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Ajami Manuscript Heritage of West Africa

Before the 19th century, West Africa as a single region did not exist, and there were several very distinctive regions in its place. Some of them, collectively known in Arabic as Bilad al-Sudan, went through more than a thousand years of contact with Islam and gradual Islamization making them an integral part of the Islamic world.

Due to the influence of the Malikite school, local written traditions, and particularly those of Central Sudanic Africa, were very conservative (coloured vowel-signs and a few special marks, e.g. for the imala, studied by Yasin Dutton).

Writing was an element of Islamic knowledge closely connected with some practical skills (Qur'anic medicine, astrology, business records). Many Islamic scholars in Sudanic Africa would gather a private library or at least a 'reference book' (collection of folios containing poetry, written amulets and prescriptions), usually in Arabic with explanations or notes in one or more African languages. The word 'Ajami' was very often used as a mark to indicate non-Arabic glosses in Arabic manuscripts.

Besides marginal translations from Arabic or short texts, writing in African languages did not become a common practice before the 19th century, mainly for Islamic poetry and private correspondence. The languages and dialects regularly used in such manuscripts included Mauritanian Arabic, several Berber languages, Fula, Hausa, Kanuri, Wolof and some Mande and Songhay languages or dialects. West African Muslims brought both Arabic and Ajami writing to the New World (Brazil, etc.).

At the same time, tales, songs, proverbs, ethnographic texts and Bible translations were written down in West African languages at the request of the European travellers, missionaries and colonial officers. Many manuscripts of this period, although written in Arabic script, cannot be described as Islamic.

The tradition of Ajami writing has survived in West Africa despite several script reforms replacing Arabic script with Latin, known as 'boko' in Nigeria.

Ajami and Ajami/Arabic manuscripts from West Africa are now found in many libraries and archives throughout the world. Among the best collections of Ajami writings are those of the United Kingdom, France, Nigeria, Senegal, and USA. Some of these manuscripts and manuscript collections have been briefly described, e.g. in the 'World Survey of Islamic Manuscripts', the 'Arabic Literature in Africa' series, and in the library catalogues published by al-Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation.

Detailed descriptions and editions of Ajami manuscripts are still rare. Some collections in Europe, USA and Brazil have not been catalogued, or the catalogues remain unpublished. There is no systematic description yet, e.g., of Hausa manuscripts in the United Kingdom, where there are probably more pre-colonial Ajami and Ajami/Arabic manuscripts from West Africa than in any single country of that region. Very little has been published on the use of ink and paper in West African written traditions.

The study of Ajami manuscript heritage from West Africa and West African diaspora is a field where many scholars can still discover unknown manuscripts and manuscripts collections, such as a collection discovered in Brazil in 2005 or the manuscripts I have found in Rhodes House Library and at St.Petersburg Institute of Oriental Manuscripts.