From Africa, In Ajami

"In the Haussa country, all chiefs of any position whatever have Arabic writers for conducting their correspondence, ... Zaria at the present day is an exception. The ruler, Alh. dan Soh, has a personal preference for writing in the Haussa language using Arabic characters, of course, Haussa so written is locally called Ajami, an Arabic word meaning simply 'foreign.'"

— Frederick William Virtual

Hugh Mace, 1915

When the Nigerian writer Nnamdi Azikiwe composed his elegiac portrait of the Prophet Muhammad in the early 1950s, he did so in what remains West Africa's predominant language: Haussa.

And when the 19th-century Sengalese religious leader and patriot Amadou Bamba wrote poems urging his countrymen to drag off French colonial rule, he penned his stirring verse in his native tongue: Wolof.

Annovation to the 18th-century poet Sayyd Ahmadu harnessed his talent with an adaptation of the Arabic epic "Umaru al-Qura," he wrote in the prevailing tongue of some 50 million East Africans Swahili.

What all three wrote in their native languages, the scripts they employed each bore a close resemblance to Arabic. They were using Africanized versions of the Arabic alphabet, collectively called 'Ajami.

Much as the Latin-based alphabet is used to write many languages, including English, 'Ajami is not a language itself but the alphabetic script used to write a language; Arabic-derived letters to write a non-Arabic—in this case, West African—language.

"Ajami" derives from the Arabic ajama, which means "foreigner" or, more specifically, "non-Arab." Historically, Arabs used the word to refer to all things Persian or non-Arab, a usage they borrowed from the ancient Greeks. Yet over the last few centuries, across Islamic Africa, "Ajami" came to mean an African language written in Arabic script that was often adapted phonetically to facilitate local usages and pronunciations across the continent, from the Ethiopian highlands in the east to the lush jungles of Sierra Leone in the west.

"If you go to the Kano Kuri market, in the heart of Kano city in Nigeria, you will find thousands and thousands of books written in Ajami. They are everywhere," says Abdallah Ude Adamu, professor of science education and curriculum studies at Kano Bayero University in northern Nigeria, home to the majority of the country's Muslim population. However, Adamu goes on to observe, many of the people reading these books are officially counted as "illiterate" by the Nigerian government, which excludes Ajami from its public school curricula. Though research has shown that as many as 60 percent of the estimated 300 million Flawaspeakers in Africa can read and write Ajami, they are considered "illiterate" because, Adamu explains, in Nigeria and other West African nations, literacy is equated with proficiency in Arabic or one of the Latin-alphabet-based colonial languages, usually French or English. As a result, such surveys overlook tens of millions of Africans whose vernacular may be Haussa, Wolof, Fulfulde or any of nearly 2000 other African languages. "This is a population that

Ajami adaptations of Arabic have parallels not only among Asian scripts, but also among European adaptations of the Roman alphabet, observes Felouh Njem, above, assistant professor at Boston University and 2011 Guggenheim fellow. Opposite and above left: This Ajami manuscript page describes construction in Flawo, which is spoken by some 50 million people today.
Ajami and Other Scripts from Arabic

Table: Countries with past and present use of Ajami scripts

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<th>Countries with past and present use of Ajami scripts</th>
<th>Countries with past and present use of other scripts adopted from Arabic (other names: countries use Arabic predominantly and do not use Ajami scripts)</th>
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| LANGUAGES | SOUTHERN | MIDDLE | NORTH \n
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For members of African societies where oral tradition predominated, Arabic was the first written language to which they had been exposed.

al-Masudi we al-Mamluki (Book of Highways and Kingdoms). "One of these towns, which is inhabited by Muslims, is large and possesses twelve mosques in one of which they assemble for the Friday prayer. There are also Islamburs and musalmans, as well as jurists and scholars."

