

## Introduction



# ‘Ajamī Literacies of Africa: The Hausa, Fula, Mandinka, and Wolof Traditions

*Fallou Ngom*

Department of Anthropology and African Studies Center, Boston University,  
Boston, MA, USA  
*fngom@bu.edu*

*Daivi Rodima-Taylor*

African Studies Center, Boston University, Boston, MA, USA  
*rodima@bu.edu*

*David Robinson*

Department of History, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI, USA  
*robins22@msu.edu*



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Ajamī is the term used to refer to non-Arabic languages and literatures that are written with an enriched form of the Arabic script. The ‘Ajamī literatures that have developed in sub-Saharan Africa, which hold a wealth of knowledge on the history, politics, cultures and intellectual traditions of the region, are generally unknown to the scholarly community and the general public alike, largely due to lack of access. The history of ‘Ajamī refutes the claims that Africa lacks written traditions. The downplaying and devaluing of the significance of African ‘Ajamī traditions has long characterized Arab-centric, as well as Euro-centric, scholars and administrators of the colonial era, and its legacy persists, perpetuating racial stereotypes, limiting political and educational participation of ‘Ajamī practitioners, and obscuring ethnographic accounts of local practices and institutions.

Our special issue centers around new knowledge generated through our research project *'Ajamī Literature and the Expansion of Literacy and Islam: The Case of West Africa*, undertaken collaboratively by researchers at Boston University, Northwestern University, Michigan State University, and scholars and field teams in Senegal and Nigeria between 2019 and 2022. The project is funded by the National Endowment of Humanities (NEH). The project seeks, through increasing access to primary sources in 'Ajamī and utilizing an innovative multimedia approach, to spark broader popular understanding of this important part of the Islamic world. It explores the 'Ajamī literatures of four main languages of Muslim West Africa (Hausa, Mandinka, Fula, and Wolof) based on over 80 digitized manuscripts along with their metadata, Roman script transcriptions, and English and French translations. In each of the four languages, 20 manuscripts have been selected and over five of the manuscripts in each language have been chanted or recited and videotaped. These video recordings of the chanting and recitations by local scholars in Africa are featured on the "NEH 'Ajamī Project" website.<sup>1</sup> These resources are freely accessible to the public, scholars, teachers and students of Islam and Africa. The project benefits from the expertise of a multidisciplinary and multi-institutional team from Africa and the United States with complementary skills in 'Ajamī, African linguistics, sociocultural anthropology, pedagogy, and digital humanities.

A collaborative interpretive analysis of the materials constitutes an important part of our NEH 'Ajamī project. While there have been studies of particular African 'Ajamī literatures, this project takes a comparative approach by looking at the 'Ajamī phenomenon across four languages (Hausa, Mandinka, Fula, and Wolof). These four languages are spoken by large populations spread across West Africa. Each language has played an important role in the spread of literacy and in the dissemination of the diverse strains of Islam that have characterized many West African Muslim communities for the last millennium. Through our interpretive research that will open up a comparative and sustained examination of the 'Ajamī phenomenon in sub-Saharan Africa, we contribute to a better understanding of literacy in Muslim Africa, showing its multiple purposes, forms, degrees, and custodians.

Our researchers are also engaged in another African 'Ajamī project that aims to develop specialized 'Ajamī Readers in Hausa, Wolof, and Mandinka with a multimedia companion website.<sup>2</sup> This project covers a range of fields,

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://sites.bu.edu/nehajami/>.

<sup>2</sup> See <https://sites-staging.bu.edu/ria/>.

including business and economy, health and medicine, agriculture and the environment, and human rights, politics and diplomacy. The project aims to provide students, language teachers, scholars, and American professionals with the necessary linguistic, cultural and literacy skills to engage ‘Ajamī users of West Africa. The goal is to develop a methodology that can be replicated for other world languages with dual literacy systems (‘Ajamī and Latin script orthographies).

This special issue contains articles about the materials in our African ‘Ajamī collections from our language team members who analyze different manuscripts and topics and situate them socially and temporally in their communities of origin. The articles also examine the technical challenges around font development issues when creating textual content in African languages written with the Arabic script, and explore the aspects of archival preservation and digitization of ‘Ajamī manuscripts. This introduction presents an overview of the social, political, and cultural roles of ‘Ajamī literacy in West Africa, with a focus on our four language communities. Situating ‘Ajamī literacy in the broader context of colonial legacies, we highlight the collaborative and multi-vocal aspects of our research that seek to facilitate comparative and interpretive knowledge about the meaning and purpose of ‘Ajamī texts, their social functions, and the voices of the people who have written, own, and use them. Through this project, we seek to foster solutions for the co-production of knowledge about African literacies in an era of increasing digitization of archival materials and the rise of new technological opportunities to enhance participation of local communities where the knowledge originates. Our special issue therefore situates the decolonizing processes of ‘Ajamī knowledge production in a framework of broader productive transformations of the present-day humanistic inquiry.

### **The Building Blocks of an Islamic Culture in West Africa**

Africa and Africans have long endured significant stigma in the eyes of commentators from other parts of the world. Much of this can be traced to the Hamitic myth or the Curse of Ham, the Ptolemaic climate theory, the Trans-Saharan and Trans-Atlantic slave-trades, and European colonization, which describe Africans as “savages, uncivilized, and backward” among other dehumanizing terms.<sup>3</sup> The architects and practitioners of slavery and

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3 See David Robinson, *Muslim Societies in African History*, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 74–88. For the Hamitic myth, see Edith Sanders, “The Hamitic Hypothesis: Its Origin and

enslavement obviously believed, and had to believe, that the slaves were inferior beings. The stereotypes about Africa were reinforced during European colonial rule from the 19th century to the middle of the 20th century.

Islam as practiced in Africa has suffered from a similar stigma. Arab Muslims were regarded as the standard-bearers of the faith that emerged in Mecca and Medina in the 7th century C.E., spread to much of the world, and created a whole new way of calculating time, the *Anno Hegirae*, A.H., the “year of the *hijra*.”<sup>4</sup> As Hunwick has suggested, while Arabs did not see all black people as slaves—regardless of skin color, “the only enslavable persons” were considered “those defeated in battle against Muslims,” usually nonbelievers—the Arab conquest was still marked by an “overwhelming sense” of superiority, and they referred to the conquered people as “clients.”<sup>5</sup> With the Arab conquest and Arabization of the Maghreb, the Sahara became the northern frontier of Islamic Africa.

The European conquest of most of sub-Saharan Africa in the late 19th century entrenched these forms of stigma further. The British, French and other Western European powers that colonized Africa now proclaimed to be “abolitionists” opposed to the slave-trade and slavery, in contrast to their leadership in the processes of enslavement in earlier times. As they made their way into the African interior, they often justified conquest in terms of opposition to slavery, and particularly the forms of slavery which they could attribute to Muslim states and forces.

The French formulated the “perfect” combination of these forms of stigma as they moved across the West African Sahel and created the federation called *Afrique Occidentale Française* (French West Africa).<sup>6</sup> They argued that *islam noir*, or “black Islam,”<sup>7</sup> as they called the practice of their new Muslim subjects,

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Functions in Time Perspective,” *Journal of African History*, 10/4 (1969), p. 521–532. For slavery in Africa, see Paul Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa*, Cambridge University Press, 1983.

4 Robinson, *Muslim Societies*, p. 6.

5 John O. Hunwick, “Arab Views of Black Africans and Slavery,” in *West Africa, Islam, and the Arab World*, Wiener, Markus Publishers, 2006, p. 1–2. See also John O. Hunwick and Eve Troutt Powell, *The African Diaspora in the Mediterranean Lands of Islam*, Wiener, Markus Publishers, 2017; Bruce S. Hall, *A History of Race in Muslim West Africa, 1600–1960*, Cambridge University Press, 2011.

