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# Language planning in West Africa – who writes the script?

Friederike Lüpke

“The school in which I would place our children will kill in them what today we love and rightly conserve with care. Perhaps the very memory of us will die in them. When they return from the school, they may be those who will not recognize us.” Cheikh Hamidou Kane: *Ambiguous adventures*

## 1. Capacity building vs. capacity detecting

A number of the papers in this volume deal with a crucial question for any language documentation project that claims to take the concerns of speech communities seriously: how can language documenters build local capacities within endangered language communities in the interests of language maintenance and revitalisation? Rather than focusing on capacity building, this paper concentrates on the even more fundamental aspect of capacity detecting, culminating in the question of how inherent capacities of language communities, once discovered, can be instrumental for the preservation and development of their language. Unfortunately, the case serving to make this point is not a positive illustration of the successful exploitation of local capacities by government officials, language planners and funding agencies. Deplorably, it rather illustrates how local capacities are consistently ignored or marginalised. The issue in question is the informal use of a script based on Arabic characters instead of the Roman alphabet for the writing of at least five African languages throughout West Africa, among them Fula, Hausa, Wolof, Manding and Susu. The use of this script, and the resulting literary tradition, have been overlooked or dismissed by most institutions charged with language planning in the relevant regions. Although the issue of scripts and literacy seems, at first sight, to be far removed from the preservation of endangered languages, there is a motivation behind the investigation of writing systems in Africa. The development of an orthography and the promotion of the written use of a language are two cornerstones of language planning (see Dimmendaal, this volume) and therefore extremely relevant for endangered languages, where every single measure increasing the prestige and scope of the language is important. If an easily adaptable written tradition and a degree of literacy in a different language among the population were present, this would be a huge advantage for the empowerment of the language in question.

Sadly, rather than illustrating the successful detection and implementation of such indigenous literacies, this paper points to a consistent Eurocentric bias present in the failure to recognise West African writing traditions which have both a long history and are still very much alive. In view of the very limited resources available for language planning and literacy campaigns in developing countries, the failure to detect and

instrumentalise these existing informal literacies is regrettable for the languages concerned. But the systematic oversight of local traditions is even more dramatic when it comes to endangered languages, for which funds and human resources are even more limited, or non-existent. Nevertheless, our findings are not altogether negative since endangered languages are generally not the subject of official language policies in the relevant countries. Language planning for endangered languages is therefore freed from political and ideological constraints holding for major languages, and therefore more able to take existing informal writing traditions and grass roots literacy into account. I conclude with a plea to language documenters and language planners to watch out for local capacities, to take them seriously, and to integrate them into their efforts to strengthen endangered languages. Before taking a closer look at the particular situations, I will introduce the problems of literacy and language planning in West Africa and different views about its scope.

## 2. Literacy and language planning in West Africa

Among the parameters generally associated with language planning, corpus planning (Kloss 1968) is particularly relevant in the context of writing systems. Corpus planning refers to the totality of measures directed at the development of the linguistic code of a language, once its status is decided upon. While corpus planning in the sense of Kloss includes development of new as well as adaptation of existing alphabets and orthographies, Fishman (1974) proposes a special term to the creation of a writing system for a previously unwritten language, namely ‘graphization’. A crucial question, unfortunately almost never asked in the West African context, is whether ‘graphization’ – the creation of a writing system, the development of an existing writing system, or a combination of both – should be part of corpus planning for the relevant African languages.

### 2.1 The making of illiterate societies

There is an overwhelming tendency to describe African societies as ‘oral’ or ‘lacking written traditions’ in pre-colonial times, often consisting of global statements such as the following, taken from a volume with the revealing title *The making of literate societies*:

“In other regions such as Sub-Saharan Africa there was no previous literate tradition and the colonial language [...] tended to be propagated.” (Olson and Torrance 2001: 6)

