(North) Arabic script is a type of writing system which developed out of the Nabatean Aramaic script in the Middle East. The earliest inscriptions which have been found in Arabic script date from the 4th century CE (Bauer 1996: 559). This script has been used in other parts of the world, notably Africa and Asia, for the writing of indigenous languages. These orthographic traditions have become known by a number of names, such as Kiarabu among the Swahili, Wolofal among the Wolof, or Wadaad's Writing among the Somali. The term with the widest local use is certainly Ajami (and a number of varieties of the same term, such as Ājām in Ethiopia, Ajamiyya among the Peul, Anjemi among the Yoruba), which originally denotes something like ‘foreigners’ speech or writing’, and this term has also gained some currency in academic research.

The present paper is a summary and overview of Arabic script as it is and has been used in Africa, as well as a history of its study. Unfortunately, there has been comparatively little scholarly research in this field, which is why it may be regarded as understudied literacy. In the following, I will first argue why Arabic script should be considered understudied in the first place, how this came about, and which implications it may have.

1. Africa: A Continent without Writing?

Traditional history books tell us that Africa used to be a continent largely without writing. Except for a few cases such as the Ethiopic script of the ancient Axumite kingdom or the Egyptian hieroglyphs of the ancient Egyptian kingdom, most languages only became written after the arrival of

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* I thank Monika Feinen for producing the map for me. Any errors are my own.
1 Historically this was an Arabocentric pejorative term similar to the Greek term barbaroi, which was “used by Arabs conscious of their political and social superiority in early Islam”; it is etymologically related to ʿaḡama ‘to speak indistinctly, to mumble’ (Bosworth 1985).
European colonialists. In earlier times, this led to the view that Africa was an a-historic continent. As Philips (2006: 39) points out, this earlier view has since been refuted:

The claim that Africa has no history because so much of its past was not documented in writing is an artifact of colonialism and a misrepresentation of both history and Africa.

Particularly in the 20th century, different scientific disciplines, such as (historical) linguistics, ethnology, or archeology, have begun reconstructing the history of Africa in the claimed absence of written testimonies.

Additionally, there have been more discoveries of writing practices in Africa, which demonstrated that Africa was not as devoid of writing as previously believed. Besides indigenous African scripts, such as the Mende, Vai, or Tifinagh scripts, in different areas of Africa more and more adaptations of Arabic script for the writing of indigenous African languages have been discovered. Mostly, these adaptations came about with the diffusion and increasing influence of Islam in Africa. Arabic script is and has been the only supra-regional script in Africa besides Roman/Latin script, which it predates by more than 500 years.

In most sub-Saharan areas, European colonization reduced Arabic to being a classical language, reserved for religious purposes, while Arabic became a mother tongue or **lingua franca** in a few areas beyond the Maghreb, such as Sudan or Chad. Previously, Arabic had spread quite successfully as a classical language or a language of special status, used in very restricted situations, mostly business and official correspondence: a **lingua franca** of politics and business and a classical language for the study of Islam and a gateway to Islamic science. Proficiency in the Arabic language also enabled Africans to pick up knowledge of Arabic literacy, a skill which they went on to apply to other indigenous languages beyond Arabic. Thus, many African languages were at some point written in Arabic script and since the promotion of Roman/Latin based script in European colonial times, a competition between scripts developed, which in some countries still is an ongoing process.

Arabic script was originally developed for the writing of the Arabic language, which at the same time has always served as the pedagogical frame of reference for the study and teaching of Arabic script in the Muslim world.

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2 For more information on these, see Dalby (1968, 1969).

3 There may be other cases: Ferguson (1970) claims, for instance, that Arabic was more widely used in Ethiopia, although Drewes (2007) disagrees with this view.