African Voices in Islamic Manuscripts from Mali

A workshop at the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures
Warburgstraße 26, room 2002, Hamburg

24-25 October, 2016

Presentation and discussion of findings of the project “African voices in Islamic manuscripts from Mali: a study of African languages written in Arabic-based script (Ajami)” funded by Gerda Henkel Foundation

In conjunction with the meetings of the “Old Mande Research Network” and “Nigerian Manuscripts Association”

In memory of Mouhamadou Almarzouk Cissé

Participants: Abdoulkadir Adamu (Kaduna), Sidi Bamadio (Bamako), Ismaila Zangou Barazi (Bamako), Hamadou Boly (Bamako), Dmitry Bondarev (Hamburg), Artem Davydov (Saint Petersburg), Nikolay Dobronravin (Saint Petersburg), Abdel Kader Haidara (Bamako/Timbuktu), Samby Khalil Magassouba (Bamako), Musa Salih Muhammad (Kaduna), Maimadu Barma Mutai (Maiduguri), Darya Ogorodnikova (Hamburg), Fallou Ngom (Boston), Maria Luisa Russo (Hamburg/Bamako), Imam Shettima Habib (Maiduguri), Lameen Souag (Paris), Tal Tamari (Paris), Abba Isa Tijani (Maiduguri), Banzoumana Traoré (Bamako).

The workshop participants were deeply saddened by the death of our colleague Mouhamadou Almarzouk Cissé, the member of the Ajami project. He passed away on 5 October 2016 due to heart attack in the town of Banamba, 150 kilometres from Bamako. His devotion, energy and ingenuity inspired the work of the whole team. We dedicated our Ajami workshop to his memory. A catalogue of Ajami manuscripts and a collection of research papers will also be dedicated to the living memory of Marzouk Cissé, as he was known among the colleagues and friends.

The workshop is the first of the two events planned during the life span of the Ajami project. The main objective of the first workshop was to bring together our project team and scholars in the field of Ajami studies to discuss results of the first phase of the project. The scholars who work on the project in Mali presented overview of the Ajami manuscripts they identified during the research period of one year, from September 2015 to September 2016. Their presentations touched upon several general issues, such as (1) the number of manuscripts in proportion to the languages written in Arabic script, (2) distribution of subject matter in Ajami manuscripts, (3) proportion between the manuscripts with commentaries in Ajami and those with Ajami in the main text, and (4) research topics and questions formulated on the basis of the project’s findings. The workshop significantly benefited from the participation of the invited scholars who gave very informative talks and shared their insights on the study of Ajami manuscripts during the panel discussions. The presentations are outlined in more details in the “Abstract” sections of the workshop programme below.
The main outcome of the workshop was (a) consolidation of the scholarly community specialising in Ajami studies, (b) recognition of the existence of high number of Ajami material in manuscript collections in Mali and (c) formulation of the objectives for the final year of the project, which should lead to the publication of a catalogue of about 800 manuscripts and a collective volume of research articles.

About 300 manuscripts were catalogued and several thousand identified as having Ajami, including the collections which were only known for writings in Arabic.

The project team gathered in Hamburg four days before the start of the workshop in order to finalise the topics for discussions and update the programme. As part of theoretical preparation for the Ajami workshop, the team attended the conference on paratexts organised by CSMC on 21-22 October. Given that the majority of the Ajami manuscripts fall in the category of paratexts, this event was particularly helpful for our team.

To reinforce international research on Ajami, the workshop drew on two networks: the already established “Old Mande Research Network” (OMRN) and “Nigerian Islamic Manuscripts Association” (NIMA), a platform for collaborative research being developed as part of MoU between CSMC and Nigerian Universities.

**Workshop details**

The first day of the workshop consisted of five presentations by the members of the Ajami project team, as follows.

**Banzoumana Traore** talked about preliminary results of identification of Ajami manuscripts in the libraries in the custody of SAVAMA-DCI. Proportion varies, e.g. Mamma Haidara: out of 33,750 previously inventoried manuscripts, only 3.2% are marked as having Ajami, which comes to 1,356 manuscripts. However, the library of Attahir Mouaz has 36% of Ajami material of 35,913 inventoried manuscripts, which sums up to 14,011 Ajami manuscripts.