This judgment, first of all, confounds the existence of a culture of writing with the language it is used for and the script it is produced in. The equation of Latin script with writing in the colonial language and, if taken into account at all, of Arabic script with writing in Arabic, is widespread in the literature. As will become evident, such an

equation is not supported by (West) African practice. But even more importantly, a generalisation like the one above totally disregards deeply rooted African literary traditions, some of which are beyond the scope of the present paper. Not further discussed here are well-documented East African cases such as the written use of Ge'ez in Ethiopia from as early as the 3rd century, or the use of Arabic characters for the writing of Swahili<sup>1</sup>. The denial of pre- and post-colonial written traditions also clashes with West African reality, where similar literary traditions evolved in pre-colonial times. Regrettably, early acknowledgments of the importance of these traditions such as the following by Goody (1968:239) are scarce and remain largely unnoticed:

“in Northern Ghana, as in large regions of Africa ..., we rarely find societies that were not influenced in some way by the techniques and products of alphabetic literacy, even before the coming of the Europeans. A full recognition of this fact casts serious doubts upon the suitability of an all-embracing functional or structural analysis of such societies. For the presence of writing means that the analytical model must necessarily be more complex than that appropriate for oral societies since it must take into account the fact that the cultural data embodied in graphic signs include materials accumulated from diverse societies, distant in both time and space.”

## 2.2 Minimising the scope of literacy in Arabic or Arabic-based scripts

Nevertheless, even if one wants to do justice to existing cultural practices, a question to be raised is how important and engrained in the relevant societies these practices were or are. In accordance with the dominant attitude of ignoring these literacies, we find a tendency to minimise their importance. Thus, even scholars like Goody who concede “restricted literacy” in West Africa (Goody 1968), resulting from exposure to Islamic scholarship in the sphere of influence of Islam, often describe the impact of this influence as limited to the ability of a small elite to read and write in Arabic. This view is maintained even in face of awareness of the use of Arabic characters to transcribe African languages by scholars trained in Islamic writing:

“the book [the Koran] was written in Arabic, and that was the language one had to learn to become a reader or a writer, so that advanced literacy skills were limited to a few Islamic scholars. Works were copied and even composed in West Africa

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<sup>1</sup> For Ge'ez, Amharic, Tigrinya, and other, even non-Semitic languages of Ethiopia, an alphabet of Semitic stock was developed (see Coulmas 2003, Ricard 1995, Rouaud 2001, *inter alia*). This alphabet is, in contrast to Arabic, written from left to right, probably under the influence of Greek, and has added signs for vowels (Rouaud 2001: 41). Similar pre-colonial writing traditions are attested for East African literatures (see Bertoncini 2000 for an overview on Swahili literature, written in a modified Arabic script generally called Kiarabu). Eastern and Southern Africa are beyond the geographical scope of the present paper and therefore not further mentioned. Although in use in West Africa, indigenous African scripts such as the Nko alphabet for the transcription of Manding (see Dalby 1967, 1969, Vydrine 1998, 2001) are not considered here for reasons of space.

but the uses of literacy for the purpose of government were few. While Hausa and Fulani were later written in Arabic script, even with the establishment of the Sokoto caliphate [according to Davidson (1998: 156) between 1804-1811] the language of state remained Arabic. The use of writing was restricted as a result of its origin in the word of God.” (Goody 1986: 112)

Goody is certainly right in that there is a wealth of African literature whose language **and** script is Arabic – the four volumes of Hunwick and O’Fahey (1994-2003)<sup>2</sup> are an impressive testimonial to the importance of this literature. While the sheer volume of their compilation of works in Arabic from all over the continent casts more doubt on the classification of Africa as a continent solely of oral traditions, the presence of a literary tradition in Arabic script alone does not tell us more than that there was an elite able to read and write in Arabic letters and language. The existence of this writing culture may suggest that the introduction of Latin-based alphabets was a historical mistake, because it was based on the oversight or voluntary ignorance of literacy in Arabic. However, since for most people able to read and write in Arabic this capacity did not go hand-in-hand with a mastery of the Arabic language (see below for the reasons of this discrepancy), it remains an open question whether literacy campaigns in vernacular languages would actually be facilitated by the use of Arabic rather than Latin scripts. Before addressing this question, let us turn to the consequences of the view that African languages need to be alphabetised, and in Roman script.

