‘Ajamization of Islam in Africa

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Human beings are not superior to one another based on their tongues. Superiority only lies in one’s faith and submission to the will of God.

—SHAYKH AḤMADU BAMBA

Introduction

The articles in this volume result from a symposium titled Sacred Word: The Changing Meanings in Textual Cultures of Muslim Africa held at Northwestern University from April 21–22, 2016 in honor of the late Professor John Hunwick. The volume is very special because it is a collective tribute to Professor Hunwick’s work and an attempt to pick up his heavy baton from where he left it. ‘Ajamization of Islam, the multiple tangible and subtle enrichments of Islamic traditions that result from their dynamic interplay with local customs in the Muslim world, is the framework that guides the articles in the volume.2

1 Thanks to Anne Bang, Brian Johnson, Charles Stewart, Karen Barton, Maimouna Barro, Rebecca Shereikis, and the anonymous external reviewers for their assistance. Special thanks to Scott Reese for his support throughout the editing process of the volume.

Before delving into the central foci of the volume, the multiple dimensions of the ‘Ajamization of Islam in Africa, it is necessary to provide a synopsis of the emergence of ‘Ajami traditions in the Muslim world and the contents of African ‘Ajami sources.

**Synopsis of ‘Ajami Traditions**

The word ‘Ajami has undergone several important semantic changes since its initial usage by Arabs during the Islamic Golden Age between the eighth and thirteenth century. Originally, the term was used in a pejorative sense to convey a meaning analogous to that of the word “barbarian”, to imply the ethnolinguistic and cultural inferiority of peoples regarded as “Other”. The disparaging meaning of the term became associated with the Persians, the close neighbors of the Arabs. The meaning of ‘Ajami evolved to refer broadly to the use of modified Arabic script to write the languages of non-Arab Muslims. Today, the term is most often associated with the modifications of the Arabic script to write African languages.\(^3\)

The modifications of the Arabic letters by non-Arab Muslim scholars to write their own languages have resulted in numerous tangible enrichments of the Arabic script in Africa, Asia, and Europe.\(^4\) These orthographic enrichments developed in the Muslim world as local scholars added innovative diacritics to the basic twenty eight Arabic consonantal letters and the three vocalization marks (fatḥā, kasra, and ḍamma) to represent the idiosyncratic sounds of their languages that did not exist in Arabic. As Islam spread from the Ḥijāz to other parts of the world, the faith also spread the Islamic sciences, Qur’ānic and higher Islamic studies, and classical Arabic, the language of the Qur’ān.\(^5\) Arabic has been central to the social and intellectual life of Muslims since the


nascent days of Islam. It has served as the Latin of Africa for over a millennium. Arabic and ‘Ajamī writings have co-existed in Muslim communities around the world and have been complementary in Islamic proselytizing and education for centuries.

While some ‘Ajamī traditions (including Urdu, Pashto, and Persian) have become standardized and used as official writing systems, others have been replaced by the Roman script for cultural, political, and ideological reasons, as the case of Turkish under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938) demonstrates. While some ‘Ajamī traditions in Asia (especially Urdu, Pashto, and Persian) are fairly well known, their numerous African counterparts remain largely neglected, despite the recent efforts made by scholars to preserve and study them. In some cases, the Roman script introduced through colonization and supported by post-colonial African governments stifled and replaced ‘Ajamī literacies, as the case of Swahili ‘Ajamī illustrates.

Nevertheless, there are vibrant ‘Ajamī traditions across Muslim Africa that the enduring promotion of Roman script literacy by Christian missionaries, colonial officials, and post-colonial African governments have not been able to obliterate. However, despite widespread ‘Ajamī literacy in Muslim Africa, there is no comprehensive census of ‘Ajamī users. By the same token, there is no consensus among scholars on when the first ‘Ajamī texts were written in the continent. Old Tashelhit (Medieval Berber), Songhay, and Kanuri are believed to be the first West African languages to have been written in ‘Ajamī between the tenth and the sixteenth centuries, followed by Fulfulde, Hausa, Wolof, and Yoruba.