6 French West Africa was a federation of eight French colonial territories in West Africa: Mauritania, Senegal, French Sudan (now Mali), French Guinea (now Guinea), Ivory Coast, Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso), Dahomey (now Benin) and Niger.

7 The concept of “islam blanc/islam noir” was championed by Paul Marty in his *L’Islam en Guinée: Fouta-Diallon*, Paris, Leroux, 1921 (Facsimile 2016).

was something inferior to “true” or Arab Islam.<sup>8</sup> Contributing to this was the fact that the experience of some French colonies where Islam had served to mobilize resistance to the colonial rule had left the French “perennially suspicious” of the religion.<sup>9</sup> The French colonizers considered that African Islamic practice needed to be contained in its inferiority, within the colonial setting. This containment meant regulating the pilgrimage to Mecca, closely monitoring local Muslim leaders, and finding allies and collaborators to help with the task. In the process, the French constituted themselves as a *puissance musulmane*—“a Muslim power” friendly to the faith—but also able to control Muslim subjects. Or at least that is what they intended to do, and actually succeeded in doing for some time.<sup>10</sup> The view of sub-Saharan Islam as “tainted” by local practices and inferior to the “pure Islam practiced in Arab countries” can be frequently encountered to this day, even in scholarly circles.<sup>11</sup>

The British did something similar in Northern Nigeria. They created a Roman script for the dominant language, Hausa, in an effort to control their Muslim subjects, and trained their colonial officers in the Romanized Hausa. Romanized Hausa was viewed as facilitating European military conquest and colonial administration after Frederick Lugard assumed control of the Royal Niger Company’s African territories in 1900, also allowing the colonizers to rely on Hausa as lingua franca among a multiplicity of smaller language communities in central and northern Nigeria.<sup>12</sup> Boko, the name for the Roman script Hausa, became a synonym for Western education. Later, it also became

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8 For discussion of the ways in which local Muslim leaders negotiated relations with the Federation of French West Africa in order to preserve autonomy within the religious, social, and economic realms while abandoning the political sphere to their non-Muslim rulers, see David Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation: Muslim Societies and French Colonial Authorities in Senegal and Mauritania, 1880–1920*, Ohio University Press, 2000.

9 See Robert Launay, “An Invisible Religion? Anthropology’s Avoidance of Islam in Africa,” in *African Anthropologies: History, Critique, and Practice*, ed. M. Ntarangwi, London, Zed Books, 2006, p. 189.

10 Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*.

11 Jean-Louis Triaud, “Giving a Name to Islam South of the Sahara: An Adventure in Taxonomy,” *The Journal of African History*, 55/1 (2014), p. 3–15.

12 John E. Philips, “Hausa in the Twentieth Century: An Overview,” *Sudanica Africa*, 15 (2004), p. 55–84. See also Nikolai Dobronravine and John E. Philips, “Hausa Ajami Literature and Script: Colonial Innovations and Post-Colonial Myths in Northern Nigeria,” *Sudanica Africa*, 15 (2004), p. 85–110.

the mantra for the 21st century Islamist insurgency, “Boko Haram,” which translates to “Western education is forbidden.”<sup>13</sup>

The stereotypes of the inferiority of Black Africa and its inhabitants endure, despite the emergence of independent African countries after World War II new currents of African Studies, African Anthropology and Linguistics, and African History. The Western and outside world have only just begun to deal with the consequences of the centuries-old stigmatization of Black Africa.



Our goal in this work is partly to chip away at stereotypes by exploring the knowledge and work of Muslims in four large language communities in West Africa—Hausa, Fula, Mandinka and Wolof—as they adapted the Arabic script to write their languages and, in so doing, created practices and literatures to enrich their faith and create institutions for its transmission to future generations and to non-Muslim communities.

But this is not, or not just, the investigation of an interesting dimension of the four languages and their pedagogy. It is also, we esteem, an exploration into the history of language and culture change, the ways in which Islamic faith and practice took root in West African societies, and the ways in which the faith became appealing and spread to non-Muslims. The early presence of Islam in Africa came from merchants involved in the Trans-Saharan trade, followed by the adoption of the religion by rulers and state administrators, only subsequently spreading to the countryside, frequently subject to revolutionary *jihads* by various reformers of the religion.<sup>14</sup> Together with the “Islamization of Africa” there occurred the “Africanization of Islam” or “the ‘Ajamization of Islam,” signifying processes by which African groups “have created ‘Muslim’ space or made Islam their own,” affecting local politics and culture through Islamic institutions, but also transforming the religion to accommodate local needs and opportunities.<sup>15</sup>

African studies, as a field and collection of disciplinary studies, is only a few decades old. It goes back essentially to the mid-20th century, to the post World War II period and the process of decolonization in British, French, Belgian and

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13 For more on the Boko Haram movement, see Wisdom Oghosa Iyekekpolo, “Boko Haram: Understanding the Context,” *Third World Quarterly*, 37/12 (2016), p. 2211–2228; and Olabanji Akinola, “Boko Haram Insurgency in Nigeria: Between Islamic Fundamentalism, Politics, and Poverty,” *African Security*, 8/1 (2015), p. 1–29.

14 Robinson, *Muslim Societies*, p. 28.

15 Robinson, *Muslim Societies*, p. 42; Fallou Ngom and Mustapha H. Kurfi, “Ajamization of Islam in Africa,” *Islamic Africa*, 8/1–2 (2017), p. 1–12.

ultimately Portuguese Africa and to the emergence of independent countries that inherited the boundaries of their colonial predecessors. From that period, African scholars, in their fledgling universities, joined their counterparts in Europe, North America and other areas to counter the stereotypes and stigma about Africa. Early research and publication often featured the new states and their politics, or the pre-colonial predecessors, as a way of validating African initiative and governance. Social scientists examined African “traditional” religions (“ATRS” in the conventional parlance), which were “truly” (neither Muslim nor Christian) African.<sup>16</sup> Art historians researched the sculptures linked to these practices. At the same time, historians and social scientists invested in the gathering of “oral tradition” for these ostensibly largely “oral” societies (see the pioneering work by Jan Vansina, the influential Belgian and American anthropologist and historian).<sup>17</sup> Reluctant to study Islam and its practitioners in Africa, many anthropologists preferred to see themselves as tasked with “decoding more ‘authentically’ African beliefs and practices.”<sup>18</sup> Only later did some attention shift to the practice of Islam and the processes of Islamization as a fully African reality.<sup>19</sup>

Similar dynamics have characterized the scholarship of African ‘Ajami. The Arabic word ‘Ajami originally meant foreign or non-Arab. It has come to refer to the use of the Arabic script to write non-Arabic languages. ‘Ajami literatures have long existed in the Middle East and across much of Asia, and have been well documented, researched and accepted for centuries.<sup>20</sup> By contrast, African ‘Ajami literatures have been largely ignored until recent decades, with the possible exception of Swahili and Hausa.<sup>21</sup> We seek to help address this neglect in African ‘Ajami traditions.

16 See also Rosalind Shaw, “The Invention of ‘African Traditional Religion,’” *Religion*, 20/4 (1990), p. 339–353.

17 Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1985.

18 Launay, “An Invisible Religion?,” p. 190.

19 For the development of African studies in Great Britain, see Colin Flight, “The Bantu expansion and the SOAS network,” *History in Africa*, 15 (1988), p. 261–301; and in France, Emmanuelle Sibeud, “La naissance de l’ethnographie africaniste en France avant 1914,” *Cahiers d’Études Africaines*, 136 (1994), p. 639–658.