### 3. Literacy and education in West Africa

#### 3.1 The equation of literacy with formal education

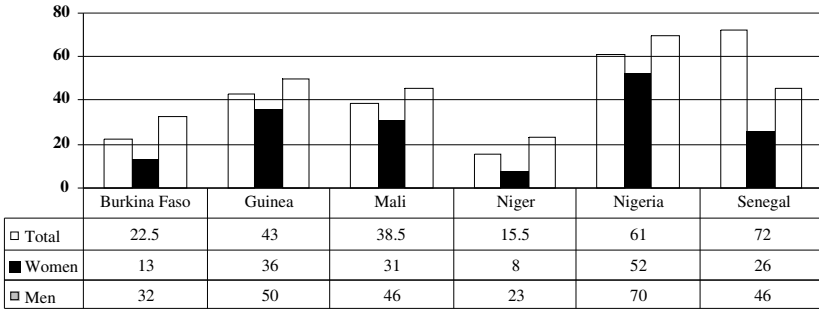
UNESCO statistics for the relevant West African countries show high degrees of illiteracy, ranging from around 80% in Niger to an exceptionally low 30% in the economically most successful country of the region, Nigeria. The estimated adult literacy rates for Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria are given in chart 1<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> The compilers focus on literature in Arabic, but “recognize the great importance of Islamic writings in African languages” (Hunwick (ed.) 1995: xi) and plan to catalogue systematically these manuscripts in later volumes of the series.

<sup>3</sup> UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2001): [http://www.uis.unesco.org/file\\_download.php?URL\\_ID=4815&filename=10280307530Afrique\\_EN\\_2001.pdf&filetype=application%2Fpdf&filesize=1017589&name=Afrique\\_EN\\_2001.pdf&location=user-S/](http://www.uis.unesco.org/file_download.php?URL_ID=4815&filename=10280307530Afrique_EN_2001.pdf&filetype=application%2Fpdf&filesize=1017589&name=Afrique_EN_2001.pdf&location=user-S/), accessed June 2004

**Chart 1: literacy rates in selected West African countries according to UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2001) and United Nations Statistics Division (2003) for Guinea in percent**



*Chart 1*

Before considering as illiterate the majority of the relevant populations in all of the countries (with the exception of Nigeria), it is worthwhile to pause and assess what these percentages are supposed to measure and what they actually indicate. UNESCO guidelines state:

“Adult literacy is defined as the percentage of population aged 15 years and over who can both read and write with understanding a short simple statement on his/her everyday life. Adult illiteracy is defined as the percentage of the population aged 15 years and over who cannot both read and write with understanding a short simple statement on his/her everyday life.”<sup>4</sup>

The data, however, as UNESCO itself hedges, does not represent the percentages of the adult population who fulfil this definition – rather, the illiteracy rates given above reflect information furnished by the relevant countries, resulting from different survey methods, and collected with different levels of accuracy. Of crucial importance in the context of this paper, the data do not distinguish between literacy in different languages and/or scripts, and are based on exposure to formal schooling, resulting in varying degrees of literacy in the official language(s), rather than measuring literacy itself. In addition, literacies are not recognised in vernacular languages and non-Roman scripts. In all of the countries mentioned, the (de jure or de facto) official language and predominant language of education is the colonial language – French in the case of Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali, and Niger; and English in the case of Nigeria (as Dimmendaal, this volume, also points out). Some of the countries have experimented

<sup>4</sup>source: [http://www.uis.unesco.org/statsen/statistics/indicators/i\\_pages/indspec/TecSpe\\_LITERACY.htm](http://www.uis.unesco.org/statsen/statistics/indicators/i_pages/indspec/TecSpe_LITERACY.htm), assessed June 2004.

