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CENTRE FOR THE
STUDY OF
MANUSCRIPT
CULTURES

The Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures (CSMC)
announces a public lecture by

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**Standardisation of Yoruba Ajami script:
catalysts and obstacles in a scriptoria narrative**

The Yoruba ethnic group is found predominantly in south-western Nigeria and is next to Hausa-Fulani block in terms of numerical strength in the country. The earliest evidence of the presence of Islam among the Yoruba, and hence of literacy in Arabic, goes back to the 16th century. According to Ade Ajayi, the earliest documented history of the Yoruba, albeit now lost, was made in the 17th century in Yoruba language written in Arabic script (Ajami) (Ade Ajayi 2006). Except for the fragmentary poetical bequests of the 19th century Islamic verse maker Badamasi Agbaji (d. circa 1891) (Hunwick 1995; Reichmuth 1998), little or nothing of the pre-colonial materials in Yoruba Ajami is known to have survived, in spite of the confirmation by the Christian curia that Arabic based Yoruba script was reasonably established by the mid-19th century, and this was during the search for a script for the production of Christian literature among the natives (Johnson 1921; Ade Ajayi 1960). But for medicinal recipes, vaticinations of geomancy (*khatt al-raml*) practitioners, incantations in Yoruba Ajami belonging to the first half of the 20th century, no serious works in Yoruba Ajami have yet come to light.

For my presentation, however, some codices of the *qasida* (Ode) by Badamasi, and a late 20th century paraenetic verse by an unknown author (circa 1979) illustrate how Yoruba authors in Ajami have sought to standardize its orthography, especially for phonemes and vocables for which there are no exact or near exact equivalents in the Arabic alphabet. My paper will examine the linguistic and metalinguistic factors which are deployed in the standardization of Yoruba Ajami. My paper will try to evaluate the current efforts at standardization in the larger context of the precedent by ISESCO and Mohamed Chatatou (1992) aimed at standardizing the script for Arabic based African languages, which efforts were anyway based on Farsi and Urdu adaptations for which reason their adventure was of abbreviated success if not outright failure.

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