20 The replacement of Arabic with Roman script in 1928 was one of the controversial features of the modernization and westernization reforms in Turkey. See Geoffrey Wheeler, “Modernization in the Muslim East: The Role of Script and Language Reform,” *Asian Affairs*, 5/2 (1974), p.157–164.

21 For Ajami use in South Africa, see Muhammed Haron, “The Making, Preservation and Study of South African Ajami Mss and Texts,” *Sudanic Africa*, 12/1 (2001), p. 1–14. For important work on the Kanuri Ajami tradition, see Dmitry Bondarev, “Quranic Exegesis in Old Kanembu: Linguistic Precision for Better Interpretation,” in *Quranic Exegesis in African Languages. Special Issue of the Journal of Quranic Studies*, 15/3 (2013), p.56–83;

### Four ‘Ajamī Language Communities

Our project aims to advance the understanding of ‘Ajamī in sub-Saharan Africa through comparative examination of four major West African languages: Hausa, Mandinka, Fula and Wolof. The ‘Ajamī literatures of the Sahel provide a unique window into the history and lived experience of peoples in this region. Despite similar origins in spreading the faith, each ‘Ajamī system studied followed its own trajectory shaped by local cultural, social and political factors.

Our four language communities cut through a wide space in West Africa. Each is closely associated with Islamic practice, but many speakers remained tied to their non-Islamic traditions. The Hausa people emerged in northern Nigeria and Niger, often referred to as Hausaland. From there they spread in all directions, and their leaders often became the arbiters of Islamic practice in the regions where they settled. In terms of numbers of speakers, Hausa is among the most important languages spoken on the African continent.<sup>22</sup> Hausa has been written with a modified Arabic script since at least the 18th century.<sup>23</sup> The growth of Hausa ‘Ajamī was accelerated by the reform movement of Usman ḍan Fodio (1754–1817) and the Sokoto Caliphate, which dominated the Northern Nigerian region through the 19th century and which is often equated with Hausaland itself. Ḍan Fodio and his contemporaries made a very conscious effort to spread their message and faith through ‘Ajamī in Hausa, as well as Fulfulde. They composed works, often in verse, to persuade people to join the reform movement and to instruct them in Islamic practice.<sup>24</sup>

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Dmitry Bondarev, “Multiglossia in West African Manuscripts: A case of Borno, Nigeria,” in *Manuscript Cultures: Mapping the Field*, ed. J.B. Quenzer, D. Bondarev and J.U. Sobisch, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2014, p. 113–155.

- 22 The estimated number of Hausa speakers, comprising native and second-language speakers, is 77 million. See David M. Eberhard, Gary F. Simons, and Charles D. Fennig (eds.), *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, twenty-fifth edition, Dallas, Texas: SIL International, 2022. Online version: <http://www.ethnologue.com>.
- 23 See David Robinson, *Muslim Societies in African History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 145–146. See also John O. Hunwick, *West Africa, Islam, and the Arab World: Studies in Honor of Basil Davidson*, Princeton, NJ, Marcus Wiener Publishers, 2006; Hamid Bobboyi, “Ajami Literature and the Study of the Sokoto Caliphate,” in *The Meanings of Timbuktu*, ed. Shamil Jeppie and Souleymane Bachir Diagne, Capetown, HSRC Press, 2008.
- 24 See David Robinson, *Muslim Societies in African History*, Chapter 9, “Sokoto and Hausaland: Jihad within the Dar-al-Islam,” p. 140–152. For more information on Usman ḍan Fodio and the Sokoto Caliphate, see also Murray Last, *The Sokoto Caliphate*, London, Longmans, 1967. For the pedagogy and career of Nana Asma’u, see Jean Boyd and Beverly Mack, *One Woman’s Jihad: Nana Asma’u, Scholar and Scribe*, Indiana University Press, 2000; and Jean Boyd and Beverly Mack’s collection of Nana Asma’u’s writings in Arabic, Hausa, and Fulani, including English translations: *Collected Works of Nana Asma’u, Daughter of Usman ḍan Fodiyo (1793–1864)*, Michigan State University Press, 1997.

The ‘Ajami tradition in Mandinka and other Mande languages goes back to the Empire of Mali, which was centered in today’s Mali and flourished from about 1200 to 1400 CE. The empire spread in several directions and implanted colonies of traders and settlers through a considerable portion of West Africa, including Senegambia. Their most remembered ruler was Sunjata Keita (c. 1217–1255), known through oral tradition, griots and the work of Djibril Tamsir Niane.<sup>25</sup> But one of his successors, Mansa Musa (c. 1280–1337), was much better known to the outside world. He made a conspicuous pilgrimage to Mecca with a large entourage and considerable West African gold. His reward was a prominent place on maps of Africa in the late medieval period.<sup>26</sup> During these centuries of Mali’s prominence, Mande communities (especially the Jula subgroup) of the empire traded and settled widely in the areas known today as Côte d’Ivoire, Guinea, The Gambia and Senegal. While Ajami traditions of Mande languages appear to have developed very early, they remain among the least documented. Mandinka scholars of Senegambia authored important texts dealing with various religious and non-religious subjects, in both poetry and prose forms. They founded over 60 Islamic learning centers in Senegambia, which, according to local oral sources, served as refuge for runaway slaves in the pre-colonial era.

Fula (the language of the Fulbe people) developed in several communities that spread from West to East, from Senegal to Nigeria and Cameroon, over the last millennium. Fula is closely associated with the “Islamic revolutions” that occurred in four areas of West Africa in the 18th and 19th century.<sup>27</sup> The Muslims of the region played a leading role as critics and reformers of Islamic practice in the Sahel and created several Islamic states across that space beginning in the late 18th century: Fuuta Jalon, Fuuta Tooro, Sokoto, and finally Masina. These Islamic states (especially Fuuta Jalon and Sokoto) spurred the development of ‘Ajami literatures. The best known of these states was the Sokoto Caliphate of Northwestern Nigeria, created under the leadership of Usman dan Fodio. Dan Fodio (1754–1817) was a Fula by descent whose ancestral roots are traced to Fuuta Tooro, the Senegal River, which is the presumed birthplace of Fula people. He and his daughter, Nana Asma’u (1793–1864), were pioneers in the

25 A Guinean historian and writer. See his book *Sundiata, an Epic of Old Mali*, 1960, Pearson College Div.

26 Taha Abbou, *Mansa Musa’s Journey to Mecca and Its Impact on Western Sudan*, 2016. Retrieved from <http://dspace.iaa.edu.sd/bitstream/123456789/932/1/Taha%20abbou.pdf>.