The speaker introduced four categories of Ajami manuscripts based on the material in SAVAMA-DCA’s collections, as follows: 1) text entirely in Ajami; 2) text mostly in Ajami; 3) Arabic mixed with Ajami; and 4) Arabic texts annotated in Ajami.

Other features discussed in his presentation are tagging of Ajami passages by means of descriptive words in Arabic and the use of supplementary graphemic signs added to the Arabic letters for writing in African languages.

**Hamadou Boly**’s presentation focused on the manuscripts written in Fulfulde Ajami. He defined which subject matter is most frequently treated in two types of the Fulfulde manuscripts. The first type, called *sardu*, is characterised by continuous text written entirely in Fulfulde. *Sardu* manuscript usually cover five topics, such as unity of God, Islamic jurisprudence, treatises on inheritance rules, eulogies to the Prophet Muhammad, and Sufism. However, the unity of God (*tawhid*) is the most popular topic in the *sardu* manuscripts. The second type of manuscripts is called *purre* which means ‘annotated manuscripts’. Three subjects covered by the *purre* manuscripts overlap with those treaded in sardu texts, these being Islamic jurisprudence, inheritance rules, and eulogies to the Prophet. Two other topics are unique to the *purre* type, that is the science of language and esoteric knowledge. Interestingly (and at the current stage of research – enigmatically) the *purre* manuscripts received disapproving attitude among the Islamic scholars in the last recent decades.

**Ismaila Zangou Barazi** presented preliminary results of identification of Ajami manuscripts conducted together with the late Mouhamadou Almarzouk Cissé. Most of the manuscripts the researchers identified so far contain annotations in Bamana. This is interesting in itself because Bamana is usually considered among the languages the least written in Arabic script. Even more surprising are the manuscripts with annotations in Bozo and Senufo, which were never reported to have existed in Ajami writing. The case of Senufo is particularly noteworthy given that
conversion to Islam among the Senufo is only a very recent and not a widespread process. Another language found alongside Bamana and Bozo annotations is Songhai.

The predominant subject matter in the manuscripts with annotations in Bamana, Bozo and Senufo is esoteric protection and healing. Many manuscripts reflect socio-economic reality. For example, the Bozo are professional fishermen and so it is not surprising that many Ajami texts from the Bozo area contain protective formulae against large fishes or water animals, such as hippos ('binding hippos mouth' is one such formula). The Ajami terms are usually used for describing the names of plants, animals, ingredients of medicinal potions and terms of diseases.

**Samby Khalil Magassouba** discussed the Soninke language in Ajami manuscripts in the region of Gajaga situated in the district of Kaye, west of Mali, which also includes neighbouring areas of Senegal and Mauritania. After an overview of the role played by the Soninke communities in the spread of Islam, Dr Magassouba presented a preliminary survey of the Soninke manuscripts in the collection of the Dramé family. One of the most important discoveries was the high number of manuscripts with Qur’anic commentaries in Soninke and several copies of the famous (secular) literary work *al-Maqāmāt* of al-Harirī, also with annotations in Soninke. These manuscripts have a high potential for the study of the grammatical tradition developed by the Soninke scholars in the context of Islamic education. The Dramé collection is also rich in literary versified texts written in Arabic and accompanied by the Soninke translation between the lines. The speaker demonstrated that even one single collection out of many others reported in the region of Gajaga opens the immense amount of unknown data which may shed more light on the history of Islam among the Soninke and sociolinguistic aspects of their language.

The first day of the workshop finished with another talk by **Ismail Zangou Barazi** who gave insights into the Ajami manuscripts from Timbuktu written by the Islamic scholar Sheikh Alfa Mahamman Mubarak who traced his descent to Istanbul and who was born in Timbuktu in 1874. The Sheikh composed many works in Songhai written in Arabic script. As reported in one of his works, his writing in Songhai was influenced by Ajami writing practiced by the Fula scholars who were successful propagators of Islamic knowledge conveyed by means of writing in Fulfule. Alfa Mahamman composed more than forty *qasidas* both in Songhai and Fulfule. The topics of his writing covered Sufism, jurisprudence, and commentary on the Qur’an. His manuscripts are kept by some of his former students and one of the purposes of Dr. Barasi’s research is to trace Alfa Mahamman’s dispersed works in several collections.

