1. Introduction

The Manding Ajami writing tradition is much less mysterious today than it was thirty or forty years ago, when scholarly literature would settle for mentioning it in passing, and practically no single authentic text was available. However, the number of texts published still remains extremely low and they reflect poorly on the geographical spread of this writing system. We are still at the stage where every new text introduced into scholarly circulation is a discovery: with a high degree of probability, it represents either a new variety of the writing, a new literary genre, or even establishes the use in a new geographical area where the existence of Ajami was hitherto unknown. The texts presented here exemplify this situation.

In the following, texts of the manuscripts will be represented in four columns: the source texts in Manding Ajami, i.e. Arabic-based orthography, a Roman script transliteration, a Roman script standard transcription, and an English translation.

In the transliteration, we tried our best to remain true to the Ajami text. We had to interpret spellings in order to segment texts into words, whenever Arabic-(based) graphemes are written disconnected to the left. This applies to the letters ‘alif, dāl, dāl, rāʾ, zāy, wāw, which are always spelt disconnected from the following letters in Arabic script. Therefore, it is most often impossible to judge whether a word boundary was intended by the author of the manuscript after such a letter or not. In the standard transcription, Bamana text is represented following the official orthography of the Bamana language, while dialectal forms are being eliminated.

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1 The Ajami writing reflects a dialectal form, different from the Standard Bamana one.
suppose that they can be easily restored from the transliteration. Although
tones are not marked in Arabic-based script, lexical tones are marked in
the standard transcription, while contextual and grammatical tonal changes
(among them, the tonal article\(^2\)) are ignored.

The Mandinka document is a sample of a magical text containing hunt-
ing incantations. Unlike all the other authentic documents published so far,
it is authored, most probably, by an ordinary Muslim, rather than a Muslim
cleric, for hunting remains a domain far remote from the sphere of pious
marabouts. ‘Allāh and Muḥammad are nevertheless mentioned in these
texts, and Arabic words are inserted here and there, possibly for extra effec-
tiveness, e.g. ِلﺎَﻤَﺗ ⟨tama’li⟩ tamaali (3:3, 3:4),\(^3\) and probably also َڨَﻠَﻓ ⟨qalaq,a⟩
kalaka (2:2). In essence, though, the religious core of this text is quite ani-
mist.

The other set of texts is the very first sample of the authentic Bamana
writing tradition published.\(^4\) They come from San, an ancient commercial
center in the southwestern part of Mali, and may well represent the earliest
piece ever of authentic Bamana literature.

In the following, the texts are reproduced in digitalized form, provided
with an exact Roman script transliteration, a normalized transcription (with
tones in Mandinka texts following Creissels et al. 1982), and an English
translation including comments. Each text is followed by an analysis of the
peculiarities of the Ajami variety.

2. Mandinka Hunter’s Incantations

The incantations were shown to Valentin Vydrin by Abdulay Daafée, who
was his host in the Samakun village (Sédhiou region, Senegal) in October
2007. His oral comments were very helpful in decoding and transliterating

\(^2\) In Bamana, a definite article is represented by a floating low tone following a noun or
a noun group. In current transcription practice, it is rarely marked even in texts with tonal
notation.

\(^3\) In referencing the texts, the first number (preceding the colon) represents the number
of the text, and the second one (following the colon) represents the line. For the Bamana two-
page texts, the figure preceding a slash represents the number of the text, while the second
figure (following the slash) represents the page number, and the third figure, following the
colon, represents the line.

\(^4\) The only Bamana texts published so far (Vydrine 1998) were written at the request of
Valentin Vydrin. Therefore, they may be regarded as evidence for the study of the ortho-
graphic tradition of Bamana Ajami, but they do not exemplify its genres.