Archives with ‘Ajamī manuscripts abound in Africa. There are over 80 languages with attested usage of ‘Ajamī in Africa (from Afrikaans in South Africa

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6 Ibid., pp. 7–9.
to Zarma in Niger). However, many old ‘Ajamî manuscripts are currently endangered. Some of the oldest have been lost due to poor preservation conditions. Important digital and non-digital archives of African ‘Ajamî materials are preserved in some African, American, and European institutions. ‘Ajamî texts, however, are not relics of the past as the tradition continues to flourish in Africa. They are still produced and kept in private libraries in Muslim Africa. Similarly, devotional and didactic Arabic and ‘Ajamî texts, what Hunwick called “market editions”, can frequently be purchased in local markets and Islamic bookstores.

African ‘Ajamî materials deal with religious and non-religious subjects. While the bulk of the materials consist of Islamic prose and poetic texts, there is a rich corpus of ‘Ajamî texts dealing with all forms of knowledge deemed important to local communities. Because bilingualism (and multilingualism in some cases) has been the norm for many African Muslim scholars, they have produced Arabic and ‘Ajamî materials of equal importance for religious and non-religious purposes. The forms and contents of their ‘Ajamî materials mirror those of their Arabic documents. The ‘Ajamî materials include key texts of the “Core Curriculum” (the most widely studied subjects and texts across the Sahel).

African ‘Ajamî materials are varied in form and content. They include prose and poetry. They deal with Islamic sciences and rituals, incantations, literature, Sufism, theology, translations and commentaries of the Qur’ān, and jurisprudence. They also contain official correspondences, private letters, business records, and materials dealing with geomancy, Arabic language and grammar, African languages, politics, medicine, philosophy, ethics, astrology and astronomy, and the science of calendars, among many other subjects. When the forms and contents of Arabic and ‘Ajamî in Africa are scrutinized, they reflect many tangible and subtle dimensions of the ‘Ajamization of Islam.

Tangible and Subtle Dimensions of the ʿAjamization of Islam

ʿAjamization of Islam is construed in this volume as the enrichment of Islamic traditions (including the Arabic script) resulting from the interactions between Islamic and local customs around the world as Islam adapts to new ethnolinguistic, cultural, artistic, and epistemological ecologies. As such, the ʿAjamization framework subsumes and transcends the current meaning of ʿAjami from which it is derived.\(^{16}\)

The dimensions of the ʿAjamization of Islam are not only reflected in writing. The orthographic enrichment of the Arabic script (ʿAjami) is only one dimension of ʿAjamization. The ʿAjamization framework assumes that, in the same way the Arabic script has been modified and enriched for centuries in the Muslim world to write consonants and vowels that Arabic lacked, Islamic traditions (architecture, ethics, calligraphic and decorative arts, Islamic sciences, scribal practices, cosmology, theology, and so forth) have also been modified and enriched by local Muslim scholars around the world to make them more meaningful to their communities. The existing corpus of Arabic and ʿAjami texts and the diversity of Muslim practices that developed since the early days of Islam bear testimony to the multiple dimensions of ʿAjamization, the various ways in which the Arabic script and other Islamic traditions have been appropriated, enriched, and effectively localized in different communities.