with or are currently attempting to introduce national languages in primary education and adult literacy campaigns. Nevertheless, national languages are not reflected in national statistics at all, due either to their not having official status, their recent introduction, or a lack of political interest in their use, despite rhetoric favouring them. Therefore, the statistics presented above are generally taken to represent the actual number of illiterates, and consequently a policy of creating literacy from scratch has been practised throughout Africa from the beginnings of colonialisation until today by national governments, international bodies like UNESCO, as well as funding agencies (see Ouane 2003, Prah 2001 for recent overviews). Whereas the languages of literacy campaigns were mainly the colonial ones – depending on the language policy of the country, also some major African languages – the script adopted has always been the Roman alphabet. And whilst it remains a matter of debate whether one should use the official language or one of the national languages (if there are recognised national languages at all) or the mother tongue in primary education and adult literacy campaigns, the choice of script is generally not at stake. It follows that even recent tendencies demanding the use of mother tongues in primary education omit the question of scripts representing them. Only a minority of language planners seems to be aware of the existence of alternative literacies and scripts<sup>5</sup>. Even the few accounts in the educational literature that mention these pre-colonial and ongoing writing traditions at all tend to stress their marginality (e.g. Fagerberg-Diallo 2001, Prah 2001, Prinz 1996). Negative judgements such as the following on the use of Ajami (Arabic-based script) for Fula in Senegal are the norm<sup>6</sup>:

“The impact of Ajami on the writing of Pulaar has been more to demonstrate the prestige and uses of writing than any practical use, due to the lack of standardized orthography and to its limited use in contemporary publishing.” (Fagerberg-Diallo 2001: 157)

Unfortunately, all the efforts centred on the Latin script to increase literacy in West Africa remain largely unsuccessful, and fail the most dramatically in countries with a dominant Islamic population (Dumestre 1997), such as Senegal, Mali, Niger, and Guinea. Among other shortcomings, the use of official rather than national languages in the educational systems of most of the countries is generally held responsible for this fiasco. Hence, the ‘graphization’ of African languages as well as the creation of written environments in these languages is, after decades of stagnation, once more the centre of attention in literacy campaigns.

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<sup>5</sup> NGOs tend to be more sensitive to the existence of these writing traditions when developing written material in order to communicate their goals – most likely because they feel less bound by official language policies.

<sup>6</sup> Only the Islamic counterpart of UNESCO, ISESCO, as well as other Islamic institutions, draw a picture dramatically different from the ‘oral’ societies to be subjected to ‘graphization’ in Latin-based alphabets. ISESCO funds a project on the “transcription of Muslim peoples’ languages in standardized Quranic scripts” (<http://www.isesco.org.ma/English/presentation/programs.html>). At the same time, the Islamic Development Bank and the World Islamic Call Society finance literacy campaigns based on Ajami in Koranic schools in Niger, Nigeria and Mali (Prinz 1996).

### 3.2 Overlooked: Koranic education and resulting literacy in Arabic characters

It is paradoxical that the countries with the highest official illiteracy rates in West Africa are among those with the most widespread ‘alternative’ model of education. Throughout West Africa there is a long tradition of Koranic education, continuing today at the formal and informal level. Some of the countries investigated here have integrated the so-called Franco-Arabic schools, teaching the curriculum of state schools in French and Arabic, into the formal education sector. All of the countries tolerate *medersas*, private Koranic establishments, as well as *marabouts* and *imams* teaching in their courtyards. The criticisms of Koranic education are manifold (see Dumestre 1997 among others) – Koranic education generally does not lead to proficiency in Arabic, although Arabic is the object language of teaching. The goal of Koranic schooling (Franco-Arabic schools exempted) is the ability to read and recite the Koran, which is generally taught through rote learning, not the ability to understand what is written there or the knowledge to speak, read, or write Arabic. But even in the case of Franco-Arabic schools with a full curriculum and more Western educational goals, such a religiously inspired model of education cannot serve as a national model in West African countries, where several religions coexist. Nevertheless, the ongoing popularity of Koranic education shows that it fulfils important cultural needs. In addition, exposure to the Koran, as a side effect, leads to mastery of the Arabic-based scripts in use for several African languages of the region which will be investigated more closely in the following section. No statistical data on the importance of Koranic education in the relevant countries are available; it may suffice to give some numbers on enrolment ratios and attendance in formal schooling to illustrate that even minimal student numbers in the Islamic education sectors, if taken into account, would have a huge impact on literacy and schooling statistics.

