The Arabic script evolved from the Nabataean script in the northern part of the Arabian peninsula in the 4th/5th centuries CE (see Gruendler 1993). In the pre-Islamic period and during the first centuries of Islam, it was used exclusively for the writing of the Arabic language. Over time, mostly through religio-cultural transfer, it came to be used for the writing of other languages in Asia, Africa, and Europe, as well (see Kaye 2006). The present volume focuses on the use of Arabic script in Africa, and in particular on how Arabic script has been used to write African languages other than Arabic. Among the sixteen papers of this volume are studies on single or multiple languages from both a synchronic and a diachronic perspective. The articles deal with African languages belonging to all major linguistic phyla of Africa but one (Khoisan), from all geographic areas of Africa (North, West, Central, East, South Africa), both in situ and ex situ (the Americas).

A number of terms have been used in this volume to refer to the usage of Arabic script for languages other than Arabic. Crosslinguistically, such writing systems are often termed 'Arabic literature', 'Islamic literature' or 'Islamic writings', and locally they are known by a large number of names, such as Wolofal, or Kiarabu. The term Ajami in particular (or variations, such as Ājam, Ajamiya, etc.), derived from the Arabic word ‘aḡam’ non-Arab; Persian’, has gained some degree of popularity in academic literature and is also encountered as a self-denomination for these writing systems in some languages, such as Hausa. In the present volume, we will use the term 'Arabic script' for the writing system in general, 'Arabic-based script' for the writing system employed for languages other than Arabic, and 'Arabic(-based) orthography' for the writing system applied to one particular language.

The present volume focuses on linguistic aspects of the contents and contexts of these writing traditions. More specifically, the papers deal with linguistic, grammatological, sociolinguistic, and historical aspects of the emergence and the past and present usage of these traditions, with an emphasis on the sociolinguistics of writing (see Unseth 2008).
The papers in this volume have been arranged geographically. The introductory section features two general papers. Peter Daniels steps beyond the boundaries of Africa and discusses the adaptations of Arabic script across the world. He discusses the expansion of the expressive capacities of Arabic(-based) scripts within their historical context, and the logic behind this development.

Meikal Mumin discusses the question of why Arabic script should be considered understudied, as well as the reasons for and the consequences of this situation. Also, the paper presents an overview of the linguistic and geographic spread of Arabic script in Africa and highlights some of the implications and potential benefits of this field of study.

North Africa differs from other regions in that it is part of the Arabic-speaking world. The main challenge here was to find a way to represent the Berber languages, which were widely spoken and remain the language of large minorities in the Maghreb countries. In this section there are two papers. Maarten Kossmann and Ramada Elghamis deal with the Tuareg writing tradition. Tuareg, a Berber language, is written in three different scripts, Latin/Roman, Arabic, and an indigenous script called tifinaq̣. The corpus of documents in Arabic script used by the authors consists of personal letters and a theological text, collected during fieldwork in Niger, where this tradition is still alive.¹

In his paper, Lameen Souag analyzes the use of Arabic script to represent Shelha, i.e., all non-Arabic languages that are spoken in southwestern Algeria. His material consists of contributions by speakers of these varieties to internet forums. The nature of this material makes it possible, not only to study the orthographical practices, but also the sociolinguistic attitudes of the speakers toward these varieties and the different ways to represent them in writing.

In terms of number of languages with an Arabic-based script, West Africa is no doubt the region with the largest variation. The section on West Africa contains six papers. By comparing orthographic practice in interlin-

¹ Strictly speaking, this is not a North African tradition since the bulk of the speakers of Tuareg live in Mali and Niger (between one and two million in total); in Algeria, there are only about 60,000 Tuaregs and in Libya maybe 10,000 (Maarten Kossmann p.c., 9.4.2010). Nonetheless, for historical and linguistic reasons, we have chosen to include this paper in the section on North Africa.