The enrichment processes of ʿAjamization are numerous. Some are visible while others are inconspicuous. They have operated both in the Arab and non-Arab Muslim world. One of the most enduring and tangible dimensions of the ʿAjamization of Islam is the orthographic enrichment of the Arabic script. The history of the Arabic script shows that the orthographic dimension of ʿAjamization is not exclusive to non-Arab Muslims. Its origin predates the birth and spread of Islam and, somewhat ironically, the Arabic script itself. As Daniel notes, the Arabic script resulted from the orthographic ʿAjamization of the ancient Aramaic script. He shows how Nabataean Arabs modified and enriched the ancient Aramaic script to represent the sounds in their language that did not exist in Aramaic.\(^{17}\) The Arabic script was, as a result, born from the orthographic ʿAjamization of Aramaic in the same way as Fulfulde, Hausa, Mandinka, Persian, Swahili, Urdu, Yoruba, Wolof and other ʿAjami traditions. Muslims have perpetuated the ancient orthographic ʿAjamization process that once engendered the Arabic script as it spread around the globe through Islam.

\(^{16}\) See Ngom, Muslims beyond the Arab World, pp. 19–20.

An important orthographic ʿAjamization process took place in the early days of Islam within Arabia and is perpetuated to this day in many parts of the Muslim world. This process has resulted in major regional scripts. These scripts bear testimony to initial concrete dimensions of the ‘Ajamization of Islam within Arabia and are attested in copies of the Qurʾān that reflect influences of the Qirāʾāt (methods of reciting the Qurʾān). It is reported that as Prophet Muhammad taught his companions to recite and memorize the holy book, he tolerated variations in the reading styles, noting that the book was revealed in seven ahrūf (styles). Some of the most distinctive features that exemplify this early orthographic dimension of ‘Ajamization in Arabia are the salient dialectal differences between Imām Warsh and Imām Ḥāfṣ’ recitations of the Qurʾān.

These two modes of reciting the Qurʾān have left indelible marks on various copies of the Qurʾān and numerous other liturgical Islamic texts, which resulted in distinct Arabic and ‘Ajami writing systems in the Muslim world. The use of the fāʿ (ف) with the dot below, the qāf (ق) with one dot above, and the imāla (أ) (a large dot below letters representing the sounds [e] and [ɛ]), which are based on the Warsh recitation of the Qurʾān have resulted in dual Arabic and ‘Ajami literacies predominantly found in the Western part of the Muslim world (including North and West Africa). In contrast, the fāʿ (ف) with one dot above, the qāf (ق) with two dots above, and the absence of imāla, which characterize the Ḥāfṣ recitation of the Qurʾān, have resulted in Arabic and ‘Ajami literacies predominantly found in the Eastern part of the Muslim world (including East Africa). The variations found between the Maghribī, Mashriqī, Sahrawī, Barnāwī, and Kanawī scripts used in West Africa and others currently found in many parts of the Muslim world reflect other tangible dimensions of ‘Ajamization.

There are other conspicuous aspects of the ‘Ajamization of Islam in Arabic and ‘Ajami texts in Muslim Africa. These include intra-lingual and inter-lingual functional complementarities reflected in the switches between Arabic dialects, and between Arabic and ‘Ajami. In Mauritania, the renowned poet, al-Māmī,
often used standard Arabic (fuṣḥa) when addressing the ‘ulamā’, and utilized the local variety of Hassāniyya when talking to more popular audiences.20 The shift from the standard to the local variety of Arabic in his speech community further shows that ‘Ajamization processes are not restricted to non-Arabic speaking communities. Another form of observable inter-lingual functional complementary is visible in the works of some African Muslim scholars. While al-Māmī alternated between the prestigious classical Arabic variety and the local vernacular dialect of Hassāniyya, some West African Muslim scholars shift between languages: classical Arabic and African languages. They use the former when addressing their peers and learned audiences, and the latter when teaching and addressing the masses.21

The complementarity between Arabic and ‘Ajamī is apparent in Islamic pedagogy and proselytizing in Muslim Africa.22 While classical Arabic has been the primary language of Islamic education, ‘Ajamī also played an important role in this domain. The use of ‘Ajamī in pedagogy and proselytizing in Muslim Africa is widely documented. Devotional and didactic ‘Ajamī prose texts as well as read, recited, and chanted poems have been used to spread Islamic teachings around the world. Ṣufī rituals and traditions of reciting and chanting devotional Arabic and ‘Ajamī poetry remain vibrant in Africa and South Asia, and exemplify the ‘Ajamization of the performing arts (the blending between Islamic and local performing arts).23

