiple elements in analytic European languages reflected in their Roman script text can form single longer agglutinated units in Ajami texts, as the examples below illustrate.

Structures in the Ajami Text		**Structures in the Standard Wolof Roman Text**	
1. Yalna	→	Yal na	(May)
2. Ngawér	→	nga wér	(you be healthy)
3. Tesaxci	→	Te sax ci	(and dwell in)
4. Jàmmaku	→	jàmm aku	(peace and/with)
5. Guwér	→	gu wér	(that is truthful/healthy)

6. Tewéy	→	te wéy	(and carry on)
7. Yalnangay	→	yal na ngay	(May you)
8. Dogbu	→	dog bu	(an opportunity that)
9. Saxol	→	sa xol	(your heart)
10. Temucc	→	te mucc	(and be saved)
11. Hayakum	→	hay akum	(calamity and/with)
12. Saxci	→	sax ci	(dwell in)
13. Lulawar	→	lu la war	(what you must do/your duty)
14. Magmu	→	mag mu	(older brother who)
15. Magla	→	mag la	(he is an older)
16. Teduwor	→	te du wor	(and does not betray)

As these examples show, the Ajami writer uses a linguistic segmentation principle that is different from the one used in the standard Wolof Roman text, which is molded on the writing of analytic European languages. While the elements of the structures are separated in the standard Wolof Roman text, they are agglutinated and form single units in the Ajami text. This is because, while in the standard Wolof Roman script text the parts of speech (nouns, verbs, pronouns, conjunctions, etc.) are key, for the Ajami writer, the agglutinated structures are more important because they represent units of thought.

Sociolinguistic and Ethnographic Knowledge of African Societies

Besides understanding the writing conventions, linguistic segmentation approach, in-depth sociolinguistic and ethnographic knowledge of the relevant African societies is necessary to fully

understand the rich contents of Ajami texts. As in most parts of Africa, many Ajami writers are multilingual. Thus, many are also multiliterate. They speak and write in several languages, including Arabic and their own local African languages. Therefore, their texts often include Arabic words, phrases, or sentences written in the Warsh writing system. Some of these structures may be influenced by local pronunciations, and thus different from the way they would appear in Modern Standard Arabic texts. Some Ajami texts also contain loanwords from other local African languages, metaphors of fauna and flora, toponyms, ethnonyms, and local narrative styles, figures of speech, coded language, celebrated virtues and heroes, and maxims, proverbs, and parables that reflect local preoccupations and worldviews.

Some texts document dialectal features and language and cultural evolution. For example, the old Wolof word *ja* (market), which might be used in Wolofal texts, is now generally replaced by the French loanword *marse* (from French *marché*) in urban Wolof. Similarly, northern Senegalese Wolof grammar with its complex noun classes reflected in *mus mi* (the cat), *jigéen ji* (the woman), *góor gi* (the man), *ngelaw li* (the wind), *suuf si* (the land), *nit ki* (the person), and *béy wi* (the goat), which are frequently used in Wolofal texts, may be simplified in different ways in urban areas and in the southern Casamance region where the *b*-class generally serves as the default class for many nouns.

Some historical Ajami texts may also contain chronograms, i.e. dates written with words such as *jaysashi*. While these words may appear as senseless to outsiders, they are precise dates based on the Western alpha numeral system of the Arabic alphabet and are calculated as follows: *j* (ج)= 3, *y* (ى)= 10, *s* (س) =300, and *sh* (ش) = 1000. Thus, the date is 1310 in the Muslim calendar (1895 in the Gregorian Calendar), which is the date of exile of Shaykh Ahmadu Bamba to Gabon. West African Ajami writers generally use this dating system.

Moreover, African Ajami writers live in worlds of complementarity, and not of dichotomies. In their worlds, orature and written literature co-exist and are interlaced in the same way religious and secular domains and the visible and the invisible worlds are entwined and in permanent dialogue. The dichotomies that separate "oral" and "written literature," "religious" and "secular" domains, and the "visible" and "invisible" worlds are foreign to their African societies. These dichotomies which are imposed and used in African studies are part of the colonial legacies.

For example, Ajami archives of Africa demonstrate that a written poem is meant to be read, recited, and (or) chanted. Similarly, a prose text can begin with a religious doxology, such as *Bismi l-Lāhi al-Rahmāni al-Rahīm* (Arabic: In the Name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful), while the following part of the text may deal with non-religious subjects. A biography might involve tangible elements of someone's life along with elements of the invisible realm of spirits, angels, or divine intervention. Therefore, there is no dichotomy between these domains in the worldviews of Ajami writers. In contrast to traditions where these domains may be neatly separated and rendered mutually exclusive, they are fundamentally complementary and mutually reinforcing in African societies. Acknowledging the complementarity between orality and written literature, between secular and religious domains, and between the visible and invisible world, which are so central in African cosmologies, is critical for a better understanding of Africa and the decolonization of African studies.

