AJAMI SCRIPTS IN THE SENEGALESE
SPEECH COMMUNITY

Fallou Ngom

BOSTON UNIVERSITY

Wolofal (from *Wolof:* Wolof language or ethnic group and '*-al*'*:* causative morpheme) is an Ajami writing (a generic term commonly used to refer to non-Arabic languages written with Arabic scripts) used to transliterate Wolof in Senegal. It results from the early Islamization of the major Muslim ethnic groups in the country, especially the Pulaar, the Wolof and the Mandinka. Although Senegal is considered to be a French-speaking country, ironically over 50% of the Senegalese people are thought to be illiterate in French. French literacy is restricted to the minority educated group mostly found in urban areas. Because the literacy rate in French is very small in the country, especially among older people, Wolofal remains a major means of written communication among people who are illiterate in French and who have attended Qurʾānic schools. It is used by these people to write letters, run their informal businesses and read religious poems and writings. This paper is based upon fieldwork conducted in Senegal in the summer of 2004. It discusses the orthographic system of Wolofal (compared to Arabic) and provides a sociolinguistic profile of communities in which it serves as major means of written communication.[1]

1. Introduction

I traveled to Senegal in the summer of 2004 to collect historical and cultural texts and religious poems and to take digital images of Wolof, Pulaar and Mandinka Ajami manuscripts used in major Senegalese Muslim communities. My goal was to collect as many texts and digital images as possible of these types of Ajami writings and to visit communities where they are typically used. Although people were initially apprehensive about my interest, when they understood my respect for the

local Ajami users and the scholars whose works contain significant knowledge of their communities, most of them shared with me their texts and the knowledge they contain, and in some cases allowed me to take digital pictures.

I also sought to study the linguistic variations in Ajami writings and the possibility of standardizing and modernizing them across the country, and ultimately across Africa. I was particularly impressed by the work of Serigne Moussa Ka,[2] one of the most prolific Wolofal writers, and the influence of his work among the Muridiyya Sufi religious brotherhood. I have not visited all religious and rural towns in the country, and it is likely that there are more scholars whose works in Wolof, Pulaar or Mandinka are still unknown outside their communities.

Although education (in French) is said to be compulsory for all children, the Senegalese *Direction de la Prévision et de la Statistique* indicates that the majority of the Senegalese people (63.4%) can neither read nor write in any language. It also indicates that the illiteracy rate is higher in rural parts of the country where it is estimated at about 77% for people over 15 years (1997, 31). However, these statistics and those provided by UNESCO do not reflect the actual literacy rate in Wolofal and Ajami systems used for other local languages such as Pulaar and Mandinka, particularly in rural and religious centers across the country.

This statistical misrepresentation of Wolofal and other Ajami users is likely due to the fact that 'literacy' is often tacitly construed in Senegal as involving people who can read and write French or are able to use other Latin-based alphabets for local languages. Because Wolofal does not fall in this categorization, its users are often mistakenly considered to be illiterates who need to learn French or the Latin-based system designed for Wolof. These perceptions miss the fact that, although the overwhelming majority of Wolofal users do not speak French or use the Wolof Latin-based alphabet in their daily communications, they have learned the Arabic writing system through the *daara*s (local name commonly used to refer to Qurʾānic schools in the country) and use it effectively for their written communication needs.

---

[2] Since relatively well known or famous West Africans with names originally from Arabic or African languages, or both, are generally most easily recognized by French or English representations of their names, no attempt has been made in the main body of this article, as opposed to transcribed passages, to transliterate scientifically their names. Because there is at times variation in such names, they are generally cited here in the form in which they seem most often to appear on the Internet.

Today, although there are Wolof speakers with advanced competence in Arabic in Senegal owing to their study of Arabic language, culture and civilization, as well as esoteric Qurʾānic sciences, those who use Wolofal but do not speak Arabic actually comprise the majority of the Senegalese Muslims. The fact that Wolofal writings are found across the country for various purposes (on road signs, in telephone booths, on walls, in commercial centers, in announcements, to name only a few) is indicative of the important number of its users in Senegal today.

2. Background

Senegal is the westernmost point of Africa. The population of the country is estimated (July 2009) to be about 13,711,597 according to the Central Intelligence Agency's *World Factbook.* The religious composition of the country is about 94% Muslim, 5% Christian (mostly Roman Catholic), and 1% following indigenous beliefs. The country is divided into 14 administrative regions: Dakar, Diourbel, Fatick, Kaffrine, Kaolack, Kédougou, Kolda, Louga, Matam, Saint-Louis, Sédhiou, Tambacounda, Thiès, and Ziguinchor. Several ethnic groups are found in the country. The major ethnic groups are the Wolof (who comprise about 43.3% of the population), the Pulaar (about 23.8%), the Sereer (about 14.7%), the Jóola (about 3.7%), the Mandinka (about 3%), the Soninke (about 1.1%), and the Europeans and Lebanese (about 1%). Other ethnic groups from neighboring countries comprise about 9.4% of the population.[3]

As a former French colony, Senegal uses French as its official language. Beside French, the most prominent languages in the country are Wolof, Pulaar, Sereer, Mandinka, Jóola and Soninke. The government recognizes these languages as the six national languages of the country, Wolof being the first and most widely spoken lingua franca (spoken by over 80% of the population). It belongs to the West Atlantic branch of the Niger-Congo phylum and is also spoken in the neighboring countries of The Gambia, Mauritania, Mali and Guinea Bissau. Although the six languages are recognized by the government as national languages and have been codified using a Latin-based alphabet, there are many minority ethnic groups across the nation with languages not codified, especially in the former region of Casamance, which is located in the

---

[3] Cf. the CIA's *World Factbook* (23 April 2009; https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/), the Internet site of Senegal's Agence Nationale de la Statistique et de la Démographie (4 January 2010; http://www.ansd.sn/), and similar recent sources.

southern part of the country (between The Gambia and the Republic of Guinea Bissau) and which corresponds to the present regions of Ziguin-chor, Kolda, and Sédhiou.

