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Jula Ajami in Burkina Faso: A Grassroots Literacy in the Former Kong Empire

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Abstract

Ajami (عجمي) is a term frequently used to refer to the use of the Arabic script to write sub-Saharan African languages. West African lingua francas such as Hausa, Wolof, and Fulani have a rather well-documented record of Ajami artifacts and use. In Eastern Manding varieties such as Bamanan and Jula, however, Ajami practices and texts have been viewed as rather limited in comparison. Recent 2012 fieldwork in Burkina Faso however suggests that Ajami practices in Jula have simply escaped the notice of the Western scholarly community. Drawing on ethnographic fieldnotes about production of Esoteric Islamic medicinal treatment recipes in addition to dialogues, descriptions and songs produced at my request, I explore Jula Ajami as a grassroots literacy existing alongside the Koranic schooling tradition. Turning to the texts themselves, I analyze the graphic system in use as well as the linguistic characteristics that suggest the enregisterment of Kong Jula as appropriate in Jula Ajami texts.

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Introduction

In Africanist research, *Ajami*¹ (عجمي) is frequently used to refer to the use of the Arabic script to write sub-Saharan² African languages (Mumin & Versteegh, in press; Mumin, in press). West African lingua francas such as Hausa, Wolof and Fulani have a rather well-documented record of Ajami artifacts and use (e.g., Ngom, 2010; Zito, 2012). In the case of Manding, however, Vydrin (1998) suggests that the practices and texts are rather limited in comparison, despite an Ajami tradition in the western Mandinka regions around the Gambia (e.g., Giesing & Vydrin, 2007). In the Eastern Manding varieties, Bamanan texts have been identified (e.g., Tamari, 1994), but the only record of Jula Ajami in Western scholarship remains a passing mention by Delafosse (1904). Recent 2012 fieldwork in Burkina Faso (BF), however, suggests that Ajami practices in the Manding variety of Jula have simply escaped the notice of particular scholarly communities.

¹ In terms of transcribing terms from Arabic, I have strove to follow the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (IJME) transliteration guide. As such, for non-technical words found in scholarly work related to Islam I have used commonly established latinizations (e.g., "Koran," "Ajami," etc.). In the other cases, I have followed IJME's transliteration scheme.

² While one reviewer suggested that this term's usefulness is increasingly called into question because of the history of contact across the Saharan, I still see it as useful especially given that locally there is major distinction made between *fārafinná* (literally "land of those with black skin" but typically glossed as "Africa") and *ārabujāmāna* (literally "Arab country").

As a Peace Corps Volunteer in BF for two years (2009-2011), I lived and worked in the south-western corner of the country near the Malian and Ivorian borders. Returning a year later in the summer of 2012 after having been exposed to non-Latin-based scripts used for Manding, I decided to look into possible evidence of Ajami practices. Given my two years of residence during which I learned the Arabic script, I was reluctant to believe that I would come across much. Having returned to the area, I settled back into a routine while pursuing an unrelated lexicography project and visiting with old friends. One market day, making the rounds to say hello to friends around the town-center as I always did, I approached some Jula friends that I knew to be proficient in at least the basics of Koranic Arabic and the script, and I decided to ask them again about their abilities. Of course they could read and write in Arabic, they told me. They could even speak it quite well too. What about using Arabic writing to write Jula, I asked. Had they ever heard of anyone doing that? Watching the busy market day pass by, a snicker or two passed between them before one of them spontaneously produced from his wallet in his pocket a small piece of cardboard from a single tea packet that friends regularly ripped off for writing purposes when we used to practice Arabic or need to diagram things. "Like this?" he said as I gazed at the tiny piece of cardboard covered with 5 lines of Arabic script. Though I could not and still cannot read this text artifact, I had just been introduced for the first time to Jula Ajami literacy practices that I had been blind to for two years.

