

Book review

Meikal Mumin and Kees Versteegh (eds.), *The Arabic script in Africa: studies in the use of a writing system* (Studies in Semitic languages and linguistics, 71). Leiden: Brill, 2014. Pp. 400.

Reviewed by David Roberts

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As writing systems go, Arabic script is not particularly old. It emerged for the first time around the 4th century CE, being consolidated in the early Islamic period and being applied for the first time to other languages around the 11th century CE (Daniels, 25).¹ Yet in many parts of Africa, it has a much longer tradition than Roman script, since its earliest manifestations pre-date the colonial period by at least five centuries (Mumin, 41, 54).

This book explores how Arabic script has been used to write African languages other than Arabic, a written representation commonly known as Ajami (from the Arabic ‘foreigner’s speech or writing’). It came about through the increasing influence and diffusion of Islam. There are few institutions coordinating or standardizing the process – a notable exception being the National Alphabet of Chad (Warren-Rothlin, 273, 282) – so Ajamis tend to be diverse and idiosyncratic, exhibiting a high degree of variation between languages, writers (Luffin, 313), and manuscripts (Bondarev, 113). Ajamis often jostle for space with other scripts: Tifinagh, Roman, and Ajami are used for Nigerian Tuareg (Kossmann & Elghamis, 79); N’ko, Roman and Ajami for Manding (Vydrin, 203).

The extensive list of references to Arabic script usage in Africa (Mumin, 63-76)

¹ References to the book under review are cited with page numbers only.

attests a growing interest in this subject, but this is apparently the first time that an entire edited collection has been devoted to it. Most of the contributions are based on papers presented at TASIA 1 (*The Arabic Script in Africa – Diffusion, Usage, Diversity and Dynamics of a Writing System*), a workshop that took place on 6 - 7th April 2010 at the University of Cologne, Germany.

In Africa, official statistics tend to be blind to literacy efforts in anything but Roman script. They consistently underestimate the role of Qur'ānic schools as powerful forces in the informal education sector (Mumin, 54; Humery, 193; Vydrin, 203; Warren-Rothlin, 261; Lüpke 2013: 75-76). Although the use of Ajami is well documented in Hausa, Swahili, and Fulfulde, it is usually thought of as being quite a rare and isolated phenomenon. Mumin puts paid to this myth, listing – and illustrating with a colour map (45) – no less than 80 attested languages and a further 15 cases that need further verification. And tantalisingly, contributors repeatedly express their confidence that many more sources are waiting to be discovered (Mumin, 49; Bondarev, 109; Humery, 193; Vydrin, 209).

After a general introduction (Mumin & Versteegh, 1-22), there are two overviews, covering Arabic script and its spread to non-African languages (Daniels, 25-39) and Arabic script in Africa (Mumin, 41-76). From then on, the book is structured geographically, with North, West, East, and South Africa treated in turn. Unsurprisingly, it is West Africa that dominates. It was slightly disorienting to see Nigerien Tuareg (Kossmann & Elghamis, 79-90) placed in North Africa, as though to fill out an otherwise sparse section. Granted, it does make a natural grouping with some of the SW Algerian Berber languages that are the focus of the only other contribution in this geographical area (Souag, 91-104). Overall, the geographical spread is impressive and not limited to the African continent. There is also evidence from Brazil and the

Caribbean (Dobronravin, 159-172), not to mention a passing reference to some Swahili correspondence discovered in Goa, India (Vierke, 320).

Since Ajami spread with the influence of Islam, most sources are religious texts. But there is an array of other genres too (several of which are published as appendices): texts about Islamic jurisprudence, education, and language, marginal notes in medical and astrological treatises, personal correspondence, chronicles, hunter incantations, travel diaries, an attestation of divorce, an election pamphlet, homework, Bible translations, currency inscriptions, newspapers, genealogies, poetry, songs, nursery rhymes, amulets, treaties, contracts, bills, internet forums, and text messages. These latter two genres are reminders that new media are generating an unprecedented quantity of new and easily accessible written Ajami data (Souag, 91). And of course, it is perfectly possible, using traditional field methods, to elicit new written Ajami texts expressly for the purpose of linguistic research (Vydrin, 217).