The use of the Arabic script to write African languages has a long tradition in Muslim communities in Africa, dating back to the historical Islamic centers of learning such as those found in the former Mali Empire. According to July (1992, 55), a center of learning comparable to a medieval university developed around the Sankore Mosque in Timbuktu, Mali, which thus served both as a place of learning and a place of worship.

Osae, Nwabara, and Odunsi (1973, 18) argue that students and teachers came from abroad as well as from all parts of the Sudan. Remarking that the Arabs called the land south of the Sahara 'the land of the Blacks' or 'Bilād-as-Sūdān', they argue that, historically, the broad belt of savanna located between the Sahara Desert and the tropical forest and between the Atlantic Ocean and the Red Sea was termed the Sudan. Today, this area roughly covers all or part of Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Northern Nigeria, Chad, and the Sudan (Osae, Nwabara, and Odunsi 1973, 13).

Moreover, the important number of libraries found in Timbuktu was attested by the Arab known as Leo Africanus, who visited western Sudan in 1510 (Imperato 1989, 22). Hargreaves (1967, 25) points out that more profit was made from the sale of books than from any other commercial activity there. The newly discovered 10th-/16th-century Ajami manu-script on Niger and Kel Tamagheg history dating from the 1500s (Gutelius 2000, 6) attests to the historical literary traditions and wide-spread use of Ajami in Muslim communities across Africa. The discovery provides additional evidence against those who mistakenly argue that West African written literature only started with the arrival of Europeans.

Today, similar Ajami manuscripts are used among the Swahili, Hausa, Fulani (Pulaar), Mandinka, and Wolof people across Africa, to name only these. The early conversion of these ethnic groups to Islam exposed them to the Arabic script through Qurʾānic schools. The establishment of these schools in African societies enabled Africans to master Arabic orthography very early on and thus to use modified versions of the script to write their own languages. Since the 11th century an extensive body of religious, historical and cultural literature has been produced in these Ajami scripts across Africa.

The high percentage of Muslims in Senegal (well over 90% of the population) results from the early Islamization of the northern part of the

country. It dates back to the Islamization of West Africa between the 11th and 16th centuries. According to Gellar (1995), northern Senegal's long involvement in the Trans-Saharan trade exposed it to Islamic currents from North Africa. The people inhabiting the banks of the Senegal River were among the first in West Africa to embrace Islam. Gellar argues that Senegal's geography brought its people into close contact with North Africa and the West, and made Senegal a crossroad where the black African, Islamic and European civilizations met, clashed and blended.

Gellar claims that during the 11th century War Jabi, the Pulaar ruler of the Tekrur empire (which involved the entire northern region of Saint-Louis and Matam, Senegal), came under the influence of Muslim traders and missionaries from North Africa. The great majority of the Pulaar from the region of Saint-Louis followed War Jabi's example. Consequently, the Pulaar became the first major Senegalese ethnic group to embrace Islam en masse (Gellar 1995, 2–3). Gellar (1995, 3) argues that from Tekrur spread the Almoravid movement, which swept through Morocco and Spain during the last third of the 11th century. Over the years Tekrur became a training ground for Muslim clerics and missionaries operating throughout modern Senegal and West Africa (Gellar 1995, 3).Thus, by the 14th century, Qurʾānic schools were established in Senegal, and most Senegalese Muslims were already able to use the Arabic script to write their own languages (Diop 1989). As a result, because the overwhelming majority of the Senegalese Muslims speak Wolof (the major lingua franca), the use of Ajami scripts to write the language is pervasive in rural and religious areas today.

3. Religious Brotherhoods and Ajami Literature in the Wolof Speech Community

The Senegalese constitution clearly states that the country is a secular state, and the government ensures that freedom of worship for all religions and faiths in the country is protected. Today most Senegalese Muslims belong to one of three Sufi brotherhoods: the Tijaniyya (which comprises two smaller brotherhoods: the Niassènes and the Layènes), the Qadiriyya (locally: Qadriyya), and the Muridiyya (often spelled Mouridiyya). These religious brotherhoods are structured around a religious leader who is typically a descendant of the founder of the brotherhood. The two largest groups are the Tijaniyya (based in the city of Tivaouane, in the region of Thiès), and the Murids (Mourides), based in their holy city Touba, in the region of Diourbel.

The Senegalese Tijaniyya brotherhood was created by al-Hajj Umar

Tall (a Pulaar clerical warrior) in the 19th century. The brotherhood was founded in the Algerian oasis Abi Samghun in 1196/1781−82 by Aḥmad al-Tijānī, some five years after going on the Pilgrimage and a prolonged stay in the East (EI², 10: 463b; cf. Gellar 1995, 7). The Tijaniyya religious order spread in the country in the 19th century through the work of the religious leader al-Hajj Malik (Malick) Sy (1855−1922), who settled in Tivaouane, where he founded a mosque and an Islamic school. Later, the brotherhood was expanded to other regions of the country by the establishment of new branches (commonly referred to as *zāwiya*), in particular that in Kaolack led by Abdoulaye Niasse (1844−1922). This branch is known today as Niassène in Senegal (named after the founder Abdoulaye Niasse). Despite the modern influences attested in the city of Tivaouane today (such as rap graffiti painted on the walls by the 'wanna-be American' youngsters), the city is still regarded as an important place for Qurʾānic and Islamic education in Senegal. Thus the Tijaniyya brotherhood has contributed importantly to the Wolof people's exposure to Islamic teachings and the Arabic script.

