

African Ajami Library

Boston University
West African Research Center
Boston, Massachusetts

The African Ajami Library is a collaborative initiative between Boston University and the West African Research Center (WARC) in part funded by the British Library's Endangered Archives Programme. The AAL Project is led by Dr. Fallou Ngom (Professor of Anthropology and Director of the African Studies Center at Boston University). AAL is envisioned as a digital "Library of Alexandria" of Islamized Africa, a continental open access public repository of aggregated Ajami materials. The first step in building AAL took place the summer of 2011. Dr. Ngom and Mr. Roger Brisson, Head of Metadata Services of Boston University traveled to Senegal to lead a workshop at WARC focused on digitization techniques of endangered Wolof Ajami manuscripts. Five people were trained in the workshop, including Mr. Ablaye Diakite (AAL-Team Member), Mr. Birane Gassama (AAL-Team member), Mr. Abdoulaye Niang (WARC Technical Director), Mr. Aliou Badara Sarr (WARC Assistant Librarian), and Mr. Ali Diop (an independent scholar).

Although written records are rarely regarded as part of Africa south of the Sahara's intellectual heritage, important bodies of Ajami literature have existed in Oromo, Somali, Tigrigna, Kiswahili, Amharic, and Malagasy in East Africa, and Bamanakan, Mandinka, Kanuri, Yoruba, Berber, Hausa, Wolof, and Fulfulde in West Africa for centuries. In South Africa, the enslaved Muslim Malay produced the first written record of Afrikaans in Ajami. The neglect is due to a number of factors, including the lack of an Ajami public depository, the limited number of individuals with the linguistic skills and cultural background required to analyze Ajami documents, and a lack of recognition of the cultural value of Ajami texts, as many Europeans and Arab scholars with the linguistic competence to study these materials have often deemed them of little scholarly interest. Most assume that sources of useful knowledge on Africa are either oral or written in European languages. Yet, Ajami traditions in Africa are centuries-old and are quite varied, consisting of satirical, polemical and protest poetry, as well as biographies, eulogies, genealogies, talismanic resources, therapeutic medical manuals, family journals, business transactions, historical records, speeches, texts on administrative and diplomatic matters (correspondence between Sultans and provincial rulers), Islamic jurisprudence, behavioral codes, grammar, and even visual arts. The primary goal of AAL is to ensure that these materials are no longer treated as insignificant vestiges, but rather as major sources of local African knowledge, without which a holistic and in-depth understanding of Islamized Africa will remain elusive.

Mandinka Ajami Manuscripts (In Progress)

For centuries, Ajami, the modified Arabic scripts used in writing African languages, have been deeply embedded in the history and culture of many Islamized societies of Africa. Ajami has played an important role in the spread of Islam in Africa and continues to be used by the speakers of more than ten major African languages for everything from poetry and historical writing to road signs and advertisements. Nevertheless, Ajami is little known outside the communities where it is used. Many of the oldest Ajami manuscripts are in danger, and few of those with a scholarly interest in these materials have access to them. The Mandinka Ajami manuscripts to be digitized in this project are precious. Ajami texts in Mande languages (including Bamanankan, Eastern Maninka, Western Mandinka (or Mandinka), Jakhanke, Jula, and Susu) are among the least documented. Only a few Mandinka Ajami texts are available to scholars compared to the rich collections of Hausa, Fulfulde, and Wolof Ajami texts recently made available to scholars thanks to the support of the British Library/Arcadia Endangered Archives Programme. This project will enable scholars to have access to thousands of pages of Mandinka Ajami texts largely unknown to Western-trained academics. The manuscripts deal with astrology, divination, Islamic education, talismanic protective devices, religious and didactic materials in poetry and prose, elegies, jurisprudence, traditions of Prophet Muhammad, Sufism, code of ethics, translations of the Quran and Islamic liturgical texts from Arabic into Mandinka, legends about Mandinka jihad leaders and mythical figures, secular writings such as commercial record-keeping, family genealogies, records of important local events such as the founding of villages, births, deaths, weddings, biographies, traditional treatment of illnesses, medicinal plants, environmental subjects, incantations, local history, local cosmology, customs and ancestral traditions, and Mandinka social institutions.