The issues discussed above to decolonize knowledge production about Africa apply to most indigenous African traditions. When scholars develop 1) in-depth competence in the relevant African languages (including speaking and writing competence), 2) in-depth knowledge of community-wide writing conventions and idiosyncratic features of individual writers, 3) in-

depth knowledge of the linguistic segmentation principles used in African indigenous texts, and 5) in-depth sociolinguistic and ethnographic knowledge of the writers' societies (including the complementary of domains reflected in their texts), they might be capable of deciphering and accessing the wealth of information recorded in African Ajami texts, such as the Mandinka excerpt below written by the late El Hadji Kemo Drame of Sedhiou, Senegal.

Image 3: Picture of the late El Hadji Kemo Drame taken in his home in Sedhiou in the summer of 2018. I am grateful to him and his family for allowing us to digitally preserve and share his Mandinka Ajami archives with the students and scholars of Africa.

Sample Mandinka Ajami Text from Drame's Collection: Proverbs and Sayings

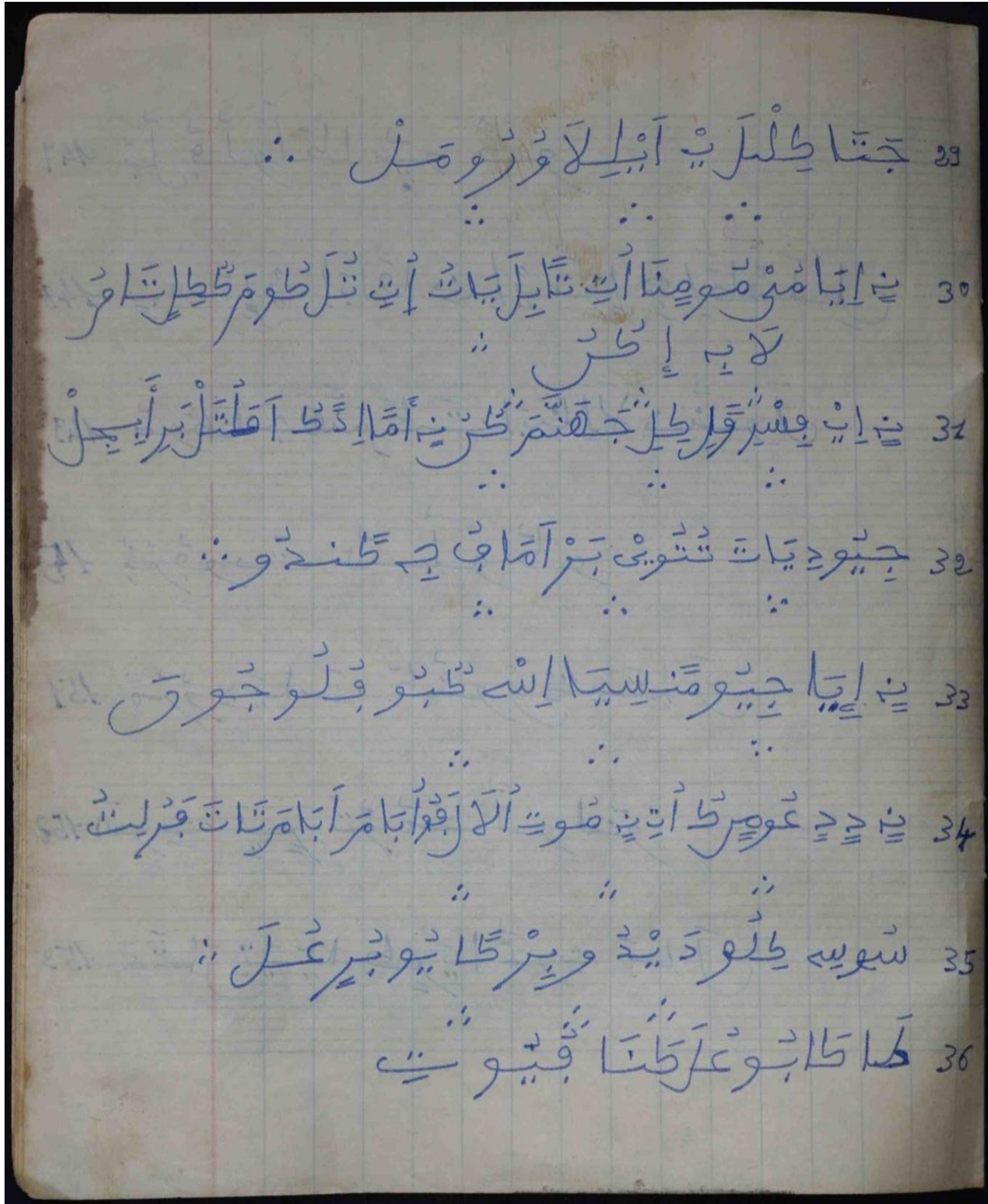

Image 4: Source: Page 4 from "Mandinka Proverbs and Sayings" (Kitab Tanbih al-Afkar) by El Hadji Kemo Drame. See https://sites.bu.edu/nehajami/the-four-languages/mandinka/mandinka-manuscripts/kitab-tanbih-al-afkar/.