The other group, the Layène brotherhood, consists mostly of the Lébou ethnic group. The Lébou constitute a relatively small fisherman group related to the Wolof and considered to be the first inhabitants of the present department of Rufisque. The brotherhood was founded by Seydina Limamou Laye (1845−1909), a member of the community. The brotherhood believes that the long awaited appearance of the Mahdi (Arabic: *al-mahdī*, 'the God-guided one') and Issa Rohou Laye (ʿĪsā Rūḥu llāhi = Jesus Christ) occurred in Senegal at the end of the 19th century. Members of the brotherhood believe that Seydina Limamou Laye is the Mahdi (the long awaited guide to come in the last days) to lead the world. They believe that his coming was predicted in old Islamic documents and that he will bring good news and divine blessing to the world. After his death, his son Seydina Issa Rohou Laye, who is believed to be the incarnation of Jesus Christ, continued his teachings. The half black, half white face in the picture on the next page, which is found in their community, illustrates the beliefs that the disciples associate with their religious leader Seydina Issa Rohou Laye as the embodiment of Jesus Christ, and their perception of him.

Another key feature that characterizes this brotherhood is the fact that the founder and most of the disciples have given up their Lébou last names to adopt the divine name Allah (Arabic: Allāhi, God, genitive case) pronounced as 'Laye' in the Layène community. For this reason, members of the Layène brotherhood can today easily be identified in

Senegal because of the last name 'Laye' they share. However, although some Wolof Ajami literature is found in the brotherhood, the quantity is relatively limited. This is due to the fact that the number of the members of the brotherhood is relatively small, and the brotherhood does not have an established tradition of Qurʾānic education or a significant number of people with the ability to use the Arabic script.

Figure 1. Seydina Issa Rohou Laye, 'Jesus Christ Reincarnated.'
Yoff-Dakar, Senegal. © Copyright 2004 by Fallou Ngom

The Qadiris and the Mourides have also contributed to the spreading of Qurʾānic schools and the Arabic writing system in the country. The Qadiriyya brotherhood, at least the original movement, was founded in the 12th century in Baghdad by ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī (470/1077–78– 561/1166; the *nisba* is sometimes given as al-Jīlī and is often written al-Jīlālī in the Maghrib). A branch was established in Senegal by the Mauritanian shaykh Bounaama Kounta. Later, his son Shaykh Bou Kounta (1840–1914) established an important branch of the brotherhood in Niassane, Senegal. Although it is the oldest religious brotherhood in the country, it has a limited number of followers compared to other brotherhoods. Traditionally, this brotherhood was limited to people who live along the Senegal River, particularly among the Moors. The brotherhood has two other branches, commonly known as the Fadiliyya and the Sidiyya, based in Mauritania. Because of the strong connection that the Tijanis and the Qadiris share with North Africa and the Arab world and the significant number of members highly educated in Qurʾānic studies and the Arabic language, most of their literature is written in Arabic

rather than in Ajami. However, while the overwhelming literary produc-
tion of these brotherhoods is in Arabic, there is evidence of the existence
of Wolof and Pulaar Ajami literature written by some disciples.

The Muridiyya brotherhood was founded by Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba
Mbacké (1853–1927), who was born in Mbacké-Baol, Senegal. He es-
tablished his religious brotherhood in Touba. Today, Touba is said to
have the biggest mosque in West Africa. Besides the basic precepts of
Islam that it shares with other brotherhoods and its special relationship
with the Qadiriyya brotherhood (Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba was a
member of this brotherhood before creating the Muridiyya religious
order), the Muridiyya brotherhood emphasizes the importance of work,
which it considers to be one of the greatest forms of worship. Today, it is
the most popular religious brotherhood in the country, especially among
younger people. This is likely due to the fact that the Murids assert an
African identity often not underscored in other brotherhoods. As such, it
has produced an African brand of sub-Saharan Islam that takes into
account the cultural traditions of Wolof society (in which it originated).
Like the founders of other religious brotherhoods in the country, the
founder of the Muridiyya brotherhood wrote his religious poems and
essays primarily in Arabic. This reflects the fact that as Islam expanded
eastward and westward into new lands, Muslim scholars used Arabic as
their lingua franca (Chtatou 1992, 16).

The use of the Arabic script to write Wolof in the Murid community
was primarily developed by the first disciples (such as Serigne Moussa
Ka) to write about their leader and his life experiences and to dissemi-
nate his teachings to other Wolof members of the community, who were
familiar with his message written in Arabic, but did not necessarily speak
or read the language. Disciples such as such Moussa Ka had a strong
mastery of Arabic orthography, which they learned through their ad-
vanced Qurʾānic education. Consequently, their Wolofal manuscripts
contrast with that of Wolofal writers with less Qurʾānic education. This
difference in Qurʾānic education is well captured by Hunwick's (2003–4,
63) distinction between the 'learned' (Serigne Moussa Ka) and the 'liter-
ate' (the other disciples).

Unlike the Tijaniyya and Qadiriyya brotherhoods, where the emphasis
was put on educating their disciples in Qurʾānic learning and Arabic
language (due to their close relationship with the Arab world and North
Africa), the Murid community put the emphasis on Qurʾānic education
and the teachings of the brotherhood conveyed in Wolof (the first
language of most members of the brotherhood). Thus, the use of Arabic
script to write Wolof became an effective instrument for educating

disciples about the tenets, beliefs, and practices of the Muridiyya brotherhood. For this reason, it contrasts with other brotherhoods in terms of literary and cultural practices. Here is a picture of a Baye Fall, that is, a follower of Shaykh Ibrahima Fall, one of the first and most prominent disciples of the Muridiyya order, who was known for his hard work for the benefit of the brotherhood. He is considered to be the embodiment of work, which as previously remarked, is viewed as one of the greatest forms of worship in the Muridiyya order.