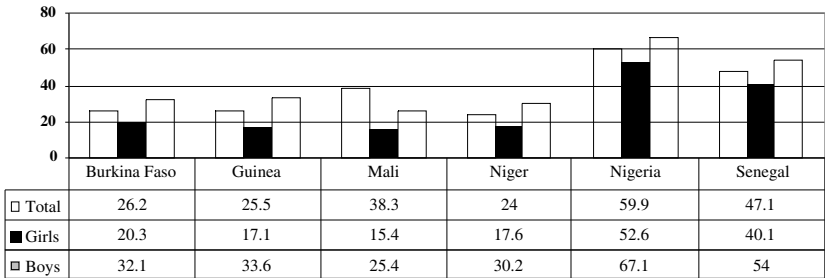
Chart 2<sup>7</sup> gives the enrolment ratios in primary education. Since for most of the countries, no data are provided by UNESCO after 1990, the enrolment ratios are given for that year.

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<sup>7</sup> UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2004): Millennium indicators: education enrolment ratio 1990-2003, . published in [http://millenniumindicators.un.org/unsd/mi/mi\\_series\\_results.asp?rowID=589](http://millenniumindicators.un.org/unsd/mi/mi_series_results.asp?rowID=589), accessed in October 2004.



**Chart 2: School enrolment ratio (primary education) in 1990 in several West African countries according to United Nations Statistics Division (2003) in percent**



### Chart 2

The number of years children spend in school – in the majority of countries depressingly few – are as follows for three of the selected countries. For the remaining countries, no estimates are provided by UNESCO<sup>8</sup>.

**Chart 3: school life expectancy in three West African countries according to UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2004) in percent**



### Chart 3

For Koranic or Arabic education, no such numbers can be contrasted with the enrolment and continuity ratios of children into the formal education sector. Therefore,

<sup>8</sup> UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2004): School life expectancy, percentage of repeaters and continuity rates to grade 4 and 5 by country and gender, June 2004, published in <http://www.uis.unesco.org> accessed in October 2004.

impressionistic judgments like the following from the report of the State University of Florida *PADLOS* project must suffice to give an appraisal of this form of education:

“The network of Koranic schools dates back nearly a thousand years in heavily Islamicized areas, and it is much denser than the network of formal primary schools ... There are entire areas of these countries (Mali, Niger, and Senegal), as well as certain parts of Burkina Faso and northern Ghana, where literacy in Arabic characters (if not mastery of the Arabic language) is very developed and where the most rapid and cost-effective means of doubling statistical literacy rates – one that could produce results practically overnight – would simply be to officially recognize and sanction this mode of writing and this source of knowledge<sup>9</sup>.”

A similar observation can be made for Senegal: according to Mbacke Diagne of the primary education division of the Senegalese ministry of education (pers. comm.), the Diourbel district in Senegal which has the densest network of Koranic schools and the highest literacy rate in Arabic script, does not feature as the nationwide leader in literacy statistics. On the contrary, Diourbel appears at the bottom of the list, since only formal schooling and resulting literacy in Latin characters is counted. The unsatisfying position of having to rely on quasi-anecdotal findings like this, instead of being able to call on verifiable data collected at the national and international levels, illustrates the vicious circle resulting from ignoring or minimising this writing culture – what is not officially recognised doesn’t inform any policies; what doesn’t inform educational policies is not taken into consideration.

Nevertheless, I hope to have made the point by now that claims classifying West Africa as virtually untouched by writing not only ignore or minimise the centuries-old traditions of writing in West African languages using a modified Arabic script, but also fail to take into account that these traditions informally survive and are in fact often the only form of literacy practised in the relevant societies. Let us now turn in more detail to these forms of writing culture and their distribution.

#### **4. Marginalised literacy: the use of Arabic-based scripts throughout West Africa**

It was already mentioned that contrary to common beliefs, there is evidence of a written tradition in Africa that uses an Arabic script not for the writing of Arabic but for the writing of African languages. A wealth of religious and profane literature in Hausa, Fula, and Wolof, (Caron 2000, Philips 2000, Seydou 2000, Dalby 1986) is visible proof of this literary tradition. Before turning to the role played by this tradition in contemporary societies, I will give a brief overview of its history and use.