The discussions of the second day of the Workshop were structured around presentations of **Fallou Ngom** and **Nikolay Dobronravin**.

**Fallou Ngom** shared his experience in dealing with Ajami manuscripts in West Africa in general and in Senegal in particular, focusing on writings in Wolof, known as Wolofal. The speaker presented a classification of the Ajami manuscripts in relation to genres and registers of the Wolof language as used in a broad range of literacy practices. It was demonstrated that the distribution of the use of Arabic and Wolof in manuscripts is conditioned by a set of social factors, with Ajami playing a big role in enriching the Islamic culture in Senegal. One of the most noticeable domains of Wolofal is related to the Muridiyya Sufi movement. Importantly, most of Muridiyya texts in Wolofal have their counterparts in oral versions, raising the questions about the degree of their similarity, their primary source of composition (written or oral), channels of their circulation, and differences in the recipient audiences.

**Nikolay Dobronravin’s** talk dealt with the problems of the identification of languages in Ajami manuscripts. The case in point was writing in Nupe, the language spoken in the Middle Belt region of central-west Nigeria. The most frequent misrepresentation of African languages in descriptions of the
Islamic manuscripts is related to the visibility and prominence of larger languages. Thus, in the manuscripts of Senegalese origin, writing in Serer are often labelled as Wolof, and in the Nigerian collections Nupe is described as Fulfulde, Wolof and Fulfulde being much more salient in literacy practices in respective countries. Prof. Dobronravin demonstrated techniques of identification of the Nupe language written in Arabic script and stressed the importance of developing similar techniques for other languages, such as Hausa, Kanuri as well as Soninke, Bamana, and Songhai.

Abdel Kader Haidara (Bamako/Timbuktu), who is on advisory board of the Ajama project, contributed to the ensuing discussions with his expert observations on a range of questions, such as proportion of Ajami manuscripts in the Timbuktu collections, subject matter represented in these manuscripts, issues of cataloguing, research methods, and best practices in working with the owners of private collections.

The workshop greatly benefited from expertise of Tal Tamari and Lameen Souag who are advisors to the Ajami project, and are members of the Old Mande Research Network. Their generosity as interpreters of presentations and discussions in French, English and Arabic was highly appreciated by all attendants of the workshop.

A special thank you goes to other participants, as follows.

Darya Ogorodnikova (Hamburg, member of OMRN) for her insights into the Ajami manuscripts in Soninke, Jula and Bamana, and other Mande languages; and also for her tireless help in organisational matters and friendly support given to the participants starting from their arrival to the day of their departure.

Artem Davydov (Saint Petersburg, member of OMRN) for his active input in the questions of language identification in the Ajami manuscripts as well as in more general matters of sociolinguistics in the context of the Mande writing traditions.

Maria Luisa Russo (Hamburg/Bamako, co-manager of the CSMC-based project “Safeguarding the manuscripts of Timbuktu” and assistant on the Ajami project), for her expert advice on the methods of codicological research and for assistance with complex issues related to financial organisation of the workshop.

Abdoukadir Adamu (Arewas House, Kaduna) for sharing his experience in conducting research based on the manuscript archives in Nigeria.

Musa Salih Muhammad (Arewa House, Kaduna) for his advice on cataloguing and identification of Ajami manuscripts.

Abba Isa Tijani (Maiduguri), for his encouragement and support in building a network of specialists from the Nigerian universities who work on Islamic manuscripts and deal with the problems of preservation and sustainability of cultural heritage.

Maimadu Barma Mutai (Maiduguri), for his expertise in codicology and palaeography of the Nigerian Qur’anic manuscripts and for his advice on best practice in cooperation with the owners of private manuscript collections.

Sidi Bamadio (Bamako), for his dedicated support in organisational and social aspects of the workshop and for his interpreter skills in more than ten languages.