Figure 2. A Baye Fall Disciple of the Muridiyya Brotherhood.
Ziguinchor, Senegal. © Copyright 2004 by Fallou Ngom.

The fact that Wolof people comprise the most important part of the Muridiyya brotherhood and that the brotherhood has not sought to fully assimilate to Arabic language and culture but has been able to adapt the teachings of Islam to the African way of life has contributed to the rapid development of Wolof Ajami literature in the Murid community compared to other brotherhoods. Thus, although there are Ajami texts from other brotherhoods, their number is limited compared to the extensive Murid Wolofal literature found across Senegal today.

4. The Use of Wolofal in the Wolof Speech Community
Wolof has a very rich oral tradition and many authors also use it in their writings. Some of the literature is recorded using the Latin alphabet. For instance, the New Testament was published in the Latin script in 1987.

However, Latin script writings are less widespread in the country be-cause of 1) the high illiteracy rate in French and other Latin-based writing systems, 2) the initial resistance of the Wolof people to enroll their children in the French schools which they perceived as a way of assimilation to the European Christian culture and way of life, and 3) the already existing use of the Arabic script to write African languages prior to the arrival of the French colonizers. However, as in many parts of Africa during colonization, colonial powers opposed the use of Arabic-based scripts and imposed Latin-based alphabets in order to prevent the spread of the Arabic language in the colonized countries (Chtatou 1992, 7). Consequently, most of the research conducted by the colonial powers focused on the teaching of their own languages and Latin-based alpha-bets for African languages.

Although no significant academic research has been conducted on Wolofal, it is a fact that it is used by most Wolof speakers illiterate in French, especially in religious towns and rural parts of the countryside primarily inhabited by Wolof speakers. Thus, although the use of French and the Latin-based script for African languages has increased, the tradi-tional use of Wolofal as a literary language and as a language of written communication has also become more widespread in the country.

Today, although the Wolof language has been codified since the 1970s using the Latin orthography, the population that uses Wolofal is significantly greater than the number of people educated in French and those trained to use the current standard Wolof orthography. This is part-ly because children typically attend Qurʾānic schools prior to going to the public schools, where French is the primary language of instruction.

4.1. The Relationship between the Arabic Script and Wolofal
Because of the limited number of people fluent in Arabic, the Arabic language has never been used as a major medium of communication in the daily life of most Senegalese people. Its use was and still is restricted primarily to religious spheres. For this reason, classical Arabic is re-spected and is granted a somewhat *holy* status, as it is the language of the Qurʾān, the holy book of over 90% of the Senegalese population. In contrast to the prestige of Arabic, Wolofal does not necessarily carry such a holy status as it is used for both religious and secular purposes. Its religious functions typically consist of religious songs glorifying God and praising the prophet Muhammad and the founders of the brother-hoods, or the translation of some Arabic literature (written by the foun-der or disciples of the brotherhood) into Wolofal. These types of writings are found in religious and non-religious settings in both urban and rural

areas in the country today.

The secular usage of Wolofal is found as well in both religious and non-religious settings. For instance, it is used to give directions on road signs, to write historical essays, biographies, songs, eulogies, poems, announcements and advertisements, to give instructions, to keep records, to write letters and to take notes, to name only these. Although Wolofal is not formally taught in Qurʾānic schools, its usage is clearly fostered in in these institutions, where users are initially exposed to Arabic orthography. These schools exhibit the basic structure of the Qurʾānic education system, as rightly pointed out by Lasisi (1995).

Education in Muslim societies typically consists of three levels. The first level, the only compulsory level, can begin for a child as young as three or four. At this level, the Qurʾān is introduced in Arabic and students learn how to observe the daily prayers, study the life of the prophet Muhammad as well as the lives of other prophets, and learn various aspects of Islam (Lasisi 1995, 14). It is at this level that children normally begin memorization of the Qurʾān, at about the age of six (Hunwick 2003–4, 63). They advance to the next level at their own rate of learning or may choose not to continue (Lasisi 1995, 14).

Lasisi (1995, 14) argues that the second level of Islamic education typically consists of learning the meaning of the Qurʾān in the local language. Very often it is only the students who wish to become teachers themselves who reach this level. At this stage, students begin receiving instruction in Islamic divination, medicine, and astrology.

The last level can go on for a lifetime. It is at this level that students often become specialized. Students may seek special knowledge in the sayings and deeds of the prophet Muhammad (*ḥadīth*), or in areas of Islamic jurisprudence, or mysticism. At this level students usually travel great distances to study with renowned scholars (Lasisi 1995, 14).

Typically, students in Qurʾānic schools recite their lessons aloud until the teacher is satisfied. They also write passages of the Qurʾān on a wooden slate with a special pen and locally made black ink (Jalloh 1997, 57). Today, in the countryside and religious towns, Qurʾānic schools operating in this manner, commonly referred to as *daaras,* are the primary educational institutions through which Wolofal users are initially exposed to the Arabic script and Ajami writings.

While it is true that most students in these schools usually leave after completing the first level, that is, after being taught some verses of the Qurʾān (typically through recitation and rote memorization) and basic Islamic precepts often reflecting the point of view of their school's religious order, they are nevertheless exposed to both the Arabic script

and its modified version so as to be able to write messages, take notes and keep their personal records in their own languages by the time they leave the school. Nowadays, market places in urban centers are filled with street vendors and small shop owners who come from these schools. These people use the Ajami writing system to write letters and to run their businesses.

In Wolofal, some letters of the Arabic alphabet learned in Qurʾānic schools are modified to write Wolof sounds that do not exist in Arabic. The modifications typically consist of the addition of new diacritical signs to some Arabic letters. The following section examines the similarities and differences between Wolofal and Arabic orthography.