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<sup>9</sup> Source: ([http://www.fsu~adult-ed/fiel\\_projects/padlos/strategies.html](http://www.fsu~adult-ed/fiel_projects/padlos/strategies.html))

The modified Arabic script employed for the writing of African languages is often referred to as Ajami<sup>10</sup> (the term used for the script in Hausa and Fula) or Wolofal (the name in Wolof). Ajami and other related scripts are based on a modified Arabic alphabet introduced in the sphere of influence of Islam in West Africa and disseminated by Islamic scholars. These Arabic-based scripts are used throughout West Africa; map 1 shows the distribution that has been attested in the literature.



Map 1: West Africa and countries with languages using Arabic-based scripts

#### 4.1 Hausa Ajami

For the Chadic language Hausa, spoken in Nigeria and Niger, the use of Ajami is attested as early as in the 17th century (Philips 2000: 19). As Philips remarks, however, “absence of evidence is not evidence of absence”, and even earlier writings in Ajami cannot be ruled out, given the difficult climatic conditions for the preservation of manuscripts and problems with dating them. Over 20,000 manuscripts in Ajami held in the Nigerian National Archives (Philips 2000: 27) are proof of this long and flourishing culture of writing in Hausa.

<sup>10</sup> Ajami is originally a cover term for the use of the Arabic script to write any language other than Arabic, derived from the Arabic word *\_ajam* ‘Persian, non-Arab’ (Philips 2000: 28). In this paper, I use Ajami only for codified versions of writing in Arabic script, as developed for Hausa and Fula, in contrast to ad hoc uses of Arabic script for the writing of African languages.

<FL TABLE GOES ON THIS PAGE>

Although Ajami was officially replaced with Romanised Hausa by the British colonial administrators, “[t]he informal use of Ajami in manuscripts by scholars, merchants and others continues today wherever there are Hausa speakers” (Philips 2000: 27), and there are still books and newspapers produced in it. Table 1 opposite (after Philips 2000: 21-22) gives the inventory of characters used for Hausa Ajami together with their equivalents in Roman letters and the IPA.

## 4.2 Fula Ajami

Similar observations as for Hausa hold for the Ajami used for the Atlantic language Fula, spoken throughout all the West African countries covered here. Accounts of the historical importance of writing in Arabic letters are not available for all countries and dialect areas. Nevertheless, it can be safely stated that pre-colonial Fula literature in Ajami covered religious, political, administrative, poetic and personal texts and was most prolific wherever Fula states existed, as in Senegal, Guinea, and North Cameroon (Seydou 2000: 64-65). For some areas, such as the Futa Jalon in Guinea, a brief history, a catalog of texts ranging from the 18th to the 20th century, and a partial evaluation of the contemporary role of the script are available (Salvaing and Hunwick 2003). In contrast to Hausa, where use of Arabic script was actively discouraged and replaced by Roman script by the British, the French colonisers of Guinea ignored indigenous Fula writing traditions, since their goal was to create a population literate in French. The continuing use of Fula Ajami cannot be systematically measured, but it seems noteworthy that it is part of the curriculum for students of Fula at the *Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales* (INALCO)<sup>1</sup> in Paris. For the Futa Jalon region of Guinea, there is continuing popularity of Ajami: although a standardised Roman orthography was created for the Fulfulde variety of Fula in Guinea and used in adult literacy campaigns, the Ajami tradition persists until today, seeing the birth of new genres, and resulting in a flourishing written environment. Salvaing and Hunwick (2003) remark

“Today, even slightly educated folk are capable of reading and writing Fulfulde in ajami script, at least for matters of everyday life and private correspondence. The great spread of written Fulfulde does not seem to have been hindered by the abandonment of teaching Fulfulde in public schools fifteen years ago, when the government, based on the work of the Military Committee for National Recovery, gave preference to French.” (Salvaing and Hunwick 2003: 503-4)

The thriving tradition of writing in Fula Ajami is certainly an exception in the West African landscape – the existence of a codified orthography, an important body of religious and profane literature, its ongoing and uninterrupted use, culminating in a website dedicated to this literature and its authors<sup>2</sup> make (Guinea) Fula Ajami a unique case. Yet, this literacy is nowhere officially documented or instrumentalised in formal education or adult literacy in Guinea – almost unbelievably since it seems to be the form of literacy that is the closest to UNESCO’s definition linking reading and writing to ‘everyday life’.