This is a joint project between Boston University and the West African Research Center (WARC), funded by the British Library/Arcadia Endangered Archives Programme. Support for this project is also being provided from the BU College of Arts & Sciences (Dean Ann E. Cudd and Associate Dean Nancy Ammerman), the Department of Anthropology, and BU Libraries. Fieldwork Team: Dr. Fallou Ngom (Principal Investigator; Director, African Studies Center), Ablaye Diakité (Local Project Manager), Mr. Ibrahima Yaffa (General Field Facilitator), and Ibrahima Ngom (photographer). Technical Team: Dr. Fallou Ngom (Principal Investigator; Director, African Studies Center), and Eleni Castro (Technical Lead, BU Libraries). This collection of Mandinka Ajami materials is copied as part of the African Studies Center's African Ajami Library. Access Condition and Copyright: These materials are subject to copyright and are distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 License, which permits non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

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Solutions to People's Problems

The entire manuscript is available for download as a single PDF file. Higher-resolution images may be available upon request. For technical assistance, please contact open-help@bu.edu. Fieldwork Team: Dr. Fallou Ngom (Principal Investigator; Director, African Studies Center), Ablaye Diakit  (Local Project Manager), Mr. Ibrahima Yaffa (General Field Facilitator), and Ibrahima Ngom (photographer). Technical Team: Dr. Fallou Ngom (Principal Investigator; Director, African Studies Center), and Eleni Castro (Technical Lead, BU Libraries). This collection of Mandinka Ajami materials is copied as part of the African Studies Center's African Ajami Library. This is a joint project between BU and the West African Research Center (WARC), funded by the British Library/Arcadia Endangered Archives Programme. Access Condition and Copyright: These materials are subject to copyright and are distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 License, which permits non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. For use, distribution or reproduction beyond these terms, contact Professor Fallou Ngom (fngom@bu.edu). Citation: Materials in this web edition may be cited as: Ngom, F., Castro, E., & Diakit , A. (2018). African Ajami Library: EAP 1042. Digital Preservation of Mandinka Ajami Materials of Casamance, Senegal. Boston: Boston University Libraries: <http://hdl.handle.net/2144/27112>. For Inquiries: Please contact Professor Fallou Ngom (fngom@bu.edu).

Provenance/Custodial history: The manuscripts' owner inherited them from his father (Imam Keba Dabo Cisse) after his death. His father was born in the region of Sedhiou. He had an advanced Islamic education and served as Imam and a religious leader in Ziguinchor until his death.

This manuscript collection consists of five different types of texts. The first type consists of prayers designed to help people achieve social mobility. This text is a manual of special prayers and techniques for finding solutions to people's social problems, including love. It begins with a short introduction in Mandinka Ajami describing the usefulness of the document. The rest of the document is in Arabic with numerous magic squares and diagrams, Arabic prayers, and names of the Prophet and God. The second, third, and fourth texts are also designed to address people's preoccupations.

The content in these three texts include: prayers, esoteric diagrams and letters written in Arabic with instructions on how to use them effectively written in Mandinka Ajami. There is a clear division of labor between Arabic and Ajami writing in these texts. The Arabic prayers, esoteric diagrams, and unmodified letters are treated as the potent text, while the Mandinka Ajami writings are used for explanatory purposes, (i.e. used to explain to Mandinka Ajami literates how to use the potent Arabic prayers, figures, and unmodified letters). The first four texts are written by the late Imam Keba Cisse and, the fifth text is a letter in Mandinka Ajami written on tracing paper by Batuma Cisse. Batuma Cisse, who was then living in Dakar with his family, wrote the letter to his brother Imam Keba Cisse, the father of the manuscript owner. In the letter, Batuma updates his brother on his life and that of his family in Dakar, the capital of Senegal. The manuscript was digitized in the home of the owner (Abdou Khadre Cisse) in the neighborhood of Kandialang in Ziguinchor, Senegal.