4.2. Arabic and Wolofal Consonants and their Corresponding IPA Symbols

The Arabic alphabet has 28 letters, of which two are semi-vowels, *wāw* (و) and *yāʾ* (ي), and one, *ʾalif* (ا), behaves much like the semi-vowels, but has no consonantal value on its own. The number of letters rises to 29 if the glottal stop *hamza* (ء) is included. Depending on its position in the word, it can be carried by the semi-vowels or *ʾalif,* or occur alone. The following table shows the basic consonantal system of Arabic, its orthography, and its letters borrowed by Wolofal writers.

Phonetic Sounds	Arabic Orthography	Wolofal Orthography
1. [ʔ], [aː]	ا	ا
2. [b]	ب	ب
3. [t]	ت	ت
4. [θ]	ث	X
5. [dʒ], [ǰ]	ج	ج
6. [ħ]	ح	ح
7. [x]	خ	خ
8. [d]	د	د
9. [ð]	ذ	X
10. [r]	ر	ر
11. [z]	ز	X
12. [s]	س	س
13. [ʃ]	ش	X
14. [sˤ]	ص	X
15. [dˤ]	ط	X
16. [tˤ]	ط	X
17. [zˤ]	ظ	X
18. [ʕ]	ع	X

19. [ɣ]	غ	X
20. [f]	ڢ ، ف	ڢ ، ف
21. [q]	ڧ ، ق	ڧ ، ق
22. [k]	ک	ک
23. [l]	ل	ل
24. [m]	م	م
25. [n]	ن	ن
26. [h]	ه	ه
27. [w], [u:]	و	و
28. [j], [i:]	ي	ي
29. [ʔ]	ء	ء⁴

X in the Wolofal column indicates letters not typically borrowed by Wolofal users. However, these letters may be used in Arabic loanwords found in Wolofal texts or in Wolof words that are influenced by the Arabic language. Such usages are also typical of Wolofal writers with some Arabic language competence learned through their advanced studies of the Qurʾān. As rightly pointed out by Hunwick (2003–4, 64), in the traditional method of learning the Qurʾān in West Africa, only advanced students of the Qurʾān learned all the complex rules of Arabic orthography. The table shows that Wolofal has borrowed about 18 letters from Arabic. The Arabic letters that are borrowed and mostly used by Wolofal users typically correspond to the sound units that already exist in Wolof, and those not regularly borrowed correspond to sound segments that do not exist in Wolof. Letters lose their tails when combined with other letters both in Arabic and Wolofal. To lengthen Arabic consonants, the sign *shadda* (ّ) is placed on the consonant. Wolofal users also make use of the *shadda* to write Wolof geminate consonants.

With respect to the Wolofal use of the letters ڢ, ڧ in 20 and 21, often referred to as the Maghribi *fāʾ* and *qāf* to distinguish them from ف, ق, the Eastern (Mashriqi) *fāʾ* and *qāf,* both the Maghribi and Eastern letters are regularly attested in the Wolofal literature. It is worth noting that the whole style of Wolofal writings can either be Maghribi (Kufic inspired) or Naskhi (Eastern, cursive) depending on the author's background.[5] While the use of the Maghribi style in Wolofal texts is

---

⁴ Learned usage.

⁵ Cf. on the Maghribi script, see van den Boogert 1989, 30–31, summarizing the arguments of O. Houdas in 'Essai sur l'écriture maghrébine', in *Nouveaux mélanges orientaux,* IIᵉ série, vol. XIX, Publications de l'École des Langues Orientales Vivantes (Paris, 1886).

likely due to the relative proximity of North Africa, the use of the Naskhi style may be due to its clarity and its frequent occurrence in the correspondence and literary production of educated Muslims. Beside these variations found in Wolofal texts, Wolofal users have made some innovations to write Wolof sound units that do not exist in Arabic. The following table provides a summary of the Wolof short consonants. I have not included Wolof geminate consonants, because they do not often pose problems for Wolofal users (as they use the *shadda* to indicate consonantal length).

4.3. Wolof Short Consonants

Stops:	p	t		k		(ʔ)
	b	d		g	q
Prenasals:	mp	nt	nǰ	nk
	mb	nd	nč	ng	nq
Nasals:	m	n	ñ	ŋ
Affricates:			č
			ǰ
Fricatives:	f	s		x	h
Lateral:		l
Trill:		r
Glides:	w		j

The consonants in frames are those that do not exist in Arabic, and therefore need new Wolofal letters to write them. In order to do so, Wolofal users tend to add three dots on top of their closest Arabic counterparts. Although in most Wolofal texts the three dots are placed above the consonants, in some the dots are placed below the consonants. The three dots used on top of the Arabic consonants (which normally do not have such dots) are referred to as 'tomb' in Wolof. The letters used in the table below are based upon the Wolofal texts I collected during my fieldwork. The following letters are the most common Wolofal letters used to write Wolof consonants that do not exist in Arabic.

Wolof Phonemes with No Arabic Counterparts	Wolofal Letters Used for These Phonemes
1. p	ݒ
2. g	ؼ ک غ
3. ñ	ݘ ج ني
4. ŋ	ؼ ݝ غ

5. č	جۡ ج
6. mp	ب بۛ
7. nt	نت ت
8. nǰ	جۡ ج
9. nk	نكـ كـ
10. mb	بۛ ب
11. nd	ذد, ذ, د
12. nč	جۡ ج
13. ng	ڳ غۡ
14. nq	ف ق

While the use of the three dots on the Arabic [b] ب to write the Wolof consonant [p] is relatively consistent in most Wolofal texts, the writing of other consonants (particularly prenasal consonants) exhibits considerable variation as the table shows. For instance, the Wolofal letters (بۛ ڳ خۡ) for [p], [g], and [ñ], respectively, are commonly attested in Wolofal writings, however, Wolofal literature also contains many instances where the same letters are used for the prenasal consonants [mp], [ng], and [nǰ], respectively. The table above shows the variations attested in the Wolofal texts I have collected. This table is not meant to be exhaustive. It only represents the variations found in my data.