In short, I was equally as blind to potential Jula Ajami practices for two years as Western scholars have been for the last 100 years. This unawareness begs the question why. To even be able to address this issue however we first need to explore Jula Ajami practices themselves. In this light, the question explored in this paper is: how is the technology of adapted Arabic script or Ajami utilized within one community of Jula Ajami practitioners in a village of the former Kong Empire in BF? Specifically, for what purposes and in what linguistic and graphic form is Jula Ajami produced? Ajami practices readily reveal themselves as instances of what has recently been deemed *grassroots literacy* (Blommaert, 2008) by virtue of their being "un-standardized" and in "vernacular" (that is, unofficial) languages. Exploring the linguistic genre and production nuances of Jula Ajami in this article ultimately suggests that the bond of grassroots literacies lies not in their use of vernacular or lack of standardization but rather in their existence on the margins of more normative forms of literacy that can themselves be understood as grassroots depending on one's scale of comparison.

Conceptual Framework

Manding and Jula

Manding is a language and dialect continuum stretching across West Africa from Senegal to BF. Manding varieties that are frequently treated as languages (e.g., Maninka in Guinea, Bamanan in Mali, and Jula in Côte d'Ivoire and BF), are widely used in their respective zones as trade languages between different peoples and language groups (Dalby, 1971). The word, Manding, a Western adaptation of the word *Màndén*,³ is the name for the former West African polity now commonly

³ There is no one standard Latin-based orthography for Manding though attempts have been made.

referred to as the Mali Empire that at its apogee encompassed much of modern-day Guinea and Mali, primarily between the 13th and 15th centuries (Simonis, 2010, pp. 41-54). From a Western linguistic perspective, Manding is often viewed as something akin to a macro-language:

It is a linguistic continuum with linguistic distance between its extreme representatives slightly overpassing the limit of mutual intelligibility of around 90 common words in the 100-word list of Swadesh. There are no clear-cut limits within this continuum, so the traditionally distinguished languages (or dialects) "Bambara, Malinke, Dioula"⁴ etc. are in fact sub-continua smoothly flowing into each other. (Vydrin, 1995, p. 2)

The glottonym of the variety analyzed in this paper, *jùlakán* "language of the Jula," stems historically from the Manding lexeme *jùlá* meaning "trader," which refers to the Muslim itinerant traders associated with the *Màndén* empire that operated in parts of what is now BF, Côte d'Ivoire, and Ghana (Dalby, 1971; Sanogo, 2003; Wilks, 1968, 2000). As early as the 11th century there are references to the Manding-speaking, Muslim, gold and kola-trading communities of the Wangara (Wilks, 2000, p. 93). These original traders formed the basis for the settlements that ultimately led to the establishment of a network of Jula towns and associated villages that operated across rural areas inhabited by diverse non-Manding and non-Muslim peoples (Wilks, 1968, 2000). In addition to common commercial interests and kinship ties, the Jula were united by Islam and a strong tradition of Koranic schooling (Wilks, 1968). Nonetheless, later arrivals from *Màndén* known as the *túntigi* (literally "quiver-possessor") or *sonongi*⁵ formed a "warrior" class that while identifying as *jùlá* and therefore Muslim did not adhere to the same norms of religious practice as the *móri* (roughly "scholar" but generally glossed locally in French as *marabout*) or lineages associated with the original Muslim Jula trading networks (Green, 1984; Launay, 1983; Launay & Miran, 2000). These "warriors" spearheaded the creation of small Jula chiefdoms such as Kong following the decline of the Manding empire (Launay & Miran, 2000; Wilks, 2000).

The Kong Empire (Green, 1984; Kodjo, 2006; Şaul, 1998) as it came to be known, was "the West Volta's leading commercial and clerical center in the nineteenth century" (Griffeth, 1971, p. 168). Kong was sacked in the last decade of the 1800s by the Manding-Jula, Samori Ture, before the region ultimately fell under French colonial rule (Griffeth, 1971; Wilks, 2000). The colonial period introduced radical changes to the social and economic activities of the Jula as well as in the sphere of education. Nonetheless, colonial and post-colonial formal education made inroads relatively late amongst the Jula. Among two Jula communities in northern Côte d'Ivoire in the early 1970s for instance, Launay (1983) found that 67.9% and 73.3% of school age boys had some

Here I follow the de facto official phonemic orthography synthesizing the various national standards that linguists use while also marking tone. Grave diacritics mark low tones and acute diacritics mark high tones. An unmarked vowel carries the same tone as the last marked vowel before it.