With a diversity of sources comes a diversity of field conditions and methods. While Breedveld is poring over faded privately owned manuscripts speckled with dirt and kept in a leather bag to protect them from harmattan dust and mildew (148), Souag is investigating the Facebook pages of a confident, connected middle class who spend their leisure time in urban cybercafés (94-103). While Humery is deftly conducting semi-structured interviews with somewhat reluctant clerics in the mosques and Qur'anic schools of Senegal (176), Dumestre, concerned that his presence as an outsider may be counter-productive, is sending a Muslim cleric friend to a far-flung town in Mali to personally hand-copy manuscripts that by now are fully a century old (and that are published here for the first time, 231-244).

The book is not devoid of human interest. In the north of Nigeria, a female writer, prolific in several literary genres, promotes women's literacy two centuries before the

coining of the word feminism (Breedvelde, 146). Further south, the Qur'ān is translated into Yoruba by a Christian missionary, refreshingly broadminded but apparently unaware that a translation by a non-Muslim outsider stands little chance of ever being accepted by the local population (Warren-Rothlin, 266). In a Brazilian plantation, an African slave killed in an uprising is found with a small book of prayers left dangling around his neck (Dobronravin, 166). In Cape Town, a Swedish beer brewer and philanthropist publishes a trilingual election pamphlet to canvas for votes among the influential “upper non-white class” of traders and craftsmen in the Cape Muslim community (Versteegh, 315-380). In a coastal town in Somalia, two Sufi brotherhoods vie for educational supremacy in the seven arts of the Arabic language (Banafunzi & Vianello, 297). Could they have foreseen that it would eventually be the women (again) who would eventually be the custodians of Ajami, memorising long poems and jealously preserving manuscripts (299)?

Idiosyncratic transcription and transliteration conventions can make comparison of linguistic data between publications onerous. And Ajami, with its complex mixture of linguistic, orthographic, calligraphic, and exegetical variation, not to mention spelling mistakes and degraded texts, presents particularly formidable challenges. The editors have opted for a mixed system of graphemic transliteration that is innovative, whilst honouring the Arabist literature (Mumin & Versteegh, 5-6). All the existing traditions actually transcribe realisations of pronunciation, but the method adopted here is a specifically *graphemic* transliteration. Established traditions also have a tendency to reflect the phonology of the language of the readership, whereas here every meaningful unit of the writing system is accounted for. Any graphic variant of a baseline letter is coded in transliteration by means of a subscript number. An extreme example is the letter *kāf*, which has eleven possible variants, $\langle k_1 \dots k_{11} \rangle$, depending on the orthography

in question (Mumin & Versteegh, 19). The introduction untangles these complexities with great clarity and the ensuing chapters apply the transcription and transliteration conventions in a thoroughly systematic way, with a fine attention to detail, accuracy, and readability.

Any writing system that is invented for one language undergoes changes when it is borrowed to represent another, to take into account the linguistic structure of that language. In Africa, this may include phenomena such as seven- and nine-vowel systems, vowel length, diphthongs, syllabic nasals, palatal affricates, retroflex and labio-velar stops, palatalisation, labialisation, nasalisation, and tone. Interestingly, additional letter shapes are rarely added to the basic inventory (Daniels, 30; Bondarev, 138). Instead, there is a strong preference for amplifying the basic stock by the addition of diacritics (Souag 99; Breedveld, 145).

The book is packed with the minutiae of grapheme-phoneme correspondences, exploring the relationships between writing, speech, and meaning in Ajami, local Arabic, and standard Arabic. There are numerous cases of overspecification: the Mandinka voiced palatal affricate is spelled as either **ɔ** or **ɛ** (Vydrin & Dumestre, 230). Underspecification is common too: in Congolese Swahili, *kasra* usually represents both [i] and [e] (Luffin, 314). At the same time, in Fulfulde, Arabic graphemes take on a chronogrammatic value (Breedvelde, 154-156).

Word breaks are also an issue, some orthographies (or individual writers) preferring to eliminate them. Mandinka Ajami tends to agglutinate postpositions, auxiliaries, and quantifiers to the content words, sometimes resulting in entire sentences being written as one word (Vydrin, 216). Similarly, Swahili Ajami joins noun+possessive and noun+conjunction as single words (Vierke, 333). These linguistic choices are inherently different from the aesthetic choice of *scriptura continua* in Pulaar Ajami

(Humery, 180), although the visual effect is similar.