Ngom, F., Castro, E., & Diakit , A. (2018). African Ajami Library: EAP 1042. Digital Preservation of Mandinka Ajami Materials of Casamance, Senegal. Boston: Boston University Libraries: <https://hdl.handle.net/2144/27112>

Abdou Khadre Cisse Manuscripts

This collection consists of three sets of manuscripts. The first is a poem (Biniiboo) that celebrates Prophet Muhammad's virtues and retraces his life and the history of his family. The poem is written in Arabic with extensive interlinear and marginal glosses. A few glosses are vocalized and are written in Mandinka Ajami. The second manuscript is a Mandinka Ajami exegesis of the popular Malik  jurisprudence (figh) text known as Al-Akhdar  widely used in West Africa. The third set of manuscripts consists of five types of texts which include prayers to help people achieve social mobility, a manual of special prayers and techniques for finding solutions to people's social problems (including love), and a personal letter in Mandinka Ajami.

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Biniiboo (Panygeric Poetry of Prophet Muhammad)

The entire manuscript is available for download as a single PDF file. Higher-resolution images may be available upon request. For technical assistance, please contact open-help@bu.edu. Fieldwork Team: Dr. Fallou Ngom (Principal Investigator; Director, African Studies Center), Ablaye Diakité (Local Project Manager), Mr. Ibrahima Yaffa (General Field Facilitator), and Ibrahima Ngom (photographer). Technical Team: Dr. Fallou Ngom (Principal Investigator; Director, African Studies Center), and Eleni Castro (Technical Lead, BU Libraries). This collection of Mandinka Ajami materials is copied as part of the African Studies Center's African Ajami Library. This is a joint project between BU and the West African Research Center (WARC), funded by the British Library/Arcadia Endangered Archives Programme. Access Condition and Copyright: These materials are subject to copyright and are distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 License, which permits non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. For use, distribution or reproduction beyond these terms, contact Professor Fallou Ngom (fngom@bu.edu). Citation: Materials in this web edition may be cited as: Ngom, F., Castro, E., & Diakité, A. (2018). African Ajami Library: EAP 1042. Digital Preservation of Mandinka Ajami Materials of Casamance, Senegal. Boston: Boston University Libraries: <http://hdl.handle.net/2144/27112>. For Inquiries: Please contact Professor Fallou Ngom (fngom@bu.edu).

Provenance / Custodial history: The manuscript's owner inherited it from his father (Imam Keba Dabo Cisse) after his death. His father was born in the region of Sedhiou. He had an advanced Islamic education and served as Imam and a religious leader in Ziguinchor until his death. Imam Keba Cisse was an Imam and Quranic teacher. He was born in the village of Bemme in Pakao and died in Ziguinchor. He had an advanced Islamic education and served as Imam and a religious leader in Ziguinchor until his death. This manuscript is a long poem that praises Prophet Muhammad. It celebrates his virtues and retraces his life and the history of his family. It highlights how he overcame the numerous challenges he faced as he sought to spread Islam. Fode Lamine Cisse who was an important Mandinka religious scholar in Pakao, wrote the poem.

He was inspired by the Arabic poetry of the Mandinka scholar Shaykh Alfa Jaji. The poem is written in Arabic with extensive interlinear and marginal glosses. A few glosses are vocalized and are written in Mandinka Ajami. Red ink is used to highlight key words (including the name of Prophet Muhammad) and some key letters. The color red is also used to cross out some words and phrases. There are also small decorative illustrations in red and black ink with Arabic words written inside them. The small designs include the following shapes: square, rectangle, and circle. Watermarks have been photographed (5 pages total) but the page numbers were not recorded. The manuscript was digitized in the home of the owner (Abdou Khadre Cisse) in the neighborhood of Kandialang in Ziguinchor, Senegal.

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Wolofal Manuscripts, Senegal

The EAP334 project, funded by the British Library Endangered Archives Programme, copied manuscripts from 15 collections. The manuscripts primarily consist of Wolofal (Wolof Ajami) materials written by the members of the Muridiyya Sufi order founded in Senegal in 1883 by Ahmadou Bamba (ca 1853-1927) and include satirical, polemical, and protest poetry, as well as biographies, eulogies, genealogies, talismanic resources, therapeutic medical manuals, historical records, instructions on codes of conduct, a translation (with commentaries) of the Qur'an in Wolof Ajami script, and two volumes of the internal biography of Ahmadou Bamba written in Wolof Ajami, among others.