27 David Robinson, “The Islamic Revolution of Futa Toro,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 8/2 (1975), p 185–221; see also David Robinson, “Reflections on Legitimation and Pedagogy in the ‘Islamic Revolutions’ of West Africa on the Frontiers of the Islamic World,” *Journal of West African History*, 1/1 (2015), p. 119–132.

development of ‘Ajamī practices and literatures in two languages: Fulfulde (the Nigerian variety of Fula) and Hausa. The Fula collections studied in our project were written by Fuuta Jalon scholars from Guinea. Fuuta Jalon, particularly the town of Labe, was a center for composition, instruction and dissemination in ‘Ajamī and for the establishment of a certain Fulbe (plural for Fula) pre-eminence in the wider region.<sup>28</sup>

Nana Asma’u Bint Usman dan Fodio was one of the most influential literary and educational innovators, whose work advanced the central role of ‘Ajamī in Hausa and Fulfulde communities of West Africa. She was a nineteenth-century Muslim scholar and scribe, who witnessed the battles of the largest of the West-African jihads of the era and explored the preparation and conduct of the jihad in her poetry. Asma’u gave accounts of the battles and victories of the caliphate, as well as the work of social reconstruction that followed the military activity. Through her literary and educational activities and vast social network, Asma’u “greatly enhanced the role of ‘Ajamī in the consolidation of the emerging caliphate.”<sup>29</sup> At the same time, her ‘Ajamī eulogies and elegies bore “testimony to the traumatic nature of these experiences” and helped to “restore the emotional balance of society.”<sup>30</sup> Asma’u was an educator, scribe, and feminist activist, “whose strategies for political and religious reform changed the social order in northern Nigeria forever.”<sup>31</sup> Asma’u organized a public education system for women: to develop grassroots Muslim activity, she focused on the education of non-Muslim rural women, training women as itinerant teachers in the villages. The women also cared for the poor and performed other social functions. The system of women educating other women was known in the Hausa language as *‘Yan Taru* (the Associates), continuing in Northern Nigeria until the present time. It has also been established among Muslim women in the United States.<sup>32</sup> The work of Nana Asma’u also includes treatises on history, law, mysticism, theology, and politics and was heavily influenced by the Arabic

28 See Alfa Ibrahima Sow, “Notes sur les procédés poétiques dans la littérature des Peuls du Fouta-Djalon,” *Cahiers d’Études Africaines*, 5/19 (1965), p. 370–387; *La Femme, La Vache, La Foi*, Paris, 1996; *Chroniques et Récits du Fouta Djallon*, Paris, 1968; and with Lilyan Kesteloot, *Le FILON du Bonheur Éternel*, Paris, 1971.

29 Hamid Bobboyi, “Ajami Literature and the Study of the Sokoto Caliphate,” in *The Meanings of Timbuktu*, ed. Shamil Cheppie and Souleymane Bachir Diagne, Cape Town, HSRC Press, 2008, p. 128.

30 Bobboyi, “Ajami Literature,” p. 129.

31 Beverly Mack, “Nana Asma’u: A Model for Literate Women Muslims,” in *The Routledge Companion to Black Women’s Cultural Histories*, ed. Janell Hobson, London, Routledge, 2021. See also Boyd and Mack, *One Woman’s Jihad*; and Boyd and Mack, *Collected Works of Nana Asma’u*.

32 Mack, “Nana Asma’u.”

poetic tradition. She was multilingual and wrote in Fulfulde and Hausa ‘Ajamī as well as Arabic.

It should also be noted that not all colonial officers exhibited disdain towards local West African cultures. In fact, colonial administrators such as Henri Gaden (1867–1939) and Gilbert Vieillard (1899–1940) were pioneers in collecting oral and ‘Ajamī texts in local communities. After his employment as District Officer in Futa Jallon, Vieillard was employed as a researcher and contributed to the collections of Fulfulde ‘Ajamī texts.<sup>33</sup> Such collections were instrumental in establishing the Institut Fondamental d’Afrique Noire (IFAN) in Dakar, Senegal, which holds manuscripts written by renowned West African scholars in ‘Ajamī and Arabic. The manuscripts encompass the work of Fuuta Jalon scholars from Guinea and Senegambia.<sup>34</sup>

Wolof ‘Ajamī, or Wolofal, can be found in limited forms in early 19th century Senegambia, and recent research based on European written sources, African oral traditions, and African carved ivories suggests that the practices of Arabic literacy may have already been present in the region in the 16th–17th centuries as part of a “social expansion of Islam.”<sup>35</sup> The main development and expansion of Wolofal occurred with the Muridiyya Sufi movement pioneered by Amadu Bamba Mbacké (1853–1927) at the end of the 19th century. The form developed in close conjunction with the expansion of the Sufi order itself, thanks to the work of a generation of scholars and poets linked to the founder, imbued with

33 Bernard Salvaing, “Colonial Rule and Fulfulde Literature in Futa Jallon (Guinea),” *Sudanic Africa*, 15 (2004), p. 122–123.

34 The IFAN archives contain manuscripts in Arabic and ‘Ajamī of the famous Fulani scholar Shaykh Muusaa Kamara (1864–1945), and one of the most renowned Wolof scholars of the 19th century, Xaali Majaxate Kala (1835–1902): see Fallou Ngom, “West African Manuscripts in Arabic and African Languages and Digital Preservation Subject: Historical Preservation and Cultural Heritage, Intellectual History, West Africa,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia in African History*, 2017. DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.123. About the work of Shaykh Muusaa Kamara and Xaali Majaxte Kala, see David Robinson, “Un Historien et Anthropologue Sénégalais: Shaikh Musa Kamara,” *Cahiers d’Études Africaines*, 28/109 (1998), p. 89–116. For more info on the fonds (a collection of archival records from the same creator) of the IFAN manuscript collection, with a focus on the histories of *Fonds Brevié*, *Fonds Vieillard*, and *Fonds Gaden*, see Mauro Nobili, “A Short Note on Some Historical Accounts from the IFAN Manuscripts Collection,” *History in Africa*, 43 (2016), p. 379–388.

35 Offering new perspectives into African written production, Thiago H. Mota (2019) contends that the 16th and 17th centuries constitute a period of social expansion of Islam in Senegambia, prior to the seizure of political power by Muslim warriors in the 18th and 19th centuries. See Thiago H. Mota, “The Ivory Saltcellars: A Contribution to the History of Islamic Expansion in Greater Senegambia during the 16th and 17th Centuries,” *Afriques*, 10 (2019), p. 1–29.

his vision of Islamic practice and familiar with the main events of his life.<sup>36</sup> While there are some Wolofal documents written by members of the Tijaniyya Sufi order in Senegal, most Wolofal material uncovered to date consists of manuscripts written by the members of the Muridiyya. We can identify four categories of 'Ajamī scholars trained in Murid schools: 1) historians, genealogists and biographers; 2) those who are engaged in research and dissemination of esoteric knowledge; 3) writers of religious and non-religious poetry for recitation by specialized 'Ajamī singers; and 4) scribes who translate Amadu Bamba's Arabic poetry into Wolof, copy important 'Ajamī manuscripts, and write letters for non-literate customers who want to communicate with their literate friends and relatives. Murid recitations have greatly facilitated the spread of the Muridiyya and 'Ajamī literacy. To accomplish this expansion, Murid leaders have made a considerable investment in studios, audio recordings and publishing presses, and disseminated their materials in market centers throughout Senegal.<sup>37</sup>

Our project seeks to combine the emphasis on the oral with documentary traditions and the arts of writing and composition. In so doing, we hope to expand the understanding of literacy and the pedagogy involved in the practice of African 'Ajamī traditions. Our research trajectories feature the development of 'Ajamī tradition in each of our study languages, its relation to Arabic poetic and prose forms, and its relation to oral performance. This includes analysis of the challenges in adapting the Arabic alphabet to African languages. We also explore the role of the 'Ajamī in the spread of Islam in space and depth.

Our project examines the different patterns of 'Ajamī development of these four languages and literatures, as well as their role in the Islamization of West Africa. The resources of our project (online and this publication) suggest ways in which 'Ajamī may contribute to a more nuanced understanding of West Africa, Islam and Islamization, as well as to our comprehension of literacy more broadly. In the course of our research process, our teams have collected and selected manuscripts, created metadata for them, transcribed them using the Roman script, and translated these into English and French, and created video files of native scholars reciting them. These are featured in digital galleries of collections.<sup>38</sup>

36 They also established significant communities well beyond West Africa, in Paris, New York and other locations. For the Muridiyya and their use of 'Ajamī, see Cheikh Anta Babou, *Fighting the Greater Jihad*, Athens (Ohio), Ohio University Press, 2007, and his most recent book, *The Muridiyya on the Move*, Ohio University Press, 2021.