These variations require Wolofal readers to be familiar with the whole gamut of possible letters used to write Wolof consonants that do not exist in Arabic. This usage of one Wolofal letter for multiple consonants is due to the fact that 1) people are not formally taught the standard form of Wolofal, and 2) idiolectal and dialectal features of writers are commonly found in Wolofal manuscripts. For these reasons, in order to be able to read and understand Wolofal texts, one needs not only to be acquainted with the writings of the author, but also with the author's dialectal and idiolectal patterns. The following section examines the use of vowels in Arabic and Wolofal.

4.4. Arabic and Wolofal Vowels and Their Corresponding IPA Symbols
Arabic only has three vowels, whereas Wolof has seven. The following table shows the basic vowel system of Arabic, its orthography and its signs borrowed by Wolofal users.

Phonetic Sounds	Arabic Orthography	Wolofal Orthography
[i]/[i:]	Line under a consonant: Example: سِ [si] / سِي [si:]	Borrowed

[a]/[aː]	Line on a consonant: Example: سَ [sa] / سَا [saː]	Borrowed
[u]/[uː]	A small و or د on a consonant: Example: سُ (su) / سُو [suː]	Borrowed
[aw]	Line on a consonant plus و : Example: سَوْ [saw]	Borrowed
[aj]	Line on a consonant plus ي : Example: سَيْ [saj]	Borrowed

What is shown by this table is certainly well known to most of the readers of this journal, but I should like to summarize for those not familiar with Arabic a few things necessary to the understanding of the remainder of this article. Arabic has three short vowels [i, u, a] which are placed on top of or under the consonants. The vowel [i] is referred to as *kasra* and is represented by a short line under the consonant as in سِ [si]. The vowel [a] is referred to as *fatḥa* and is represented by a short line on top of the consonant as in سَ [sa]. The vowel [u] is referred to as *ḍamma* and is represented by the sign ُ or a small superscript د written on top of a consonant as in سُ [su]. Typically, Arabic vowels are lengthened when they are accompanied by the semi-vowels (ي , و) and the letter ا , as shown above. Diphthongs are generally represented by a combination of a vowel with a semi-vowel bearing a *sukūn* (a small circle put on top of the semi-vowel), as illustrated in the words [saw] and [dañuj] in figure 3 below. Vowel diacritics are not commonly used in contemporary Arabic as they can be predicted by native speakers. They are mostly used in poetry, the Qurʾān and Arabic books designed for children or foreign learners. The absence of a vowel is indicated by the use of the *sukūn*. It is a small circle put on top of the consonant as in سْ [s]. Wolofal has borrowed all these Arabic features. However Wolof has seven vowels to represent, as illustrated by the following diagram of the Wolof vowel system.
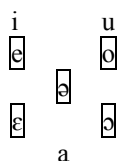
In order to write Wolof vowels which do not exist in Arabic, most Wolofal writers use the Arabic *kasra* to write all the Wolof front vowels [i, e, ɛ], the *ḍamma* to write all the back vowels, and *fatḥa* to write the

vowels [a] and [ə]. The vowels [ɔ] and [o] are also written with the *ḍamma* and a dot placed inside it in some Wolofal texts. While most Wolofal texts use these Arabic vowels, some Wolofal texts also use a dot below a consonant to indicate the vowels [e] and [ɛ]. The table below provides a summary of the writing of vowels in Wolofal.

Arabic Vowels	Wolofal
Kasra [i] is used to write	i, e, ɛ
Ḍamma [u] is used to write	u, o, ɔ
Fatḥa [a] is used to write	a, ə

Similar to the variations discussed earlier with respect to consonants, these vocalic variations require Wolofal readers to be familiar with the range of possible Arabic vowels used to write Wolof vowels. The following section provides visual images of Wolofal writings with variations comparable to those discussed above.

5. Analysis of Sample Wolofal Texts

I had long been aware of the religious use of Ajami scripts in areas beyond the spheres of influence of European languages in Senegambia. However, I was stunned by its widespread secular use as illustrated by the Wolofal texts in figures 3, 4, and 5 at the end.

Figure 3 was found in a secluded place in the city of Diourbel where people would sometimes urinate, if they did not have immediate access to a bathroom. The targeted audience is clearly the Wolofal users who comprise the majority of the population of that area. The picture exhibits some of the variations discussed earlier. For instance, the *kasra* is used to write the two Wolof vowels [e] and [i] as illustrated by the words [tere] 'prohibited' and [fi] 'here' in the picture. The following picture exhibits analogous variations.

The picture in figure 4 was found in Touba, the major religious city of the Muridiyya brotherhood. It was found at the entrance of a local commercial center. The targeted audience is the local customers who are Wolofal literates and who comprise the overwhelming majority of the population of the city. This Wolofal text consists only of French and Arabic loanwords. These words are loanwords that entered into the Wolof speech community a long time ago. Consequently, most Wolofal users know their meanings, although they may not speak French or Arabic. The borrowed standard French words 'centre commercial' [sãtʁ-komɛʁsjal] (commercial center) and 'original' [oʁiʒinal] are written in Wolofal as they are pronounced by Wolofal users who are largely illiterate in French. The fact that the French words are written as [santar-

komaʁsjaːl] and [oriʃinaːl] in Wolofal is due to the linguistic influence of Wolof, a language which does not have nasal vowels and the consonants [ʁ] and [ʒ], and does not accept consonant clusters such as [tr]. The use of the non-standard pronunciation of the French words suggests that the writer is likely not to have been educated in French.