Imam Shettima Habib (Maiduguri), for his longstanding support and assistance in the studies of bilingual Arabic/Ajami manuscripts, especially commentaries on the Qur’an in Old Kanembu.
Monday, 24 October 2016 (room 2002)

9.45 am  Welcome & Introduction: Dmitry Bondarev, Hamburg

10.00 am  Hamadou Boly, Bamako

Les sujets plus fréquemment traités dans les manuscrits ajami peul au Mali

11.00 am  Banzoumana Traoré, Bamako

Les manuscrits ajami : formes et styles prédominants et caractéristiques calligraphiques (cas des manuscrits de Tombouctou)

12.00 pm  Coffee Break

12.15 pm  Ismaila Zangou Barazi / Mouhamadou Almarzouk Cissé, Bamako

Les langues africaines en ajami dans les collections de manuscrits au Mali : une enquête préliminaire

1.15 pm  Lunch

2.30 pm  Samby Khalil Magassouba, Bamako

Observations sur le parler soninké dans les manuscrits Ajami au Mali : cas du Gajaga

3.30 pm  Ismaila Zangou Barazi, Bamako

 Alfā Muḥammad bin Mūsārak, Wajhūdī fī al-makhṭūṭāt al-‘umāmīyya bi-tamkhtū’t

4.30 pm  Further discussion

7.00 pm  Dinner

Tuesday, 25 October 2016 (room 2002)

10.00 am  Fallou Ngom, Boston

Collecting and studying Ajami manuscripts (a round-table discussion)

11.00 am  Nikolay Dobronravin, Saint Petersburg

Identification of African languages in Ajami manuscripts: a case of Nupe

1.00 pm  Lunch

2.00 pm  90 minutes round-table discussion: problematic issues in cataloguing and digitisation of the Ajami manuscripts; potential research topics.

7.00 pm  Dinner
Abstracts of presentations

Hamadou Boly

Les sujets plus fréquemment traités dans les manuscrits ajami peul au Mali

Cet exposé va s’articuler autour de ces axes suivants : 1) Introduction ; 2) Les sujets fréquemment abordés par les manuscrits peuls au Mali ; 3) Sardu ; 4) Purre ; 5) Conclusion. Les manuscrits peuls observés, une centaine, sont répartis en deux catégories : A. sardu (textes ajami peul écrits par les alphabets arabes). B. purre (textes arabes annotés peul). Certains sardu connurent leur existence avant la colonisation française, notamment les œuvres de Belko Jelgodji. Nous constatons que le tawhid (unicité divine) est le sujet le plus traité par sardu. Or purre touche à plusieurs thématiques religieuses et linguistiques. Les recherches de terrain que nous avons menées se sont révélées fructueuses, car nous avons pris connaissance de l’existence d’une présence massive des anciens manuscrits dans d’autres localités bien précises, qui feront l’objet de notre identification ultérieure.

Banzoumana Traoré

Les manuscrits ajami : formes et styles prédominants et caractéristiques calligraphiques (cas des manuscrits de Tombouctou)

L’usage de l’Ajami (langues vernaculaires) dans les manuscrits subsahariens répondait à un besoin local d’accès large au savoir et de formalisation de pratiques quotidiennes de la vie. Ce faisant, les techniques utilisées pour la satisfaction de ces besoins ont donné naissance à de formes ou styles de composition de textes et d’invention de certaines graphies pour combler un certain vide laissé par le médium d’écriture, l’alphabet arabe.

Ismaila Zangou Barazi / Mouhamadou Almarzouk Cissé

Les langues africaines en ajami dans les collections de manuscrits au Mali : une enquête préliminaire

اللغة العربية في مختلف المخطوطات بمالي، مسح أولي

نخلص إلى أن أكثر المخطوطات المتداولة بأيدينا - إلى حد الآن - في لغة البينمان واللغات المجاورة لها من جنوب مالي، تدعو إلى التحقق من نقطة مفادها أن هذه الثقافات اهتمت بالطب؛ ذلك أنه أكثر من أي موضوع آخر، إذ ينبغي على 80% . وقد رأينا أنهم وظفوا الطب في مستويات مختلفة، إن على مستوى أمراض البشر، أو الجنس، أو السحر...إلخ. عموماً عن سبب ربط مخطوطات الجنوب بهذا الموضوع، فتحتاج إلى التريث ربما تستمع كل معطيات البحث في الأيام القادمة.

ويلاحظ أن مخطوطات بوزو تتميز بالتصنيف والتصدي، وجمع الحيتان...إلخ. وهذا يرتبط بلا شك بواقع حياتها الاجتماعية والثقافية والاقتصادية، وعلى فهمنا هذه المخطوطات بما يمكن وصفه بخدمة "المصالح الدينية".