"These jurists and scholars, as well as the traders, turned out to be critical not only to the spread of Islam, but also to the eventual development of Ajami. From its beginning, Islam was a literate religion. Arabic ( "reading") is the first word of God's revelations to Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam. The story of Islam is intertwined with the stories of how Islam came to Africa some centuries ago and how European colonization followed a millennium later. Muslim Arabs first came to Egypt, within a decade of the Prophet Muhammad's death in 632 CE. By 790 CE, the spread had passed over North Africa and across the Mediterranean into the Iberian Peninsula and southern France. By contrast, Islam came to sub-Saharan Africa more gradually, flowing south along the network of long-established trade routes that tied the Mediterranean lands to the Niger Delta in the west and the ports of the Indian Ocean in the east. Traversing these famed, trans-Saharan trade routes on which they travel, the mouth of one God. The earliest urban center to embrace Islam was, later in the 8th century, was Damascus the Niger River in Mali. Other Muslim kingdoms along the trans-Saharan route followed. Takrur (Senegal), Songhay (Mali; Kano, Burkina Faso had, and Timbuktu [Niger]). By the 10th century, reports of those and other flourishing Islamic cities made their way north to Al-Ma'mun in southern Spain, the aristocratic geographer and historian Al-Khwarizmi. "The city of Ghana consists of two towns situated on a plain," he wrote in his Kitab al-Masalik al-Mamalik (Book of Highways and Kingdoms). "One of these towns, which is inhabited by Muslims, is large and possesses twelve mosques in one of which they assemble for the Friday prayer. There are also Islamburs and musalmans, as well as jurists and scholars."

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often been taught literacy by using the Bible. Thus, for the members of African societies where oral tradition predominated, Arabic was the first written language to which they had been exposed.

Yet while Arabic was the language of the Qur’an, as well as of the discourses and commentaries of the several schools of Islamic law (sharia), it could not meet every institutional and literary need of the region’s powerful and politically competing groups. For example, with a 17th-century ruler of the 75-state Kano signed his name, he could write his given name “Abu-Hazim” in Arabic, but he required a specially adapted script to render his Hausa surname “Refa’i.” Likewise, documents pertaining to uniquely African cultural traditions, arts and sciences were more easily written in a script that could accommodate both local vocabularies and pronunciations.

In traditional medical books, for example, you will often find the texts written in Wolof, on the other hand, says Nikolas Dobrunz, African studies specialist and professor of world politics at the School of International Relations at Russian St. Petersburg University, “The main test may be in Arabic, but you usually have commentaries and the names of local plants and their medicinal names written in Wolof.”

The earliest surviving Arabic text is a code-calling in different dates from the 5th or 6th century. Paper was more perishable than stone; the oldest Ajami manuscript dates to the 6th century. Written in Tamacheq, the language of the largely nomadic Tuaregs, it is a pharmacopoeia. Similar early documents from the 7th and 8th centuries survive in Wolof, Fulluba and Hausa.

To accommodate the vocabularies and pronunciations of each language, writers of Ajami modified the Arabic alphabet, often creating new letters.

“Ajami lacks three vowels, whereas Wolof has seven,” Ngom points out. “Similarly, there are consonants in Wolof that do not exist in Arabic, so what the writers of Ajami did was to add dots above or below letters that were their closest Arabic counterparts.”

Collectively, all of these adaptations became known as Ajami—the scripts of Arabic medical texts, botanical surveys, works on the occult and astronomy, political, commercial and personal correspondence and religious texts written well into the early 20th century. By this time, however, Ajami began heading headlong into the Latin-based scripts of European languages imposed by colonial administrators who viewed Ajami as nonsense at best and a threat to their authority at worst.

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In Melville's Shadow
Written by Robert W. Lebling

Was American writer Herman Melville reading an orientalist adventure novel by William Sturtevant Mayo while drafting his classics Typee and Moby-Dick? Mayo is today remembered only by specialists, but his 1849 Nakhozah was a runaway best-seller that Melville appears to have admired.

Kazan: Between Europe and Asia
Written by Richard Covington
Photographed by Sergey Maximishin

Elist of Moscow, on the river Volga, where a cathedral and a mosque stand side by side as fraternal landmarks, the people of Kazan are producing one of the most culturally vibrant cities you have probably never heard of.

Egypt's Granite Garden
Written by Sylvia Smith
Photographed by Richard Duebel

Each winter since 1999, sculptors from Egypt and around the world have come to the city of Aswan, where they take one of Egypt's oldest arts into a new era. The results—as diverse as their imaginations—are for powdering.

From Africa, in Ajami
Written by Tom Verde
Manuscripts courtesy of the Melville J. Herskovits Library of African Studies
Photographed by Dick Douglass

From Senegal to Ethiopia, dozens of African languages were first written by adapting the Arabic alphabet to local phonetics, and the literary legacy of these “Ajami” scripts is shedding new light on African history through African eyes.

Suggestions for Reading

44 Classroom Guide
Written by Julie Weiss

46 Events & Exhibitions
For My Children