Compared to the French loans, the Arabic loanwords on the picture are less influenced by the Wolof linguistic system because they have retained their original Arabic features. For example, the consonants ط and ش (in the Arabic structure [mɑtˤɑbu ʃʃifaːʔi] 'Search for Remedy'), which do not exist in Wolof, are still maintained in the Wolofal text. This suggests that the author is influenced by Arabic. The fact that the س in كُمِرْسيَالْ has no vocalization indicates that the writer is also avoiding putting a *sukūn* in a place not acceptable in the Arabic language. This further indicates that the writer has some mastery of Arabic grammar. With respect to the vowels used in figure 4, the text exhibits some variations. For example, the *ḍamma* is used for both [o] and [u] and the *kasra* is used as [ɛ] and [i].

Similarly, the Wolofal text in figure 5 exhibits extensive orthographic variations. As indicated earlier, Arabic loans written by Wolofal authors with some Arabic education tend to keep some or all their initial orthographic features as illustrated by the Arabic structures [assalaːmu ʕalajkum wa raħmatu lˤlˤɑːhi] in line 1, [aʃʃajxu lxadiːm] in line 2, and [in ʃaːʔa lˤlˤɑːhu] in line 7. The Arabic structure [aʃʃajxu lxadiːm], which literally means the 'Servant Shaykh', from (*khadīm al-rasūl,* the servant of the Prophet), is an epithet used for Ahmadou Bamba (the founder of the Muridiyya brotherhood). In line 6, the French word [ʒɥijɛ] 'Juillet' (July) is written as [suljeː] (the way it is typically pronounced by Wolof speakers with no education in French, who comprise the overwhelming majority of Wolofal users).

With respect to vowels used in this text, the variation is consistent with the patterns discussed earlier in Figure 4. The *ḍamma* is shown in Figure 5 to refer to the Wolof vowels [o], [ɔ] and [u], the *kasra* is used to write the Wolof vowels [i], [e] and [ɛ], and the *fatḥa* for the Wolof vowels [a] and [ə] throughout the text. The text also contains two instances where a dot below a consonant is used to refer to the Wolof vowel [e]: in the words [suljeː] in line 6 and [ǰɔteː] in line 7. It is interesting to note an additional variation with respect to the use of this dot. In the Wolofal word corresponding to [suljeː] in line 6, the dot occurs below the *kasra* already under the ي , while in the Wolofal word corresponding to [ǰɔteː] the *kasra* is not used below the consonant ت . The

use of the dot below the *kasra* is consistent with the Arabic diacritical sign adopted for the Wolof vowel [ɛ] written as 'é' in the Latin-based alphabet (Chtatou 1992, 40). Finally, the schwa in the last word in line 8 is mistakenly written with *ḍamma* rather than the *fatḥa* used throughout the text. While the use of the *shadda* ◌ّ on the consonants to indicate geminates is fairly consistent in the text, the writing of the consonants exhibit variations similar to those observed with the vowels.

For instance, the prenasal [mb] in line 2 is written with ب, whereas it is written with ﺜ in line 3. Again, the consonant [p] in line 8 is also written with ﺜ. Similarly, the consonant [ñ] in lines 3, 5, and 8 is written with ح, and the consonant [č] in lines 3, 5, and 7 is written thrice with ح and once with خ. The consonant [g] in lines 4 and 6 is also written with ڭ and ﻚ, respectively. Moreover, the Maghribi [f] ڢ is also used in lines 5 and 7. Although these variations in the Wolofal literature are well-understood and tacitly accepted among users, they have made Wolofal manuscripts difficult to read and comprehend by people outside the community.

In this respect, the standardization of Wolofal is a crucial step toward eliminating these variations and modernizing the system in a way that it can be used as an effective means to teach Wolofal users the modern skills they need to be active participants in the development of the country and be successful in the 21st century. It is worth noting that some initial efforts have been made to standardize Wolofal since the 1980s. The Senegalese government in collaboration with UNESCO and ISESCO developed standard Arabic alphabets for Wolof and Pulaar in 1987 (Chatou 1992, 36–48). By 1992, ISESCO produced the first Afro-Arabic keyboard and typewriter (Chtatou 1992, 62–63). However, since then the standard Wolofal orthography has not been employed among Wolofal users due to the lack of funding for opening actual schools or pilot schools in the countryside, where the new standard alphabet could be used to teach mathematics, geography, sciences, and the like. Because of the cultural and historical connection that people have with Wolofal in rural parts of the country, the scope of its usage, and the pride associated with it in rural communities, opening secular modern Wolofal classes both in rural and also urban areas of Senegal would undoubtedly be successful. This could potentially be more effective than the current use of the Latin-based standard Wolof alphabet (quite foreign to learners) in adult literacy programs throughout the country today.

Unfortunately, despite the efforts of the Senegalese government and some non-governmental organizations today to raise the literacy rate in

Wolof and other local languages in the country, Wolofal and other similar forms of writing (used across the country by the overwhelming majority of the French-illiterate Muslims) are still not taken into account in the literacy programs, and the extensive body of literature written in them is still unknown or at least not studied in academic circles in Senegal or abroad.

Conclusion

Given the scope of usage of Wolofal and other similar Ajami scripts across Africa (in Senegal, The Gambia, Mali, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Ghana, Tanzania, Kenya, Niger, Nigeria, to name just these), and given the linguistic, cultural, religious, and political challenges of the 21st century, it would of great benefit to the world that such systems be rigorously studied by scholars, that university courses based on the literary traditions of these societies be offered to uncover the extensive knowledge still buried in their Ajami manuscripts and that the secular use of the modernized and standardized forms of these writing systems be supported by both governments and non-governmental organizations.