Transcription

29. Jaata kelelaa, a ye yillaa wuuroo ma le.

30. Niŋ i yaa moyi moo minna ate tambi la ñaato, a te tula kooma kuŋ kiliŋ taamoo le be a kono.

31. Niŋ i ye fisiriwallee kili jahannama kono, niŋ a maŋ i dankuŋ, a maluta le, bari a be jee le.

32. Jiyoo diyaata totoo ye, bari a maa fo jii kandoo.

33. Niŋ i ñaajiyoo maŋ siyaa, i si kumboo foloo juuna.

34. Niŋ dindiŋo miŋ ko a te niŋ moo te bula la, fo wo baama le maŋ taa faroo le to.

35. Siisee kiloo landoo beroo kaŋ, ñooboriŋo le mu.

36. Taakaa muŋ ka bo wuloo kono foñoo ti.

English Translation

29. Whoever goes to hunt the lion should expect to howl in fear.

30. If a person does not want to walk in front or behind, it is because they prefer to walk alone.

31. If you call on a traitor in hell and he doesn't answer, he's ashamed but he's still there.

32. The frog likes water, but not hot water.

33. If you don't have a lot of tears, then start crying early on.

34. If a child refuses to follow others, it is because his mother did not go to the rice paddies.

35. Laying an egg on a stone is no easy task.

36. The bush fire is often accompanied by the wind.

El Hadji Kemo Drame's Mandinka Ajami document contains over 200 proverbs and riddles that capture the wisdom of his society. The themes discussed in the full texts include family, wisdom, morality, ethics, social living, knowledge, stupidity, and cleverness. The document highlights numerous aspects of Senegambian Mandinka life and culture, including respect for elders,

understanding one's own abilities and limitations, personal flaws, respect for the natural world, maintaining harmonious interpersonal relations, and bodily and spiritual cleanliness. It draws extensively on the local flora and fauna for metaphors and includes frequent references to local foods. The document is an example of the philosophy by which rural Mandinka speakers live.[18]

Conclusion

Though I have focused on Ajami traditions in this paper, my goal is to highlight the plurality of African sources of knowledge and the bottom-up approach needed to access their rich but largely overlooked contents. African sources of knowledge are not restricted to oral and Europhone sources.[19] They include 1) Oral sources, 2) Europhone sources, 3) Arabic sources, 4) Ajami sources, and 5) sources written in locally invented scripts. Each of these sources must be incorporated in knowledge production about Africa because all of them are equally important African sources of knowledge. Learning African languages and writing systems, accessing the unfiltered opinions recorded in the various texts, and incorporating them in teaching and research about Africa must be normalized to fully decolonize African studies.

Despite the long neglect of non-Europhone African writers and their works, they are central pathways into African worldviews, knowledge systems, philosophies, and preoccupations in the same way European languages are ultimate pathways into European cultures and societies. Besides correcting the pervasive stereotypes about Africa, the excavation of the knowledge buried in non-Europhone sources will force revisions of various aspects of our current understanding of pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial Africa. These sources are resources essential to research and teaching about people of African descent, their histories, and belief

systems, and they enable us to see the world and hear voices of ordinary and learned Africans never heard before.

Finally, I do not call for an outright rejection of the educational institutions inherited from colonization, because it is impractical to do so. However, I call for their fundamental reform to match African realities and needs. I call for the inclusion of African languages and writing systems in educational programs in Africa and their professionalization and transformation into commodities that allow new generations of language specialists to gain socioeconomic mobility through employment in public and private spheres, including in African language teaching, pedagogical material development, translation and interpretation, language engineering, advertisement, and software and font development. The new polyvalent generation of African language specialists trained in multiple traditions will be bridge-makers for the guardians of African orature, Roman script users, Arabic and Ajami users, and users of other locally invented scripts, who are generally disconnected due to their socialization or educational trajectories, even though they are all children of Africa.