⁴ *Bambara*, *Malinké*, and *Dioula* are the French names and spellings of *Bamanan*, *Maninka*, and *Jula* respectively.

⁵ Typically spelled *sonongui* (presumably as an influence of French orthography) the etymology of this word remains unclear to local participants and linguists (Green, 1984, p. 234) and as such I write it according to Jula orthographic conventions albeit without its phonological tone which remains unknown to me.

“Arabic” (that is, Koranic) education whereas 39.4% and 55.2% respectively had attended public government-run school.

Koranic Schooling and Ajami

Koranic teaching amongst the Jula (and Manding Muslims more broadly) typically begins between the ages of six and fourteen when students are taught the prayers and passages from the Koran that are necessary for daily worship (Launay, 1983; Wilks, 1968). Though only a small minority acquire an ability to understand simple Classical Arabic, all acquire a basic command of the script (Launay, 1983; Wilks, 2000). Vydrin (1998) asserts that Manding Ajami practices were born out of and played an auxiliary role to Koranic teaching. While this is certainly true, it remains unclear to what extent Jula Ajami may be integrated into Koranic instruction (i.e., for interlinear glosses, etc.). Indeed, amongst the Bamanan of Eastern Mali, even more advanced levels of study that focus on Koranic passages or the basics of *Māliki* (مالكي) law (a major Sunni Islamic tradition of jurisprudence or *fiqh* (فقه) dominant in West Africa and North Africa) are carried out entirely in Manding and not Classical Arabic (Mbodj-Pouye, 2011).

Regardless, until recently the attitude of researchers to Manding and Jula Ajami is nicely summed up by Vydrin (1998), who compares the future expansion prospects of the three competing graphic systems used for Manding:

...the arabo-manding writing is objectively the most vulnerable: it is the least adapted to the phonological systems of Manding languages; it presents more difficulties for typography and information technology; it doesn't offer an opening to Western culture and knowledge; it isn't a symbol of a pan-Manding idea (as opposed to the N'ko alphabet). (p. 20, my translation)

While this is by and large an accurate assessment of Manding Ajami's prospects at an official level, it may ultimately miss the mark by making a biological allusion to Ajami practices as “vulnerable.” This framing in many ways parallels the way linguists and the general public use biological metaphors of endangerment (Moore, Pietikäinen, & Blommaert, 2010) to talk about languages in general. While there is certainly a potential historical record written in Ajami to be preserved, the writing itself is not endangered. In fact, viewing it as a potentially dying practice may be wrong considering it has been going on largely without being noticed by Western academics for at least a hundred years. Moreover, one can only have the view of Ajami as a form of literacy dying out if one views literacy as a singular skill as opposed to a variable and situated practice, as I will attempt to do in what follows.

Ethnography of Grassroots Literacy

West African societies have frequently been considered to be oral and therefore on the other side of the great divide from literate post-industrial societies of the West (e.g., Goody, 1975). As Gee (2008) and others from New Literacy Studies (e.g., Heath, 1982; Street, 1984) have demonstrated though, there is no great divide but rather “different cultural practices that in certain contexts call for certain uses of

language” (Gee, 2008, p. 76). In investigating Ajami then, as any other literacy practice, our concern should not be limited to analyses of the textual artifacts, but also with understanding literacy as a social practice that is but one modality of an individual's “communicative competence” (Hymes, 1972). While Ajami documents are clearly not discursive behavior in the sense of orally-produced speech, they are nonetheless communicative events involving senders and receivers of messages and therefore merit the same ethnographic analysis that “speaking” (Hymes, 1974) does to situate why Ajami texts and practices take the shape that they do. As Zito (2012) suggests:

Such information can help us understand how Ajami literacy is acquired, its relationship to Arabic literacy and other forms of knowledge, the uses of different genres of writing, how someone becomes qualified as a writer, and the standards by which the quality and legitimacy of a text is judged. (p. 73)

Blommaert (2008) reminds us that this focus should not deflect our ethnographic gaze from the products of the more easily analyzable practices of literacy. He has therefore called for an *ethnography of text* to explore *grassroots literacy* or “writing performed by people who are not fully inserted into elite economies of information, language, and literacy” (p. 7). By ethnography of text Blommaert means we should not concentrate exclusively on the context of the literacy events but that we should also focus directly on the text. Here I use the term *text* to refer to written artifacts and their content there within. Nonetheless, it is convenient that the term text can also be used in a technical sense to refer to a boundable stretch of communication through the use of signs – linguistic, corporal, written or otherwise. Text, in other words, can refer to any segmentation of *semiotic* or sign-making behavior.