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23 A comparative study of the longue durée ‘Ajamization processes that African and South Asian Ṣufī traditions share and the idiosyncratic patterns that set them apart would be fascinating. For a few insightful readings on South Asian Ṣufī traditions that mirror those in Africa, see Bruce and Laurence, “The Early Chishtī Approach to Samā’”, in Islamic Society and Culture: Essays in Honor of Professor Aziz Ahmad, ed. Milton Israel and N.K. Wagle, New Delhi, Manohar, 1983; Carl W. Ernst and Bruce Lawrence, Sufi Martyrs of Love: The Chishti Order in South Asia and Beyond, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2002; and Ali S. Asani, Ecstasy and Enlightenment: The Ismaili Devotional Literature of South Asia, New York, I.B. Tauris, 2002.
By using ‘Ajami poems and prose texts that include local worldviews, maxims, heroes, saints, metaphors of fauna and flora, and other aspects of local cultures to convey Islamic teachings, African Muslim scholars spoke directly to their local audiences and made their messages resonate with the masses. The spread of Islam in many parts of the Muslim world resulted from such functional complementarities between ‘Ajami and Arabic in Islamic pedagogies and proselytizing. The recitation and chanting of ‘Ajami poetry expanded ‘Ajami literacy and Islamization in some parts of Muslim Africa through an ‘Ajamization process termed music-derived literacy; some have acquired Arabic and ‘Ajami literacy through recitation and chanting of devotional and didactic Islamic texts in their communities.24 Nowadays, music-derived literacy continues online. For example, some classical Arabic odes of Shaykh Aḥmadu Bamba (1853–1927), the founder of the Muridiyya Ṣufi order of Senegal, are time-aligned with their recitation and chanting allowing his followers around the world to be able to listen to and read the odes simultaneously. These digital materials have expanded the Muridiyya and dual literacy in the Warsh-based Arabic and Wolof ‘Ajami beyond the traditional epicenter of the Ṣufi order in Senegal.25

The complementarity between Arabic and ‘Ajami is equally evidenced in the forms and contents of the Islamic literatures of Africa. The complementarity is noticeable in two types of hybrid (bilingual or multilingual) texts commonly found in Muslim Africa: (1) ‘Ajami manuscripts with Islamic doxologies, loanwords, and phrases in Arabic drawn from Islamic texts, and (2) Arabic texts with explicative marginalia and glosses in ‘Ajami.

Besides these tangible dimensions of ‘Ajamization, there are subtle complementarities between Islamic and local knowledge systems reflected in the contents and symbolic meanings assigned to Arabic and ‘Ajami in Muslim Africa. Such complementarities are reflected in the functions assigned to Arabic and ‘Ajami in esoteric and numerological recipes such as medicinal texts and khātim (magic squares). These esoteric materials are generally used to appeal to the supernatural powers of God, angels, prophets, saints, and jinn for medicinal purposes, divination, protective and good luck amulets, casting or removing spells, and so forth. Because of the sacredness of Arabic as the language of the Qur’ān, unmodified Arabic letters, words, and numerals are regarded as imbued with binary potency (the power to bring fortune and misfortune).26

24 Ngom, Muslims beyond the Arab World, pp. 32–34.
26 For the “binary potency” of words, see Ngom, “West African Manuscripts” (forthcoming).
Therefore, they constitute the pivotal ingredients in the esoteric and numerological recipes designed to address the local preoccupations described above.