It is often claimed that because Arabic script is an Abjad, it is not suitable for writing non-Semitic languages (Mumin, 50; Vierke, 326). Yet the reader is left with the overall impression of a pliable raw material that has ably demonstrated its capacity to represent the linguistic structures of at least some African languages. There is sometimes evidence of a correlation between linguistic suitability and motivation for literacy. Vydrin (205, 208) reports that Ajami is not at all well adapted to Manding phonology, and that it does not compete well against the more dominant Roman and N'ko scripts. Warren-Rothlin (262, 273), on the other hand, considers Ajami to be eminently suitable for representing Hausa, Fulfulde, Chadian Arabic, and Kanuri (in some cases, perhaps more so than Roman script) and notes a correspondingly high motivation for using Ajami in that region. But it would be simplistic to imagine a direct cause and effect in all cases. Clearly, Ajami is never chosen primarily for its linguistic efficiency, but for its social role as an emblem of Islamic civilisation (Hemery, 181).

Researchers in several domains will find this collection a useful addition to their libraries. It invites grammatologists to look beyond the usual pre-occupation with Roman script and takes Semiticists to the peripheries of their linguistic family. Comparatists interested in proto-forms will find inspiration in Bondarev's reconstruction of Old Kanembu (138), while those involved in developing practical orthographies for previously unwritten languages will gravitate towards Warren-Rothlin's contribution (261-289). Several of the articles adopt an ethnographic approach which will appeal to anthropologists and the social context that forms the backdrop to all the contributions will speak to sociolinguists and historians. One example is the account of how, in pre-apartheid South Africa, the Cape Muslim community's use of Ajami shaped the development of Afrikaans as a Dutch creole and how this

inconvenient truth was deliberately obliterated as Afrikaner identity grew more racist and oppressive (Haron, 349).

I conclude by suggesting four areas that are ripe for further research with regard to Ajami script for African languages: orthographic depth, the representation of tone, the psychology of reading, and mother-tongue literacy.

Bondarev (138) briefly discusses orthographic depth in his contribution, pointing out in Old Kanembu, vowels and tones are shallow representations while consonants, because they are underspecified, are deep. Elsewhere in the collection, the subject of orthographic depth is often implicitly present, but more overt, intentional discussion situated within the framework of the recent literature (e.g. Benuck & Peverly 2004; Ellis et al. 2004; Ziegler et al. 2010) would be welcome.

Several of the authors touch briefly on the subject of tone (Mumin, 51-52; Bondarev, 114; Vydrin & Dumestre, 226). This is novel, since the bulk of existing Africanist tone orthography research to date focuses exclusively on Roman script (e.g. Bird 1999; Kutsch Lojenga 2013; Mfonyam 1990; Roberts 2013). The obvious question for Ajami is “How should tone be represented in a script that is already so heavily reliant on diacritics for distinguishing between consonants and for representing vowels?” Any such research should bear in mind the extremely varied functional load of tone in African languages – on a continuum from extremely low to extremely high – making it unwise to generalise about whether, how much, and by what means tone should be marked.

Another interesting angle would be to explore the suitability of Ajami from the point of view of the psychology of reading. There are already researchers exploring the efficiency of Arabic script among L1 learners of Arabic (Eviatar & Ibrahim 2000; Ibrahim & Eviatar 2009; Ibrahim et al. 2013). What if the same research question were to be

extended to the use of Arabic script for African languages with their vastly different linguistic structures? For anyone interested in the subject this is virgin territory.

Typically, Africans learn Arabic script through Classical Arabic and then apply it to their own local language. It is often a natural, un-taught side effect of Arabic literacy (Kossmann & Elghamis, 80; Souag, 103). Yet a wealth of research confirms the principle of ‘first language first’, i.e. that the mother-tongue is the ideal medium for acquiring literacy skills in the early years of schooling (e.g. Brock-Utne & Alidou 2006; Heugh et al. 2007; Mwinsheikhe 2003; Prophet & Dow 1994; Sampa 2005). With this in mind, the Ajami field is wide open for classroom experiments comparing performance of learners who acquire Arabic script through the medium of their L1 first, transitioning later to Classical Arabic, and those who acquire it in the opposite direction.

Any researchers interested in Ajami will look forward to a forthcoming second volume to be published as the proceedings of TASIA 2, which took place 26 - 27th April 2013 at the Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium.²

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