

EVERYDAY AJAMI WRITING PRACTICES IN SENEGAL

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In many parts of Muslim Africa people make use of the Arabic script to write their own languages, although this type of literacy rarely gets counted in official statistics on literacy for the continent. Researchers in a variety of disciplines including history, religion and linguistics have started to pay attention to the vast body of *ajami* writing, as the practice of writing languages other than Arabic in the Arabic script is known, and studies focusing on erudite – and often religious – texts in African languages are starting to be translated and annotated. While these texts provide a glimpse into a unique intellectual tradition, I am more interested in the everyday, non-elite literacy practices which Senegalese speakers of Wolof, Pulaar and Seereer are engaged in. I am interested in the resources they bring to accomplish their everyday reading and writing needs, whether it be keeping shop records or jotting down measurements at the tailor's, and I am interested in how they acquire those resources and how they put them to use, and how such practices change over time.

Although I have been documenting *ajami* script in Senegal for some time, I have recently focused on trying to understand the religious milieu that gave rise to *ajami* writing in Wolof and Pulaar, namely the Qur'anic school or *daara* as it is known in Wolof, Senegal's most widely spoken language. The main purpose of the Qur'anic school has been to teach students how to recite, read, and write the Qur'an in Arabic, but as scholars such as Louis Brenner and Murray Last have documented, a local language is often used as a language of religious explanation. I suspected that writing and even formal instruction in *ajami* also went on in Qur'anic schools run by Wolof and Pulaar-speaking marabouts (religious leaders and teachers), otherwise how could we

account for the conventional way in which it is written, especially in the adaptation of the Arabic alphabet for sounds in those languages that do not exist in Arabic?

In interviewing people about their acquisition of *ajami* I first encountered a vast metalinguistic vocabulary to describe the Arabic language in both Pulaar and Wolof: every Arabic letter in every one of its forms, for example, has a unique name in Pulaar and Wolof. I then learned that advanced Qur'anic school students not only copied devotional religious poetry written by Senegalese Sufi scholars in Arabic, they also copied such poetry in Pulaar or Wolof,



thereby learning the conventions of *ajami* writing for that language. In addition, the Hizbut Tarqiyya, a religious organization affiliated with the Mouride Sufi order, has a curriculum that emphasizes literacy in *wolofal*, as *ajami* Wolof is called, and frequently transcribes religious recordings in *wolofal*, thus all students who have studied in their schools have a good knowledge of the writing system.

I continued my documentation of *ajami* writing, particularly in the urban context of Dakar, in order to explore the extent to which it is a literacy practice in

the capital, far from the religious centers of Touba, Tivaouane and Kaolack. The robustness of the writing practice is illustrated in the fact that urban Wolof, a variety that borrows a great deal of vocabulary from French, is also frequently written in *ajami*, combining a writing system whose origins are to be found in the history of Islam in Senegal with a way of speaking that comes from the longstanding contact between Wolof and French in Senegal's coastal cities over the course of three hundred years. This research on *ajami* will be published as a chapter entitled "Ajami writing practices in Atlantic-speaking Africa" in the forthcoming *Oxford Handbook of the World's Languages: Atlantic*.

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