In contrast to the symbolic value assigned to unmodified Arabic letters, words, and numerals, the instructions on how to prepare or use such esoteric recipes are often provided in ‘Ajamī (with modified Arabic letters), which can include Western numerals. A good metaphor of this functional complementarity between Arabic and ‘Ajamī in these esoteric and numerological recipes is modern medicine’s chemical ingredients and its directions for use. The Arabic words and unmodified Arabic letters in these esoteric materials represent the potent chemical ingredients listed on a bottle of Advil (written in a technical language accessible only to the specialist), while the ‘Ajamī texts symbolize the plain English used to provide instructions on how to use Advil (which is made accessible to the consumer). Orthographic ‘Ajamization (modifications of Arabic letters) and the use of Western numerals in these esoteric recipes constitute a means to remove the sacredness and potency of the Arabic letters, words, and numerals in order to assign a specific informational function to ‘Ajamī writing.27

Other subtle dimensions of the ‘Ajamization of Islam observable in the writing of African Muslim scholars include the blending of Islamic ethical traditions with local ones, which often results in elevating the latter into religious traditions. This is the case in the elevation to sacredness of the traditional Wolof virtue of muñ (perseverance in the face of adversity) that blends with its Islamic counterpart of ṣabr in Senegambia.28 Naturally, a different virtue may be elevated and sanctified in the same manner elsewhere in the Muslim world. In many cases, the blending of Islamic and local traditions is old and entrenched to the extent that average local Muslims are often unable to distinguish what is originally Islamic from what is local in their own cultures. This is because the Islamic and the local traditions have fully blended and have become integral parts of their identities acquired through socialization and education in their communities.

‘Ajamization of Islam and ‘Ajamī Studies
The concept of syncretism often associated with Muslims who live beyond the geographic boundaries of Arabia does not do justice to the multiple processes

28 Ngom, Muslims beyond the Arab World, pp. 151–152.
of the ‘Ajamization of Islam reflected in the interplay and complementarity between Islamic and local traditions. The ‘Ajamization framework seeks to address the limitations of “syncretism” and to move the conversation on the interactions between the Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) and local ones beyond the assumptions of loss of value that “syncretism” often suggests.29 ‘Ajamization of Islam entails no assumption of loss of value of pristine Islamic traditions, for the simple reason that these traditions have been subjected to modifications and enrichments since the beginning of the faith within and beyond Arabia. To the contrary, it assumes multiple enrichments of the faith and its traditions (including the Arabic script) as they spread around the globe and interact with other belief systems and traditions.

The ‘Ajamization framework is therefore meant to do justice to the various localizations of Islam reflected in the “whatever–izations of Islam” (“Africanization” and other similar words), to use David Robinson words.30 It follows Robinson’s argument that “Africanization of Islam” does not entail diminishing or compromising the faith as some Islamicists and Islamic purists would have us believe; rather, the process is analogous to the one that Christianity and other faiths have undergone as they spread from their birth regions and take root around the world.31 The ‘Ajamization framework fosters new approaches to the study of Islam in ways that transcend the common dichotomies of “center/periphery”, “esoteric/rational episteme”, “Islam Noir/Islam Blanc”, “orthodoxy/heterodoxy”, and so forth. In this framework, these categories are treated as fluid and forming continua.32 Thus, it challenges the traditional treatment of the Sahara as a barrier and the corollary separation of sub-Saharan Africa from North Africa and other parts of the Muslim world.33

33 For a good challenge of this Orientalist legacy, see Kane, Beyond Timbuktu.
ʿAjamization processes are central to the preoccupations of the field of ʿAjamī Studies, a domain of reconciliation and cross-pollination of disciplines, including African Studies, Anthropology, Codicology, History, Islamic Studies, Linguistics, and Literature. This field complements Professor Hunwick’s legacy in the Arabic literature of Africa. It charts more distinctly a promising terrain of investigation that seeks to better understand the longue durée evolutionary processes of Islam that unite Muslims around the globe as well as the idiosyncratic traditions that set them apart, with new concepts and frameworks informed by the corpus of understudied local written and oral sources.