<sup>1</sup> See [http://www.inalco.fr/ina\\_gabarit\\_rubrique.php3?id\\_rubrique=47](http://www.inalco.fr/ina_gabarit_rubrique.php3?id_rubrique=47)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.fuuta-jalon.net>

### 4.3 Wolofal

Another case of the use of Arabic letters for a language other than Arabic is the Atlantic language Wolof, spoken in Senegal. The creation and use of Wolofal, according to Camara (1997) dates back to the 17th century, for this language is tightly linked to the Islamic brotherhood of *mourides*. The *mourides* have been very influential in the Senegalese religious landscape, and the use of Wolofal for religious and poetic writings in their realm has resulted in an important body of literature, for the most part preserved in private libraries and copied by hand. McLaughlin (2001), following Camara (1997), states that the present-day use of Wolofal:

“originated within a religious context, but it is also fairly widely used on the contemporary scene by those who are familiar with the Arabic alphabet but not the Roman, to keep records and notes and especially to write letters. The use of wolofal for writing Wolof appears to be much more widespread than the use of the Roman alphabet for the same purpose, a fact that is due to almost universal attendance by Muslim children at Qu’ranic school, where they master the rudiments of the Arabic writing system. Public school education is conducted in French, and thus students who attend those schools learn to write in the Roman script – but attendance at such schools is not as high as attendance at Qu’ranic schools, and was even lower in the past.” (McLaughlin 2001: 165)

### 4.4 Arabic-based scripts for other West African languages

Apart from the visible and formalised uses of Ajami and Wolofal, Arabic-based scripts are formally and informally used for letter writing in these and other languages. Even for languages lacking a formalised Ajami tradition, informal and even ad hoc writing in Arabic characters is attested, for instance for the Mande languages Soso (Guinea), Mogofin (Guinea) and several varieties of Manding spoken in Mali, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Ivory Coast, and Senegal (Vydrine 1998). Figure 1 illustrates the use of Arabic for a story written in Mandinka, a Manding variety.

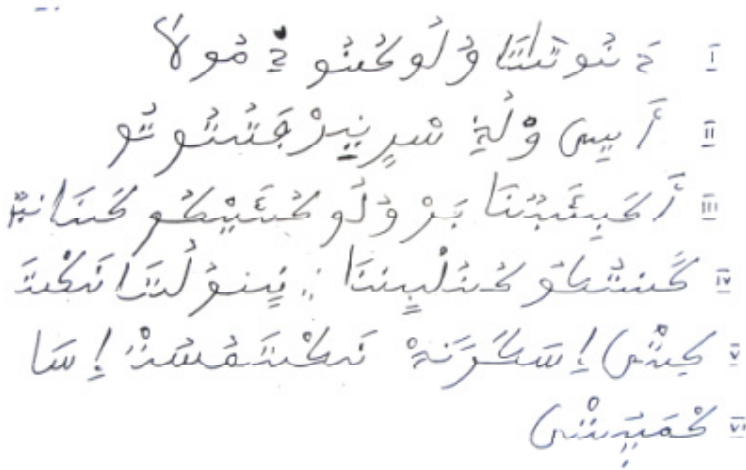


Figure 1 Mandinka text written in Arabic letters by Keba Singateh (Vydrine 1998: 66)

It can be expected that the semiformal to spontaneous use of the Arabic alphabet for the writing of African languages is much more widespread than reported so far, for two reasons:

- the important role of Islamic education, leading to literacy in Arabic, throughout the relevant West African countries;
- the marginalisation of the role of Islamic education and the failure to take the resulting non-Latin-based and grassroot literacy into account.