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Notes

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[1] For more discussions on the treatment of African languages as "backward," "primitive," and "unable to express complex thoughts" and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's position, see Kristin I. Helland, "Writing in Gikuyu: Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Search for African Authenticity," in *Contact Linguistics in Africa and Beyond*, edited by Akinmade T. Akande and Rotimi Taiwo, chapter 14 (Hauppauge, New York: Nova Science Publishers, Inc., 2013).

[2] See Ousmane Oumar Kane, *Non-Europhone Intellectuals* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 2012).

[3] See the open access African Ajami Library: https://open.bu.edu/handle/2144/1896; and the NEH project (in progress): https://sites.bu.edu/nehajami/.

[4] For sample of the manuscripts of Timbuktu, see Ancient Manuscripts from the Desert Libraries of Timbuktu: https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/mali/.

[5] For more on pre-colonial and post-colonial writing systems in Africa, see Helma Pasch, "Competing Scripts: The Introduction of the Roman Alphabet in Africa," *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 2018, volume 191: 65–109.

[6] Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Nairobi, Kenya: East African Educational Publishers Ltd), 9.

[7] John Mugane, "Necrolinguistics: The Linguistically Stranded," in *Selected Proceedings of the 35th Annual Conference on African Linguistics*, 2006, 10-21. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla, Proceedings Project. www.lingref.com, document #1292.

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[8] Meikal Mumin, "The Arabic Script in Africa: Understudied Literacy," in *The Arabic Script in Africa*, edited by Kees Versteegh and Meikal Mumin, 2014, 44.

[9] For more on the N'Ko script, see Coleman Donaldson, "The Role of Islam, Ajami Writings, and Educational Reform in Sulemaana Kantè's N'Ko" *African Studies Review*, 2020, volume *63* (3): 462-486.

[10] See Konrad Tuchscherer, "Bamum Script and Archives Project: Saving Africa's Written Heritage," EAP051, https://doi.org/10.15130/EAP051.

[11] See the African Ajami Library, https://open.bu.edu/handle/2144/1896; the NEH project (in progress), https://sites.bu.edu/nehajami/.

[12] G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, J. Sibree, Translator (New York: The Colonial Press, 1900), 90-99.

[13] See Cheikh Hamidou Kane, "Joseph Ki-Zerbo, portrait d'une génération africaine sous influence coloniale." *CODESRIA Bulletin,* 2007, 3-4: 70-76.

[14] President Léopold S. Senghor's decree number 71566 of May 1971 gave Wolof, Joola, Mandinka, Pulaar, Soninke, and Seereer the status of national languages and recognized the importance of introducing them in the education system. However, until now these languages have largely been marginalized in the Senegalese education system. The recent support of 73 million dollars by the USAID to promote reading competence in three national Senegalese languages (Wolof, Seereer and Pulaar) must be commended. It is a major positive development. I hope that the Senegalese government will sustain and make permanent these efforts beyond the USAID funding. See https://www.usaid.gov/fr/senegal/press-releases/united-states-government-teaches-children-read-national.

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[15] Cheikh Anta Diop, *Nations Nègres et Culture* (Edition: Présence Africaine, 1954, 1979), 528-532.

[16] Fallou Ngom, *Muslims beyond the Arab World: The Odyssey of ʿAjamī and the Murīdiyya* (New York: Oxford University Press, July 2016), 247.

[17] The Senegalese government in collaboration with UNESCO and ISESCO developed standard orthographies for Wolof and Pulaar in 1987 called *caractères arabes harmonisés (harmonized Arabic letters)*. See Chtatou, Mohamed, *Using Arabic Script in Writing the Languages of the People of Muslim Africa* (Rabat: Institute of African Studies, 1992). However, the writing systems that were produced did not take into account the widespread and enduring local conventions to write vowels and consonants in Ajami texts discussed in this paper. Instead, new invented diacritics and letters borrowed from other parts of the Muslim world were proposed for African languages. The result is that the system has not appealed to the masses of Ajami users. Knowledge of the *caractères arabes harmonisés* does not enable people to read old or contemporary Ajami texts. For more discussion on the *caractères arabes harmonisés*, see Fallou Ngom, "Murid Ajami Sources of Knowledge: The Myth and the Reality," in *From Dust to Digital: Ten Years of the Endangered Archives Programme,* Maja Kominko, editor (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2015), 119-164. For the online version, see: https://books.openedition.org/obp/2248.

[18] El Hadji Kemo Drame, "Kitab Tanbih al-Afkar" (Mandinka Proverbs and Sayings), https://sites.bu.edu/nehajami/the-four-languages/mandinka/mandinka-manuscripts/kitab-tanbih-al-afkar/.

[19] For more on non-Europhone sources of Africa, see Fallou Ngom, "West African Manuscripts in Arabic and African Languages and Digital Preservation," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History, 2017*. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.123.