الدكتور إسماعيل زنغو برزي / أ. مروزق سيسي

Arabic alphabet in the manuscript collections of Mali: a preliminary appraisal

We came to the conclusion that the majority of the manuscripts that have so far passed through our hands are in the Bamana language and its neighbouring languages in the south of Mali. The manuscripts demonstrate that these ethnic groups were concerned about medicine. This topic is the most frequent of all other subjects and it amounts to more than 80%. We observed that these ethnic groups turned to medicine in a variety of situations, such as illness of stomach or body parts, or illness caused by witchcraft, etc. As for the reason why the manuscripts from the south are associated with these topics, more time is needed until we collect larger substantial research data in the future.

One can notice that the Bozo manuscripts are characterised by preoccupation with protection, gathering fish, etc. This corresponds to socioeconomic situation of the Bozo being professional
Samby Khalil Magassouba

Observations sur le parler soninké dans les manuscrits Ajami au Mali : cas du Gajaga

الموضوع: ملاحظات حول سوننكي في المخطوطات العجمية يملائي: غاجاغا نموذجا.

ملخص البحث:
يعتمد البحث في الأساس على الشقين الرئيسيين: الأول: تقديم نبذة مختصرة عن مجتمع سوننكي في مالي، من حيث التاريخ والجغرافيا، والاهتمام بالإسلام، وإسهاماتهم في نقل التراث الإسلامي عبر العصور، وأردف ذلك التدرج إلى منطقة غاجاغا، الذي ينحى بصدده الحديث عنه. أشار كذلك إلى بعض الجهود المبذولة حول هذه اللسان، وتطويعها وإثرائها.

الثاني: عبارة عن عرض نماذج للتراث العربي المخطوط في إقليم غاجاغا، وذلك حسب الموضوعات التي عالجها في نشاطهم العلمي، من حيث أساليبهم في التوثيق، وتوزيعهم لغتهم، مع شرح بعض النماذج من كلامهم، بإيجاز غير مخل.

Observations about the Soninke language in Ajami manuscripts of Mali: a case of Gajaga

Abstract of the presentation.
The presentation is based on two main parts. The first part: a short introductory overview of the Soninke communities in Mali as to their history, geography, and achievements in Islam as well as their participation in the spread of Islamic heritage across the epochs with an impact on Gajaga – the region dealt with in this talk. The presentation also describes efforts in dealing with the Soninke languages, and aspirations of reviving and enriching it. The second part presents an example of manuscript Arabic heritage in the region of Gajaga. This is according to the titles which treat it in scholarly activity such as their procedures/methods/styles of authentication, and their employment of their language??, with explanations of some of the examples of the words, briefly and precisely/to the point.

Ismaila Zangou Barazi

ألفا محسن بن مبارك وجهوده في المخطوطات العجمية بمبكتو

ولد ألفا محسن بن المبارك عام 1295هـ - 1874م، بمدينة مبكتو، وبها تربى وترعرع وتقلي الibbean الأولى في طلبه للعلم بها.

ترك الشيخ عدا كثيرا من المخطوطات والدورية، وخاصة في لغة منغفيي، ولكن نظرا للرحلات الامتناعية التي قام بها الشيخ في المنطقة وتكوينه عدا من طلبة العلم؛ ظل مؤلفاته مبتعثة بين بعض تلامذته، هذا الذي استكمله أحفاده بعد وفاته.

ويلاحظ أن أكثر مخطوطاته في التصوف، الفقه، التفسير..إل.:

الدكتور إسماعيل زنغو برزي

Alfa Mahamman Mubarak and his endeavours in the Ajami manuscripts of Timbuktu

Alfa Mahamman Mubarak was born in 1295/1874 in the city of Timbuktu. There he grew up and matured and received first foundational basis in his quest for knowledge. The Sheikh left behind many manuscripts and works in Ajami, especially in the Songhai language. However, because of endless trips that the Sheikh undertook in the region and his activity of formation of many students, his works remain dispersed among some of his students. This is what his grandsons discovered after his death.

One can see that many of the manuscripts are on matters of Sufism, legal issues, tafsir and other topics.