Fully exploring grassroots literacy then entails exploiting the notion of *indexicality* stemming from the work of Peirce (1893-1913/1992). While Saussure (1916/1972) theorized one kind of sign made up of a *signifier* and a *signified* in establishing his vision of linguistics, Peirce distinguishes three kinds of signs: symbols, icons and indices (Mertz, 1985). A *symbol* is a kind of sign that we are able to interpret as connected based upon a general law (Mertz, 1985, p. 3). A Peircean symbol therefore parallels Saussure's basic sign and serves well to describe the semantic machinery or denotational coding feature of language. An *index* on the other hand is a sign that has a value that can only be established in context and indexicality therefore refers to the notion of a pointing-to-relationship or “contextual connection” (p. 3). Language involves both kinds of these signs despite the fact that departmentalized linguistics typically only privileges the analysis of the symbols or the semantic machinery. For our purposes here however we will focus on the level of *social indexicals* (Agha, 2007). Social indexicals are the linguistic or semiotic features and their arrangement in interaction from which we infer information about kinds of people. Given this understanding, grassroots literacy texts like those of Jula Ajami offer opportunities to explore the communicative repertoires of persons and groups that have been treated as marginal outliers of imagined homogenous communities, languages etc. as opposed to part of normal human variation and diversity (Blommaert, 2008).

Ajami Practices and Texts

The preliminary ethnographic insights gained from my participants' commentary and their texts can be investigated profitably to at least two ends. First, it suggests that recent work complicating the notion of speech community and vernacular in favor of ideas of *translanguaging* (e.g., García, 2009) and *hybridity* (e.g., Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Tejada, 1999) are not particular to any era of globalization or "super-diversity" (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011; Vertovec, 2006). Secondly, it sheds light on the ways that grassroots literacy texts as discursive behavior can fruitfully be used to explore larger socio-historical processes—regardless of their ephemeral or esoteric content. My goal here then is to first offer initial insights about the practice of Jula Ajami text production and then secondly focus on the indexical information that can be gleaned from the linguistic features of the texts themselves.

Ethnography of Production

Following my Peace Corps service, I was introduced to the existence of Ajami practices while studying Manding linguistics in Paris. One year later, I returned to BF and while pursuing other projects and traveling, I began querying friends about Ajami practices and asking them to potentially help me learn a bit of the graphic system by producing small sample texts for me. All these research participants were male, Jula-speaking Muslims that identified and were identified as Jula⁶ during my two years living in the village. Their ages ranged between their late twenties and sixties approximately. My corpus of texts stems from four Jula Ajami authors. Two others also served as primary participants in recounting their knowledge of Ajami practices past and present. Our discussions were conducted informally as general conversation or chatting (*bàró*). Given that I had not returned to BF with the intention of researching Ajami practices, I did not use any systematic criteria for participant selection. I rather brought up Ajami in the course of conversation with some of my closest Jula friends that I knew to be proficient in the Arabic script from having seen them writing it. From there, some of them suggested I go and talk to other mutual acquaintances who were inevitably described as older or more advanced in Koranic studies. From the information provided by research participants I can identify two emergent themes regarding the production of Jula Ajami texts: its banal nature as a writing system, on the one hand, and its potentially sensitive nature by association with the Islamic *esoteric sciences*, on the other (Brenner, 1985; Soares, 2005).