37 See Fallou Ngom, *Muslims beyond the Arab World: The Odyssey of 'Ajamī and the Muridiyya*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2016.

38 See <https://sites.bu.edu/nehajami/>.

Our work builds upon several earlier projects hosted by Boston University, Northwestern University, and Michigan State University and MATRIX,<sup>39</sup> all dealing with ‘Ajamī and Islam in West Africa. This has provided us access to a range of ‘Ajamī manuscripts in each of the project languages and to a growing body of scholarly work on ‘Ajamī and its significance for the understanding of past and contemporary West Africa. The National Science Foundation supported the creation of AODL (African Online Digital Library), hosted by Michigan State University and MATRIX. Another previous research project funded by the British Library’s Endangered Archive Programme in 2011–12 enabled our Boston University scholars to collect over 5,000 pages of Wolof ‘Ajamī materials written by members of the Muridiyya Sufi order.<sup>40</sup> The archival materials remained with the owners while digital copies of each document were deposited at the West African Research Center (WARC), the British Library, and Boston University. A number of 19th-century Mandinka and Wolof ‘Ajamī texts were uncovered in the course of a project carried out in 2010–11 by colleagues at Michigan State University.<sup>41</sup>

Another collection from which we drew for the current project was the Northwestern University’s Arabic and ‘Ajamī collection from West Africa, held by the Melville J. Herskovits Library of African Studies, which includes more than 5,000 handwritten manuscripts and printed items.<sup>42</sup> A 1990 NEH Preservation and Access Grant funded the cataloging of 4,207 of these items and the creation of a searchable stand-alone database. A 2005 grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to the Institute for the Study of Islamic Thought in Africa (ISITA)<sup>43</sup> funded the cataloging of the remaining 1,000 items and made all the records available through a web-accessible repository. The

39 Center for Digital Humanities and Social Sciences, <https://matrix.msu.edu/>.

40 British Library Endangered Archives Programme, Digital Preservation of Wolof Ajami Manuscripts of Senegal (EAP334), <https://eap.bl.uk/project/EAP334>. See also Fallou Ngom, “Murid Ajami Sources of Knowledge: The Myth and the Reality,” in *From Dust to Digital: Ten Years of the Endangered Archives Programme*, ed. M. Kominko, Cambridge, Open Book Publishers, 2015.

41 This project was carried out in 2010–11 by Walter Hawthorne and Bala Saho of MSU in cooperation with the National Records Services (NRS) of The Gambia and MATRIX’s head of digitization at the time, Scott Pennington.

See David Robinson, “Muslim Societies in West Africa: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives in Digital Form,” *Islamic Africa*, 5/1 (2015), p. 103–121.

42 This collection of manuscripts dates back to the 19th and 20th centuries and originates mainly from northern Nigeria (Kano in particular), but also includes items from Ghana, Senegal and Mali. These manuscripts cover a wide range of subjects, including Arabic grammar, history, theology, law and astronomy. See <https://www.library.northwestern.edu/libraries-collections/herskovits-library/collection/arabic-manuscripts.html>.

43 See <https://isita.northwestern.edu/>.

catalog records have also been provided to the West African Arabic Manuscript Database (WAAMD), a union catalog containing entries from Arabic manuscript collections across West Africa. While drawing on the materials collected by those projects to some degree, much of our project's collection consists of newly collected and digitized manuscripts during our fieldwork in Muslim communities in West Africa in 2020–22.

### Decolonizing the Archive: Participatory Knowledge-Making and Digital Technologies

Our special issue presents important new perspectives into the opportunities that digital technologies afford for uncovering the historical and contemporary role of 'Ajami literacy in mediating the lives of West African communities. We explore the role of archival preservation and collaborative interpretation for counter-hegemonic knowledge-making in an era of increasing digitization of archival materials. Recordkeeping systems are not neutral: they were developed to serve specific informational needs of institutions and bureaucracies and reflect the exclusions that were formed in the process of colonial record creation.<sup>44</sup> Such systems conveyed a fictional image of social order that colonial administrators had used for governing society: a fiction of violence and control. As representational systems, colonial archives were "both manifestations of a culture as well as the infrastructures to support that culture."<sup>45</sup> Archival institutions therefore provided important infrastructural elements for the "ideological construction of national histories" and may have featured as active agents of colonial oppression.<sup>46</sup> Colonization entails more than just occupation of land, involving also occupation of regimes of knowledge that are used to legitimate it.<sup>47</sup> Through administrative institutions such as recordkeeping systems, colonial structures and knowledge are perpetuated. The legacies of colonialism frequently endure in different ways even after the fall of the colonial regime.

Digitizing recordkeeping systems can be motivated by a desire towards transparency but it can also constitute an act of "(re)activation of the colonial

44 Charles Jeurgens and Michael Karabinos, "Paradoxes of Curating Colonial Memory," *Archival Science*, 20 (2020), p. 199–220.

45 Elizabeth Yakei, "Archival representation," *Archival Science* 3 (2003), p. 1–25; Jeurgens and Karabinos, "Paradoxes," p. 201.

46 Jeurgens and Karabinos, "Paradoxes," p. 210.

47 Roopika Risam, "Decolonizing the Digital Humanities in Theory and Practice," *English Faculty Publications*, 7 (2018), [https://digitalcommons.salemstate.edu/english\\_facpub/7](https://digitalcommons.salemstate.edu/english_facpub/7).

structures,” rather than mere change in the technical form of documents.<sup>48</sup> Instead of knowledge and transparency, the digital archive can therefore come to re-enact “erasure and violence.”<sup>49</sup> In order to decolonize such a system, it has to be made more open, accessible and participatory: the recordkeeping community has to “find ways to develop infrastructures that facilitate multiple perspectives, permit different voices, enable different forms of agency and meaning-making.”<sup>50</sup> This means that the digitization of such knowledge infrastructures needs to incorporate means to accommodate multiple viewpoints that include historically marginalized groups, as well as allow for greater user input in defining the knowledge stored and the terms of access and use of the digital records.

One way to decolonize archives is by re-situating the media in the “languages, practices, and histories of the communities” in which they are created.<sup>51</sup> This enables us to relocate the meaning in the “contexts of its unfolding” and overcome the penchant of the colonial archive for “collecting, classifying, and isolating.”<sup>52</sup> Through co-construction of knowledge as based on interactions, local storytellers and listeners can “counter the imperial archive’s insistence on expert codification of knowledge.”<sup>53</sup> At the same time, decolonization cannot be a simple articulation of the perceived exclusions along the lines of race, gender, class, or nation, but must rather entail a critical review of the power structures that underlie the production of knowledge—gatekeepers, reviewers, and definitions. This means a review of all the practices that reinforce the Global North as the “site of knowledge production.”<sup>54</sup>

The methodology of our projects draws on pursuing multi-vocality and participatory knowledge-making through ethnographic interviews, conversations with chanters and singers of poems and treatises, and collaboration in the transcriptions and translations of ‘Ajamī manuscripts. The collaborative analysis that defines our project draws on both scholarly knowledge and the expertise of local ‘Ajamī user communities. Our project is not merely collecting, digitizing and displaying texts and documents in ‘Ajamī, but interpreting and translating these documents with the participation of local African community members and scholars on the continent. Our goal has

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48 Jeurgens and Karabinos, “Paradoxes,” p. 202.

49 *Ibid.*

50 *Ibid.*

51 Ellen Cushman, “Wampum, Sequoyan, and Story: Decolonizing the Digital Archive,” *College English*, 76/2 (2013), p. 116.

