1. Introduction

Tuareg\(^2\) is a Berber language spoken in the central and southern Sahara and the Sahel, in Niger, Mali, Algeria, and Burkina Faso. Tuareg society has a long tradition of literacy. The Tuareg script, \textit{tifinag}, is a continuation of the Libyco-Berber script, a North-African creation inspired by the Phoenician or Punic alphabetic script(s) (Kerr 2010; Pichler 2007), which, in Antiquity, was used in the Maghrib. As such, \textit{tifinag}, has an Africa-internal history of over 2000 years. The script is known and used by important parts of the Tuareg population, in a wide array of social settings (Elghamis 2011). Tuareg society is multigraphic. In addition to \textit{tifinag}, since the 1960s an official Latin orthography is used, which is taught in experimental schools and other alphabetization modules. The third script in use for writing Tuareg is the Arabic script, commonly referred to by the Hausa (originally Arabic) term \textit{ajami}. Tuareg Ajami is mainly found in those tribes which are considered experts in Islamic learning (so-called ‘maraboutic tribes’); in fact, there seems to be some kind of complementary distribution between the use of Arabic script in these groups, and the use of \textit{tifinag} by other parts of society. Ajami—and Arabic of course—are the major vehicles for writing about Islam; using \textit{tifinag} for such purposes is considered inappropriate by many, albeit not by everybody. However, members of the maraboutic tribes also use Ajami for secular purposes, such as personal letters.

\(^1\) In the transcription of Tuareg, the following special symbols (with their IPA equivalents) are used: \(z \sim [z \ddot{a}], d \sim [d \ddot{a}], t \sim [t \ddot{n}], c \sim [t \ddot{f}], s \sim [t \ddot{f}].\)

\(^2\) We shall use here the exonym Tuareg rather than ‘Tamashek’, as found in many modern Anglo-Saxon sources. The reason is twofold. In the first place, Tamashek corresponds to the Mali Tuareg pronunciation of the ethnonym/glossonym, and can therefore be considered an exonym itself in a Niger context (‘Tamajaq’ would be more appropriate). In the second place, scholarly tradition both inside and outside Niger commonly uses ‘Tuareg’. At least in Niger, most Tuaregs do not object to the term, which has no derogatory connotations. See Aghali-Zakara (1984).
While there exists reasonable documentation on *tifinaʤ* (see Elghamis 2011), our knowledge of Tuareg Ajami is extremely poor, and its form, history and function remain largely unstudied. This is regrettable, as, according to some sources, early documents in Tuareg Ajami would date back to the 16th century CE (Gutelius 2000), which would make them earlier than any other Ajami tradition in the region, with the exception of Kanuri (Bondarev 2006).

In this article, we shall trace some of the main traits of Tuareg Ajami as currently used in Niger, on the basis of a small corpus gathered by Ramada Elghamis during his fieldwork on *tifinaʤ*. It consists of four recent personal letters, one recent declaration of divorce and one four-page manuscript with religious content. The corpus is described briefly in the following; for more information and for the texts, see Elghamis (2011):

i. Letter by a craftsman from Azel (near Agadez), belonging to the Kel Äwäy. 2005; 5 lines.

ii. Letter by a craftsman from Teghazert (near Agadez). 2001; 5 lines.

iii. Letter by a marabout from Tillabéry, Ifoghastribe. not dated (recent); 5 lines.

iv. Attestation of divorce from a marabout from Tillabéry (same writer as iii), Ifoghastribe. Dated 1430 AH; 5 lines.

v. Letter by a person from Tahoua, Iwellemmeden tribe. 2000; 19 lines.

vi. Manuscript with theological content, deposited at the archives of the Institut de Recherches en Sciences Humaines (Département des Manuscrits Arabes et Ajami) of Abdou Mounouni University in Niamey (manuscript No. 3988). According to the colophon, it was written by Mukhammad Assalix Ibn Mukhammad. The document is not dated, but may not be extremely old. About 40 lines in total.

While studying the orthography of such writings, many questions as to their context come up. The most basic question is to what extent the writings represent a tradition, i.e. a code learned from members of an earlier generation, or separate individual creations; the last possibility should not be ruled out *a priori*, as teaching of Arabic (including, of course the script), is a major element in Islamic education, and an individual may start writing his or her own language by means of this script without any further model. Supposing that the writing represents a tradition, one would have to determine the parameters of variation. Are we dealing with variation linked to geography and tribal affiliation (e.g. an Ayer Tuareg tradition as opposed to an Iwellemmeden Tuareg tradition), or are there different conventions related to different traditions of schooling, for instance between the Qādiriyya and Tijāniyya brotherhoods? Unfortunately, the present corpus does not allow