An informal survey among fellow fieldworkers complemented by my own observations in several West African countries has shown that we all had come across people writing letters to their family in an African language but using an Arabic script. If more reliable studies both on literacy rates in Arabic language and script and usage of Arabic scripts for African languages were available, it is reasonable to assume that they would reveal societies more literate than expected, but also literacy in different languages than assumed so far, and furthermore using the 'wrong' script.

## 5. Cultural diversity taken seriously: diversity of languages AND scripts

What are the consequences of the existence of these largely unnoticed forms of literacy in West Africa? If one wants to take local capacities seriously, a central pillar of language planning where such writing traditions exist would be the reinforcement of these traditions through further development, standardisation, creation of a larger literacy context, etc. In view of the multilingual and multireligious West African situation, instrumentalising Arabic-based scripts cannot mean replacement of other existing scripts at the national level, though, not even at the language level. Rather, these Arabic-based scripts should be added to the list of

officially recognised alphabets, resulting in language policies that are truly multicultural. Such a demand may seem too ambitious in view of the limited resources for language planning in third world countries. Nevertheless, two arguments should weaken objections against less centralised language planning:

- new technologies make publishing in several scripts of even a very limited number of copies much cheaper than in the recent past;
- more importantly, it seems that language policies based either on official languages mastered by only a minority of the population, or on Latin scripts for languages that nobody uses, are too costly – particularly in view of their generally attested failure to increase literacy.

An additional point in favour of such a bottom-up approach to language planning is the undesired effect that vernacular literacy in Roman scripts often only serves official languages in the sense that it is a bridge to acquisition of literacy in the national language. Especially for endangered languages, such a side effect would be detrimental to any attempt at language maintenance and revitalisation. There is a proven tendency of newly acquired literacy in vernacular languages to be short-lived because ultimately the new literates shift to the official language as the code for writing. This tendency to use vernacular literacy merely as a step towards reaching official language literacy has been demonstrated extensively by Mühlhäusler (1990) for the Pacific. In the West African context, Dumestre (1994a, 1994b, 1997) has shown how for Bambara speakers, literacy in French is the desired outcome of any literacy programme conducted in the Roman alphabet, and that literacy in French is a prerequisite for learning Latin-based orthographies of Bambara – learning to write Bambara in Latin characters is thus viewed as a waste of energy by most speakers. Along the same lines, McLaughlin (2001) observes for Senegal:

“Although a standard Wolof orthography exists in the Roman alphabet, it is not widely used, being almost uniquely the domain of linguists or educators working in literacy programs, as well as a handful of Senegalese authors who write in Wolof. Wolof written in the Roman alphabet, whether in the official orthography or in a French orthography, presupposes a knowledge of French, however basic, on the part of the writer, and for most people who know French, that is the language they will write, thus relegating Wolof or other indigenous languages to the oral domain. To summarize the general situation, those Wolof speakers who are literate in French normally write in that language; those who are not write in wolofal. The writing of Wolof in the Roman script is thus by far the least used of all written possibilities” (McLaughlin 2001: 165)

To avoid the dilemma of actually encouraging language shift when ‘reducing’ a language to writing (Mühlhäusler 1990) it might turn out to be crucial to exploit established literacies, such as Wolofal writing for Wolof, that do not lead to the observed shifts in literacy to the official language. Since no shift to Arabic has been seen in the context of Arabic-based scripts in Africa, probably due to the dissociation of mastery of script from mastery of language, the exploitation of Arabic-based scripts might well serve language maintenance better than Roman scripts.



If it is not a mere transitional step towards a different language, literacy is an important prestige-enhancing factor for any language, and Fishman (2001) underlines the importance of literacy in an endangered language ('Xish') as part of reversing the shift to another language ('Yish'). Not surprisingly, he notes that 'Yish' advocates often "play down the legitimacy or importance of Xish literacy, as part and parcel of denying Xish any serious intellectual claims as a whole" (Fishmann 2001: 471). Any language policy that does not want to be accused of explicit or implicit condescending attitudes should therefore be careful not to dismiss too lightly the cases of West African literacy reported here. Additionally, any capacity building for an endangered language in that area should make use of the freedom of not being constrained by national language policies and work with the local traditions instead of against them.

## 6. References

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