52 *Ibid.*

53 Cushman, “Wampum,” p. 117.

54 Risam, “Decolonizing,” p. 80.

been to facilitate comparative and interpretive co-production of knowledge about the meaning and purpose of these texts, their social uses, and the voices of the people who have written, own, and use those materials.

Reflecting on his fieldwork in the communities of ‘Ajamī users in Senegal and Mali, David Robinson has highlighted the crucial mediating role of local research assistants who are knowledgeable about the choice of informants and the best ways to conduct interviews.<sup>55</sup> Community-based intermediaries are also instrumental in guiding the translation process in ways that best convey local perspectives and language use practices. Studying the documents in ‘Ajamī with local informants in Fuuta Tooro or Pulaar-speaking communities, Robinson observed the importance of regional variety in the rendering of Pulaar in Arabic script and the transcription systems developed in different communities.<sup>56</sup> This highlights the relevance of considering the multivocality and local insights in the use of ‘Ajamī, even among the speakers of the same language.

The manuscripts of our project comprise a wide variety of texts, ranging from historical records to religious and secular poems and prose texts. They cover a broad range of topics, including history and politics, business and economy, health and medicine, agriculture and environment, jurisprudence, divination and astrology, religious poetry and prose, secular records of commerce, local genealogies and biographies, folkloristic treatises of traditional medicine, and accounts of customs, rites, and local cosmologies. Such texts may often constitute more than static repositories, functioning as “living documents” with their marginalia of opinions and insights that were continuously added as the texts traveled among the community members. Some manuscripts consisted of poetry designed to be performed and recited in the local communities, serving as an efficient tool of education and socialization. The themes of such poems focused on morality and ethics, family and community relations and norms, and shared history of war and peace. Some materials explore the role of ‘Ajamī literacy in women’s education and livelihood activities, as well as in socializing young people.<sup>57</sup> Other materials reveal the importance of ‘Ajamī in

55 David Robinson, “Interviewing, Intermediaries and Documents: Senegal and Mali,” *Mande Studies*, 20 (2018), p. 31–36.

56 Robinson, “Interviewing,” p. 35.

57 See Biography of Lady Maam Jaara Buso (Soxna Maam Jaaratul Laahi Buso), 2022, <https://sites.bu.edu/nehajami/the-four-languages/wolof/wolof-manuscripts/soxna-maam-jaaratul-laahi-buso/>; Biography of Lady Asta Waalo Mbakke (Soxna Asta Waalo Mbakke), 2022, <https://sites.bu.edu/nehajami/the-four-languages/wolof/wolof-manuscripts/soxna-asta-waalo-mbakke/>; Biography of Lady Aysatu Mbakke-Kajoor (Soxna Aysatu Mbakke-Kajoor), 2022, <https://sites.bu.edu/nehajami/the-four-languages/wolof/wolof-manuscripts/soxna-aysatu-mbakke-kajoor/>; Biography of Lady Faati Ja Mbakke (Soxna

mobilizing local communities for public work and infrastructural projects and other communal initiatives.<sup>58</sup>

As much of the focus is on social norms and moral and civic values, the materials provide valuable insights into the ways in which those values historically operated among local communities, how this alternative form of literacy created spaces for contesting and negotiating colonial power structures, and how ‘Ajamī is still frequently used among the local people as an alternative to the prevailing westernized structures and norms of knowledge-making—particularly in the contexts of new commercialized spaces of transnational corporations, as well as educational and administrative institutions still often dominated by the European colonial heritage.

In the earlier days, ‘Ajamī literary records that you see in the archives were collected mainly by Western or Arabic scholars, rather than local community members or African scholars themselves. It is only after the demise of the colonial state in Africa that we see a meaningful entry of local scholars and community experts in ‘Ajamī scholarship. The nature of the texts collected has changed and become more diverse, and the broader scholarly community is starting to discover the important role of ‘Ajamī literacy in mediating people’s everyday livelihoods, in the past as well as at present. Our project therefore provides a unique bridge between archival knowledge and lived experience as it strives to bring back the digitized texts of the past to their communities of origin to be read, discussed, chanted, and interpreted—broadening the access past Western-centered knowledge custodians. Our field teams have also been collecting manuscripts and texts in the present-day communities of ‘Ajamī users in Senegal, Nigeria, and The Gambia, enabling us to observe the evolution of the uses, contexts, and purposes of ‘Ajamī.

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Faati Ja Mbakke), 2022, <https://sites.bu.edu/nehajami/the-four-languages/wolof/wolof-manuscripts/soxna-faati-ja-mbakke/>; A Poem on Marriage in Hausaland (Wakar Aure a Kasar Hausa), 2022, <https://sites.bu.edu/nehajami/the-four-languages/hausa/hausa-manuscripts/falke-0734-wakar-aure-a-kasar-hausa/>; Ndigël: Murid Newspaper in Wolof Ajami 2 (Statements of the National Federation of Young Murids), 2022, <https://sites.bu.edu/nehajami/the-four-languages/wolof/wolof-manuscripts/ndigel-2/>.

58 See Water Tower Inaugural Speech (Ubbiteg Fooras bi), 2022, <https://sites.bu.edu/nehajami/the-four-languages/wolof/wolof-manuscripts/ubbiteg-fooraas-bi/>; Enhancing Relationships 1 (Jokkere Endan 1), 2022, <http://sites.bu.edu/nehajami/the-four-languages/fula/fula-manuscripts/jokkere-endan-1/>; Minutes (Deftere Tumbondiral), 2022, <https://sites.bu.edu/nehajami/the-four-languages/fula/fula-manuscripts/deftere-tumbondiral/>; Poem of the Mosque of Touba (Wolofalu Jumaa ji), 2022, <https://sites.bu.edu/nehajami/the-four-languages/wolof/wolof-manuscripts/wolofalu-jumaa-ji/>; A Murid Expression of Gratitude (Cântug Murid), 2022, <https://sites.bu.edu/nehajami/the-four-languages/wolof/wolof-manuscripts/cantug-murid/>.

African ‘Ajami can be observed in a growing multiplicity of secular environments and in the public sphere, including interpersonal communication, commercial advertising, street posters, billboards and road signs, political campaign ads, and the insignia of local businesses and services.<sup>59</sup> It is an important means of communication in many areas of Africa where Qur’anic schools have been the primary source of education. It is estimated that over 50% of the population of Senegal are illiterate in French, and adequate skills in written and oral French largely remain the purview of urban elites.<sup>60</sup> Many Muslim groups of the country use ‘Ajami scripts for their written communication. For example, ‘Ajami Wolof or Wolofal is used for both religious and secular purposes in the local communities, including personal written communication such as private letters, as well as in business records and advertisements of the informal sector. The role of ‘Ajami as an effective tool to reach grassroots communities has not gone unnoticed by large multinational corporations expanding their business in Africa. The adverts of mobile money services of large telecommunications companies adorn some huge billboards on highways,<sup>61</sup> as well as walls and fences of modest neighborhood shops and kiosks in Senegal. Frequently, major public announcements in Murid communities are first issued in ‘Ajami and then translated into French for wider national outreach. During the 2019 general elections, political posters using ‘Ajami script were widespread among Nupe language speakers in middle and northern Nigeria.<sup>62</sup>

Through attention to these contemporary and visual dimensions of African ‘Ajami, our research introduces the new theoretical concept of “Ajamiscap” that encompasses the aspects of historical evolution, distribution, learning, and comprehension of ‘Ajami literacy among the populations of West Africa. Inspired by Arun Appadurai’s work on global cultural flows in a world that is increasingly interconnected by modern communication technologies, this term highlights the novel mobilities as well as disjunctures inherent in such flows.<sup>63</sup>

59 Daivi Rodima-Taylor, Mustapha Kurfi, and Fallou Ngom, “The Social Life of African ‘Ajami: Connecting the Grassroots, Mediating the Mundane,” 2019, <https://sites.bu.edu/neh/Ajami/2019/09/08/african-ajami-connecting-the-grassroots-mediating-the-mundane/>.