The seven papers in this volume contribute to the effort of establishing the field of ʿAjamī Studies. They exemplify an array of tangible and subtle dimensions of the ʿAjamization of Islam reflected in Arabic and ʿAjamī texts from West and East Africa. The first four papers focus on West Africa and the remaining three on East Africa. Mustapha Kurfi’s article deals with calligraphic and decorative arts. It illustrates important dimensions of the ʿAjamization of Islamic aesthetics in Northern Nigeria. Kurfi shows how some contemporary Hausa artists extend sacred Islamic calligraphic and decorative arts to social domains such as the human body, clothing, houses, and other objects. In doing so these artists creatively appropriate and enrich the Islamic calligraphic and decorative traditions in response to their local realities and preoccupations.

Nikolai Dobronravin examines, among other issues, ʿAjamization as reflected in Arabic and ʿAjamī “market editions” in Northern Nigeria, including writing styles, colophons, and glosses. Bernard Salvaing and Alfa Mamadou Diallo Léouma examine ʿAjamization traits in Fuuta Jaloo scholars’ scribal traditions. Their paper highlights the wealth of new information to be gained from colophons, marginal notes, and other material elements in Fuuta Jaloo scholars’ manuscripts. By analyzing several versions of a nineteenth-century treatise on astronomy, they open a new window into the ʿAjamization of Islamic sciences in Muslim Africa. Darya Ogorodnikova’s paper focuses on two Mande languages in manuscripts from Senegal, the Gambia, Guinea, Mali, and Burkina Faso. She uncovers key tangible dimensions of ʿAjamization reflected in layouts of annotations, linking and labelling techniques, and transnational techniques in parsing Arabic texts, among other innovative idiosyncratic practices.

Sara Fani’s article illuminates important ʿAjamization processes reflected in the scribal practices in Ethiopian Islamic manuscripts in Arabic from the region of Harar. She highlights the cultural interplay between the acquired Islamic scribal models and their local reinterpretations. Her paper shows, among other things, regional Ethiopian scribal differences (between Harar in the East and Gibe in the West), key orthographic traits that Ethiopian scholars

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34 For more on ʿAjamī studies, see Ngom, *Muslims beyond the Arab World*, pp. 247–251.
share with their Persian and Sindi counterparts as well as their own local innovative practices. Her paper sets the stage for further comparative studies of scribal practices between different Ethiopian regions and other areas of the Islamic world.

Adday Hernandez-Lopez's article also focuses on the ‘Ajamization processes reflected in Ethiopian manuscripts written in Arabic. By examining Ethiopian Islamic texts dealing with the use of Arabic letters, numbers, and names of God in magic, invocations of jinn, and the blending of traditional local deities with the Islamic God, she uncovers important cultural, cosmological, and theological dimensions of the ‘Ajamization of Islam in Ethiopia. By highlighting Ethiopian Christian magical traditions and the influences of Islamic knowledge on their practices, Adday demonstrates that ‘Ajamization processes can transcend Islam. The last paper by John Mugane looks at the history of Swahili ‘Ajamī writing and highlights the orthographic dimensions of ‘Ajamization reflected in the records of Arabic and ‘Ajamī texts produced by Swahili scholars. Mugane concludes his paper by highlighting the significance of the Swahili ‘Ajamī records as major sources of human knowledge.

These articles confirm Souleymane Bachir Diagne's view that “Islam is one and plural, that it speaks Arabic, the language of the Qurʾān, but other languages as well.”35 By focusing on the ‘Ajamization processes reflected in selected West and East African Arabic and ‘Ajamī manuscripts, the articles supplement the work of Professor Hunwick and his colleagues on the Arabic literature of Africa.36 They highlight the significance of The ‘Ajamī Library of Africa (the corpus of works primarily written in ‘Ajamī), which complements the Arabic Library of Africa (the corpus of works primarily written in Arabic).37

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35 See back cover of Ngom’s Muslims beyond the Arab World.