In 1863, a Kurdish scholar named Abu Bakr Effendi (1835–1880) was sent by the Ottoman sultan to the Cape Colony to instruct the local Muslim community in the correct rules of Islamic creed and behaviour. The direct motive for his mission was a request by the British government, but it was also part of the Ottoman policy of gaining recognition for the Sultan as sole representative of the Islamic world (cf. Germain 1999; van Bruinessen 2000). Abu Bakr’s Ḥanafī interpretation of Islamic law clashed with the Ṣāfī’ī tradition of the Cape Muslims (Davids 1980: 51–56), but the Arabic school he established constituted an important contribution to the development of formal instruction in Arabic and Islamic knowledge in the Cape Colony.

For the spreading of his message Abu Bakr used the language that by then had become the common language of the Cape Muslim community, Afrikaans. Muslims had been residents of the Cape, especially of Cape Town, since the second half of the 17th century. The founder members of this community were labourers and political prisoners from various regions in South and Southeast Asia, who had been transported by the Dutch to South Africa. They spoke different languages, but most of them knew and used Malay, which had been in use in Southeast Asia as the language of Islamic instruction. When Malay was written, Arabic script (the so-called Jawi script) was used, adapted to the sound inventory of the language. After the initial period of migration to the Cape Colony, many non-Malay inhabitants of the Cape, especially slaves and freemen, converted to Islam. By the time Abu Bakr arrived, there was a thriving community in Bo-Kaap,

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with five mosques (Davids 1980: 97). Collectively, Muslims in South Africa were often called ‘Malays’, and in the context of Cape Town, this term became practically synonymous with ‘Muslims’, although most Muslims regarded it as a derogatory term (Fransch 2009: 67–69; Davids 2011: 18–19).

Muslims were treated as a kind of ‘upper non-White class’ because of their professional skills and the fact that they were active as traders or craftsmen (Matthee 2008: 71). Under the prevailing franchise system for elections, they could become registered voters because they owned some property. Within the various groups of non-Whites, converting to Islam was a sign of upwards social mobility (Matthee 2008: 72). As a result, Christianity tended to be regarded as the distinguishing characteristic of the White community, while Islam became increasingly associated with the non-White population.

At first, formal teaching of Islam had been forbidden in the Cape, but when this ban was lifted in 1804, Islamic schools were founded in Cape Town. Initially, Malay was retained as language of instruction and remained so for some decades, as is evident from the Malay interlinear translations in Arabic treatises used by the students (Davids 2011: 79–84). The advent of new converts and the resulting linguistic diversity in the community necessitated the use of a new lingua franca as in-group language. For this purpose, the best choice was Afrikaans, the creolized version of Dutch that had become the daily vernacular of the descendants of the Dutch colonists and many indigenous groups alike. At the time Abu Bakr came to Cape Town, Malay itself was still known by parts of the Muslim community, but since it could no longer serve as an in-group means of communication among them, this knowledge gradually died out, and Malay was replaced by Afrikaans, not only as lingua franca, but also as the language of instruction, leaving behind just a few traces in the form of loanwords in the variety of Afrikaans spoken by the Cape Muslims. In the non-Muslim communities in the Cape, Afrikaans was used as a spoken language, but for a long time metropolitan Dutch, the language of the original colonial power, was retained as the official written language of the Cape Colony. Written Afrikaans was only used for humorous purposes, for instance when the language of non-Whites was stereotyped. The term ‘Afrikaans’ became current only when this style of writing was recognized as a genre in its own right; before the 1870s, the current term for this style was ‘Kaapsch Hollandsch’, i.e. Cape Dutch (Deumert 2004: 48). It was not until 1925 that Afrikaans became one of the official languages of the Cape (Uys 1983).

It was a logical choice for Abu Bakr to use the colloquial language for the instruction in Islam. It was equally logical for him to adopt Arabic script as the medium to represent Afrikaans in writing, since this was the script