60 Fallou Ngom, “‘Ajami: Scripts in the Senegalese Speech Community,” *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies*, 10 (2017), p. 1–23.

61 Including Tigo Senegal of Saga Africa Holdings, and Orange S.A., a French multinational telecommunications corporation; see Rodima-Taylor, Kurfi, and Ngom, “The Social Life of African ‘Ajami.” See also Ngom, “Murid Ajami Sources of Knowledge.”

62 Rodima-Taylor, Kurfi, and Ngom, “The Social Life of African ‘Ajami.”

63 Arun Appadurai, “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy,” *Theory, Culture & Society*, 7 (1990), p. 295–310.

The concept of ‘Ajamīscape provides us with a better view of ‘Ajamī literacy as a contemporary identity marker in post-colonial Africa and as an ongoing response to politicization, commercialization and financialization in spaces that are frequently defined by the interests of foreign capital and geopolitics. The concept draws attention to the “perspectival constructs”<sup>64</sup> that may contribute to the formation of alternative ways of constructing identities and building social as well as geographical mobilities in a world which is increasingly defined by digital means of communication and knowledge-making. Our work explores what these new sources of street and bureaucratic ‘Ajamī materials tell us about contemporary power struggles, social imaginaries, poverty, and grassroots agency, examining novel implications for digital preservation and archival science that are entailed in these diverse formats and media.

Our approach in collecting, interpreting, and displaying our material online reflects our commitment to continued collaborative research and broad visibility. For all our manuscripts, we have developed a detailed metadata template that presents comprehensive information about the origin and content of the manuscript, its genre and subject matter, manuscript provenance, type and condition, as well as information about its source reference, citation information, access conditions and copyright, and information about the team that worked with digitizing, transcribing, translating, and interpreting them. We utilize various forms of electronic communication and file sharing and storage systems for everyday communication with our colleagues in Africa and in partner institutions in the United States. Our public web interface serves as a permanent website for the project, displaying ‘Ajamī manuscripts, their metadata, transcriptions into Latin orthography, English and French translations, and related images of owners or collectors. This information is made publicly available, searchable, and easily accessible for viewers globally. The website has different sections educating the audience about our project, its background and goals, and profiles of project members and partners. Our lively blog section features ongoing activities and accomplishments of our project members.

The multimedia component of our African ‘Ajamī research project comprises video-recorded recitations of selected ‘Ajamī poems, images of manuscript owners or reciters, audio recordings of chanting and interpretation of selected texts, digitized ‘Ajamī texts, and transcriptions and translations. Through field interviews, our research teams sought insights into the daily practices of ‘Ajamī users, their educational and professional background, their history of learning and using ‘Ajamī, contexts of ‘Ajamī use, and their assessments of the

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64 Appadurai, “Disjuncture,” p. 296.

educational and cultural value of ‘Ajami. All this enabled us to gain detailed information about the present-day role of ‘Ajami in the communities of West Africa and to find new ways to disseminate the findings of our research project and engage in ongoing conversations with local African communities.

As digital modes of communication are becoming increasingly prevalent in West Africa, this expands the forms and meanings of communication and literacy but also creates new challenges, inequalities, and digital divides. This calls particular attention to facilitating participatory knowledge-making processes during and after the research. In our project, information and communication technology has been increasingly relevant not only for preserving and disseminating archival records with the help of digitization, but also for facilitating communication among our field teams and local communities. In the process of collaborative interpreting and preservation of archival texts with the communities in which they originate, we utilized contemporary digital technologies such as the internet, smartphones (particularly the WhatsApp platform), social media, and Google Drive. To broaden access to our resources in Africa and beyond, our project also translates the materials into French, in addition to English, and produces transcriptions using Roman scripts. Creating participatory databases and storage options has been an important way to enable the communities to meaningfully interact with and take ownership of the knowledge featured in those databases.

Reflecting on their activities in our collaborative three-day workshop in summer 2022,<sup>65</sup> our team members highlighted the complexity of the ‘Ajami texts and the central role of local experts and contextual knowledge in the transcription and translations processes. In-depth cultural, historical and religious expertise was often necessary to fully understand the content of the manuscripts. Ethnographic research was helpful when translating local metaphors and idioms. Historical texts required particular care when conveying the meaning of certain concepts that may have been interpreted differently in the past. Dialectical variations of languages as used in different communities and regions posed additional challenges. Difficulties were also encountered when making digital copies of manuscripts and preparing video files, due to remote field locations that frequently lacked steady electricity supply and Internet connection.

Our team members highlighted the importance of working through local facilitators and elders to build trust with local manuscript owners and communities, explaining to them clearly the purpose of the study, and being

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65 See <https://sites.bu.edu/nehajami/2022/07/14/collaborative-workshop-three-years-of-the-neh-ajami-project/>.

respectful of their time, resources, and local customs. They also emphasized the need to give feedback to local communities when the fieldwork was completed and sharing with them digitized and translated texts, video recordings, and other output.

Despite the challenges we encountered, the project members found their experience of working with the ‘Ajamī manuscripts and local ‘Ajamī users very educational and rewarding. They noted how the ‘Ajamī sources revealed a wealth of written heritage that has existed in Africa for ages, allowing researchers to develop important new perspectives on the histories and knowledge systems of local communities. The authors of Wolof ‘Ajamī manuscripts, for example, used their agrarian environment, farming tools, and the fauna and flora as vehicles to teach and convey difficult Islamic concepts and expand on the key principles of Murid ethos that they blended with their Wolof moral values and philosophy. Our researchers pointed out the important contributions of the project to the study of the Muslim cultures of sub-Saharan Africa, as ‘Ajamī manuscripts revealed the local imprint of the adoption of Islam in African communities. This work therefore demonstrates how Africans have adapted and integrated the Islamic religion in their everyday lives in a productive and largely peaceful manner.<sup>66</sup>

### Contributions of the Special Issue Articles

The articles of the special issue contribute to the study of African literacy and knowledge-making in three interrelated ways. First, they establish important historical dimensions of the role of ‘Ajamī literacy in mediating the lives of grassroots communities that have not yet been systematically studied. Secondly, they enable unique comparative perspectives on ‘Ajamī use in four major West African languages, contributing to the interpretive and contextual analysis of ‘Ajamī literacies and their social role. The special issue articles draw on the materials in our African ‘Ajamī collections, analyzing various manuscripts and topics and situating them socially and temporally in their communities of origin. And thirdly, the articles explore the role of digital technologies and methods in studying and preserving African ‘Ajamī texts.

There are eight articles in this volume. In the first article, “The Geographic Spaces of ‘Ajamī in West Africa,” Fallou Ngom and Karen Barton highlight the geographical dimensions of African ‘Ajamī traditions, with an emphasis on the Wolof, Fula, Mandinka, and Hausa traditions. They examine the spatial variation

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66 See <https://sites.bu.edu/nehajami/2022/08/16/project-members-reflect-on-their-work/>.

of these traditions, as well as their specific uses in different geographical spaces, places, and realms. The article shows how ‘Ajamī documents—both historic and contemporary archives—are ubiquitous across Muslim Africa and have been uncovered in both private and public spaces, playing an important role in everyday life. We explore how new cartographies that focus on the diffusion of ‘Ajamī scripts and their broad reach can provide us with a richer understanding of African knowledge systems and their important footprint, helping to debunk stereotypes about African literacy.