Finally, the creation of modern schools using the modernized and standardized Ajami scripts of Berber, Pulaar, Wolof, Mandinka, Hausa, Swahili, Zarma, Songhay, and the like, could be a giant step toward the linguistic integration of Africa, since it would revitalize a common historical heritage and appeal to cultural and linguistic relationships that have existed between Muslim communities across Africa for centuries. The creation of such schools could also help provide a modern 21st century curriculum to be used in African Qurʾānic schools for the teaching of such subjects as science, mathematics, geography, and history, thereby exposing students to the world outside their communities and to knowledge that is generally limited or unavailable in typical Qurʾānic schools.

كُفِسَوْ	تِرِ	دَخُيْ
[ku fi saw]	[tere]	[dañuj]
(Someone here urinate)	(Prohibited)	(It is)

Figure 3. Wolofal Instruction: 'Urinating Prohibited at this Place.' Diourbel, Senegal. © Copyright 2004 by Fallou Ngom

كُمْرسِيَالْ سَنْتَرْ
[komɛrsjaːl] [santar]
(Commercial Center)

الشِّفَاءِ مَطْلَبُ
Ara: [matˤlɑbu]
[ʃʃifaːʔi]
(Arabic name: Maṭlabu l-Shifã°i)

أُرِسِنَالْ
[orisinaːl]
(Original)

a 150M. ←[at 150 meters ←]

Figure 4. Wolofal Sign with French and Arabic Words. Touba, Senegal. © Copyright 2004 by Fallou Ngom.

IPA Transcription of Wolofal Text with English Translation

1. Arabic: [assala:mu ʕalajkum wa raħmatu lˤʕɑ:hi] (*Peace be upon you and God's Mercy*)

2. [jeːn mbɔkki ǰullit ji «da:raj aʃʃajxu lxadi:m»] (*You Muslim brothers in 'al-Shaykh al-Khadīm's house'*)

3. [ɲi nɛkk karče «laje:n» či mbakke, ɲɔ: leːn di] (*who are in the 'Layeen' district in Mbacké, we are*)

4. [jəgal daʒeb lisla:m burəj bu nuj amal-] (*informing you about the Islamic meeting organized*)

5. [dibeːr, ɲa:r fukki fan ak bɛnnə,⁶ či weːru] (*on Sunday, 21st day, in the month of*)

6. [«rakka:ti gammɔ» tɔllɔːk 11 / sulje: / 2004] (*'Rakkasti Gammu'⁷ corresponding to July 11, 2004*)

7. [bu fukki waxtu jɔte: či suba. in ʃa:ʔa lˤʕɑ:hu] (*at 10 o'clock in the morning. God willing*)

8. [ɲuj sakku seːn teːwa:j jeːn ɲeppə⁶] (*We are asking for the presence of all of you.*)

Figure 5. Meeting Announcement in Wolofal found on a Wall, Mbacké, Senegal. © Copyright 2004 by Fallou Ngom.

---

⁶ This word is generally pronounced with final geminates and written in the Latin script without the final schwa. However, in Wolofal such final geminates often carry a vowel.

⁷ Third month of the Wolof lunar calendar, literally 'sibling of the sibling of Gammo', *Gammu* being the celebration of the prophet Muḥammad's birthday, which occurs in the first month of the Islamic calendar.

REFERENCES

Boogert, N. van den. 1989. 'Some Notes on Maghribi Script'. *Manuscripts of the Middle East* 4: 30−43. See http://www.islamicmanuscripts.info/reference/articles/boogert_notes_maghribi_script.PDF (accessed May 19, 2009).

Chtatou, Mohamed. 1992. *Using Arabic Script in Writing the Languages of the People of Muslim Africa.* Rabat: Institute of African Studies.

Diop, A. H. 1989. 'Language Contact, Language Planning and Language Policy in Senegal'. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University.

Direction de la Prévision et de la Statistique. 1997. *Enquête sénégalaise auprès des ménages.* Dakar: Ministère de l'Économie, des Finances et du Plan.

EI² = Encyclopaedia of Islam. 2nd ed. Leiden : Brill, 1960−2009.

Gellar, S. 1995. *Senegal: An African Nation between Islam and the West.* Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.

Gutelius, David. 2002. 'Newly Discovered 10th/16th C. Ajami Manuscript in Niger and Kel Tamagheg History'. *Saharan Studies Newsletter* 8, nos. 1−2.

Hargreaves, John D. 1967. *West Africa: The Former French States.* Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.

Hunwick, John. 2003−4. '"I Wish to Be Seen in Our Land Called Africa": ꜥUmar b. Sayyid's Appeal to Be Released from Slavery (1819)'. *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 5: 62−77.

Imperato, Pascal James. 1989. *Mali: A Search for Direction.* Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.

Jalloh, Alusine. 1997. 'The Fula and Islamic education in Freetown, Sierra Leone'. *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 14/4: 51−68.

July, Robert W. 1992. *A History of the African People.* 4th ed. Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland Press.

Lasisi, R. O. 1995. 'French Colonialism and Islamic Education in West Africa, 1900−1939'. *Muslim Education Quarterly* 12/3: 12−22.

Ngom, Fallou. 2002. 'Lexical Borrowings as Pathways to Senegal's Past and Present'. In Toyin Falola and Christian Jennings, eds., *Africanizing Knowledge: African Studies across the Disciplines,* 125−47. Edison, NJ: Transaction Press.

Osae, T. A., S. N. Nwabara, and A. T. O. Odunsi. 1973. *A Short History of West Africa: A. D. 1000 to the Present.* New York: Hill and Wang.