1. Introduction

It is a commonplace for papers dealing with African Ajami\(^1\) to say that the Ajami tradition is neglected by scholars. And it will not be an exaggeration to say that Mande Ajami writings are stepchildren of the African Ajami studies: not a single manuscript was published during the colonial period, and even afterwards, such publications remain very few (Giesing & Vydrine 2007; Schaffer 1975; Vydrine 1998). Among the West African Arabographic manuscripts identified recently as written in African languages (Hunwick et al. 2003), not a single Mande text has been attested. There are good reasons to consider Manding Ajami understudied by the Western scholarly tradition, and the quasi-absence of special publications is due to a lack of attention by researchers.

2. The Historical Situation

Mande people were among the first in West Africa to enter into contact with Islamic culture and the Arabic language. One should not forget that out of three great Medieval empires of Western Sudan, two were created by the Mande.

The Ancient Ghana (Wagadu) Empire, whose emergence is lost in the ages, is associated with the Soninke (Sarakole) people. During the five centuries of the intense commercial and cultural contacts with Northern Africa, an Islamized stratum of Soninke traders, the *jùla*, emerged; as for the political elite of Wagadu, it remained animist by the time of the reports by al-Bakrī...

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\(^1\) Arabographic writing systems for languages other than Arabic.
(11th century) and al-ʾIdrīsī (12th century). Reports from Wagadu by Arabic authors are brief, and no written document of Wagadu origin has reached us. Therefore, any conjecture concerning Ajami writing in Wagadu would be of purely speculative nature. Modern Soninke society is strongly Islamized, and Islam is regarded as the central component of Soninke identity.\(^2\) However, no significant tradition of Soninke Ajami seems to exist, although it might be used occasionally by those Soninke who are literate in Arabic.\(^3\)

On the other hand, it should be mentioned that the \textit{jùla} network dating back to the Ancient Ghana played a tremendous role in the Islamization of Western Sudan:

\begin{quote}
Juula were undoubtedly among the first West Africans to acquire Islamic knowledge, being originally a merchant group who traded gold with North African merchants in Ancient Ghana. (Hunwick et al. 2003: 1)
\end{quote}

They were also the main agents in the creation of the local literary tradition in Arabic language and in Ajami. The question (which will hardly be ever answered) is: Was the literary tradition established as early as in Ghana, or only later?

We are much better informed about the Ancient Mali Empire (beginning from the 13th century\(^4\)), both by Arab authors and through an extremely rich Manding oral tradition. Its rulers were Muslims and went to Mecca,\(^5\) and Ibn Baṭṭūṭa wrote about the fervour of inhabitants of Mali and the practice of chaining young people who were negligent in learning the Qurʾān. Meanwhile, the predominant opinion among the historians (which I share) seems to be that the Islamization of Ancient Mali concerned mainly the commercial and ruling elites, and only to a much lesser extent the broad masses. Here again, no written document from inside Ancient Mali has reached our

\begin{itemize}
\item[\(^2\)] Meanwhile, for significant groups of Soninke, Islamization might be a relatively recent phenomenon: according to reports by European authors, non-Muslim beliefs were current there at the beginning of the colonial era (Pollet & Winter 1971: 471–485).
\item[\(^3\)] My only encounter with this script took place in November 1992, when I traveled by train from Bamako to Kayes. A fellow traveler, who was a Soninke marabout, wrote on my request, quite naturally, a page-long text in Soninke Ajami, but he seemed to attach little value to such writings.
\item[\(^4\)] The end of Ancient Mali is difficult to date, for its decline was gradual and poorly documented.
\item[\(^5\)] Certain modern griots and historians (e.g. Kántɛ 1992) assert that even Sunjata Keita, the cultural hero of Manding and the legendary founder of Ancient Mali, was a Muslim. However, this claim looks like an adaptation of the Sunjata image to the realities of modern Manding society, which is becoming more and more Islamized.
\end{itemize}