The second article, “The Role of ‘Ajamī in Hausa Literary Production,” is from our Hausa language team members Jennifer Yanco and Mustapha Kurfi, who discuss the role of Islamic education and literacy in Hausa literary production. While ‘Ajamī made its way into Hausaland with the spread of Islam, its use today is not limited to sacred or religious texts. At the same time, the Islamic values that inform Hausa culture are an integral aspect of these materials. They show how over time Hausa scholars adapted the Warsh-based Arabic script to the particularities of the Hausa language, resulting in Hausa ‘Ajamī’s enriched inventory of characters and diacritics. The ‘Ajamī tradition remains strong and widespread, as shown in our collection of 20 manuscripts online, most from the 20th century, which highlight a range of personal qualities valued by the Hausa people.

The article “The Fuuta Jalon ‘Ajamī Tradition” by our Fula language team members David Glovsky and Abubakar Jalloh argues that Fula ‘Ajamī texts serve an important pedagogical tool in Fuuta Jalon in Guinea, allowing for the spread of Islamic knowledge over generations. Moreover, they also tie places like Fuuta Jalon to the longer history of Islam, both spiritually and literally. Thus, important spiritual and political leaders like Cerno Ibraahiima Hoore Dongol, Cerno Maawiyatu Maasi (1832–1903), and Almaami Alfaajo (death c. 1751) are connected and legitimized through their piety and Islamic lineage. Thus, many of the Fula texts from Fuuta Jalon used in the NEH ‘Ajamī project serve a dual purpose: to educate and prescribe the proper path of righteousness and to validate the religious and political rulers of the region as inheritors of the path trod by the Prophet Muhammad and the first Muslims. The article explores how each text connects the highlighted individual to longer Islamic genealogies and traditions of place-making. It also discusses how the poems seek to legitimize traditions of ‘Ajamī learning as democratic pedagogical institutions and to show the holiness of the land of Fuuta and its importance as an Islamic center of learning.

The first contribution on Mandinka ‘Ajamī research is written by Ousmane Cisse. The article, titled “‘Ajamī Script in Senegambian Mandinka Communities,” discusses the rich oral and ‘Ajamī written traditions of the Mandinka

communities in West Africa. Their oral traditions, which are embodied by the *jali* (griot) caste, have served for centuries to transmit many forms of knowledge between generations. Besides their oral traditions, multiple forms of literacy coexist with illiteracy in the Mandinka communities in Senegambia. The first and oldest form of literacy in Mandinka communities is ‘Ajami. Currently, ‘Ajami remains the primary means of written communication for many Mandinka speakers in Senegambia. They keep their records of various events and transmit various forms of knowledge in this medium. Using Mandinka ‘Ajami texts hosted at the African ‘Ajami Library and the British Library included in our NEH ‘Ajami project, this paper focuses on the innovations that Mandinka scholars have made to the classical Arabic script to develop their own ‘Ajami writing system. It discusses the people who use the system, the types of documents they produce, and their broader social and cultural significance in Senegambian Mandinka communities.

Drawing on the project’s Mandinka ‘Ajami sources, Bala Saho’s article explores the meaning, purpose, and usefulness of proverbs among the Mandinka people of Senegambia (Casamance, Senegal and The Gambia), who speak the variety known as Western Mandinka. Proverbs are, by nature, vehicles for the transmission of social, moral, cultural, ethical, and philosophical wisdom in society. Therefore, they serve as pivotal educational tools and comprise interconnected layers of communicative devices that can be unraveled through careful listening devices and assemblage of cultural etiquettes, suggests Saho. The article explores how proverbs strengthen the speaker’s position in society because of his or her command of the oral bank of knowledge that is regarded as wisdom. The speaker therefore obtains respect and authority because of his or her skills in the manipulation of the language and knowledge of a particular culture. In this way, a proverb can become a vehicle that conveys special messages to empower or disempower a person or group. The article examines the persistence, commonness and usefulness of proverbs in Mandinka societies of Senegambia.

The article “Beating the Drums in God’s Wrestling Arena’: Spirituality Translated into Local Metaphor in Wolof Sufi ‘Ajami Poetry” by our Wolof language team members Gana Ndiaye, Elhadji Djibril Diagne, and Margaret Rowley, discusses the ways in which ‘Ajami scholars translate Sufi metaphysics into a language accessible to their audience. It shows that Senegalese Wolof ‘Ajami poetry often seeks to translate divine concepts into the local lingua franca in all of its literary dimensions. For the Wolof ‘Ajami poet, proverbs, parables, and metaphors are key literary devices facilitating understanding among listeners. Studying the poems can teach the contemporary reader-listener about Sufi metaphysics and the particular historical contexts in which

the poems were produced. Through these metaphors, the poet “‘Ajāmīzes,” conferring sacred meaning onto practices and devices that might otherwise be outside the Sufi realm. Metaphors become vessels of divine meaning in this process. The article examines the metaphor as a master literary device whose understanding is paramount for grasping the meaning of the religious message. It argues that treating ‘Ajāmī poems as social documents and works of literature offers scholars new possibilities for understanding everyday life. Drawing on the Wolof ‘Ajāmī manuscripts collected and analyzed in the project, the article offers a literary analysis of selected poems, showing how metaphors, parables, proverbs, and other literary devices offer us illuminative insights into Wolof society, culture, and history.

As more African ‘Ajāmī manuscripts are digitized for preservation, it is essential to have the technical tools required to support this groundbreaking work, argues article “African ‘Ajāmī in the Digital Environment: Typographic and Technological Challenges” by Mark Jamra and Neil Patel. With Africa poised at the threshold of a typographic renaissance, its writing systems often face unique challenges when entering the digital environment. The article discusses the current state of technical support for the digitization and creation of African ‘Ajāmī texts, the fonts and input methods available for that task, and the technical challenges still remaining to be resolved to accommodate creators of textual content in African languages written with the Arabic script. The article offers an overview of the design and production of the typeface family Kigelia Arabic,<sup>67</sup> showing the challenges in creating fonts that address traditional sub-Saharan Sahelian forms in all of their variations and alternatives. The authors discuss the development of ‘Ajāmī-specific keyboards and methods for expanding features and key layouts for different language communities and propose a strategy for achieving widespread availability of African ‘Ajāmī scripts to everyday users.

The article “African ‘Ajāmī Library Project: A Ten-Year Retrospective” by Eleni Castro provides an in-depth look at the past ten years of the African ‘Ajāmī Library (AAL) project that was founded at Boston University by Fallou Ngom with the goal to serve as a digital continental open access public repository of aggregated digitized ‘Ajāmī texts from Africa. With over 31,400 pages of manuscripts—hosted at Boston University’s institutional repository, OpenBU—the African ‘Ajāmī Library has had over half a million individual views and downloads to-date. The article examines the types of manuscripts

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67 Kigelia is a large typeface family that contains the most prominent writing systems in Africa. See <https://docs.microsoft.com/en-us/typography/font-list/kigelia>; and <https://www.kigelia-font.com/>.

digitized; manuscript impact, visibility and usage; fieldwork locations and methodologies; the importance of local project teams and partnerships, and what the next ten years might look like for this project. The AAL is a collaborative initiative between Boston University and the Dakar-based West African Research Center, in part funded by the British Library's Endangered Archives Programme and supported by the Boston University African Studies Center and Boston University Libraries.<sup>68</sup>

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68 See <https://open.bu.edu/handle/2144/1896>.

# **AUTHOR QUERIES**

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AQ1— Please provide the Abstract and keywords for the article.