Unremarkable practice

As evidenced in the introductory vignette, my participants expressed a mild surprise at my interest in Jula Ajami because for them it was something that, of course, they and others knew how to do or did from time to time. As

⁶ I refer to my participants as Jula simply in the sense of them either self-identifying as descendants of pre-colonial Jula empire based in Kong in modern-day Côte d'Ivoire or as being Manding speakers that were integrated into the Jula community (see Launay & Miran, 2000 for the shifting value of *Jula* as a modern identity/ethnicity marker and its uptake by groups that historically were not treated as Jula).

one participant seemed to suggest in laughing about my questions, anyone who had been a *mórikalanden* or "student in the Koranic schooling system" had this ability or had been exposed to it. It remains unclear however to what extent the use of the Arabic script to write Jula is integrated into instruction or if it is simply a practice used and passed on by students amongst themselves. In any case, all the participants that I asked stated their ability to do so, said it was a practice they were well aware of, and produced sample texts for me. They also suggested that it was a practice that was no longer as frequent as it had been. Some referenced it as something their *cèkòròbáw* ("elders," literally "old men") did or had done frequently, especially to send messages to other villages. Cellphones therefore were cited as one of the major reasons that the practice is no longer prevalent. It is interesting to note in this respect that despite the flood of cheap Chinese smartphones with Arabic script capability, I never witnessed anyone using this feature to write messages in any form. Regardless, while hand-written Jula Ajami may have been much more frequent for communicating between Jula villages in the past, there are not necessarily large personal archives of texts. When I asked one participant about potential personal collections, he told me that they threw away all the old papers of a deceased Ajami-practicing family member when clearing his former house for someone else to take. Indeed, the authentic texts that participants did proffer were of an ephemeral nature. The first one was produced from a participant's pocket and written on the back of a piece of cardboard. The others were in a formerly waterlogged notebook that was more or less falling apart in another participant's house. Moreover the owner said that he had not touched them for two to three years since the day that he received them from a brother. It was suggested to me by one participant who was relatively advanced in Islamic learning that the further one goes in one's Koranic studies the more likely one is to simply write one's notes not in Jula Ajami but rather in actual Classical Arabic since there was less chance of miscomprehension given the graphic ambiguities of Jula Ajami (see below). This and similar remarks seem to confirm that Jula Ajami practices are instances of "grassroots literacy" by those that are not fully part of the locally elite literacy of Koranic schooling (Blommaert, 2008).

Private texts and esoteric Islam

The other theme emerging from my field data is that of curiosity and perhaps a bit of guardedness about my interest in Ajami practices. While my participants openly discussed Ajami, gave me texts, produced samples and helped me to read them, they were understandably a bit curious about my own interest in Ajami. Despite my having lived in the community for two years, my position as a non-Muslim American *tùbabú* ("white person") in his mid- to late twenties obviously goes a long way in explaining these reservations. Despite being a step removed from the French *tùbabú* and their colonial rule, I remain a white Westerner associated with the injustices of colonialism. In addition, Ajami texts are inaccessible even to the majority of local residents due to their lack of proficiency in the Arabic script. In this sense, by their very nature as a literacy that only a minority can engage in, they are in some sense private. Having worked with adult literacy centers before, I explained my interest as related to learning about other ways that people read and write Jula. I inevitably felt however that I was encroaching on a relatively

private practice and tried to proceed respectfully. The most delicate moments came when I expressed interest in seeing old notes or personal texts that an older Jula man thought he might have laying around. He agreed to look for some but when I pressed him later for a good time to check back both him and the others laughed “à b’â nâpininna!” “he’s really after it!” I do not mean to suggest that there was open opposition to my inquiries. My so-called research participants are more accurately my friends and I obtained permission to publish this research from them a year later when I returned to the field this past summer (July 2013). As such, this feeling of intrusion can perhaps be better understood as we move forward and take into account the genre of the authentically-produced—that is, not written at my request—texts that I did come across.

The types of texts were all medicinal treatment recipes (e.g., Owusu-Ansah, 2000). One of them was produced from the pocket of a participant. Seven others were in one notebook and had been sent to another participant by a brother in northern Côte d’Ivoire years earlier. All of these texts revealed themselves in some ways to contain sensitive information that was not meant for wider public viewing. The first Jula Ajami text explained and even given to me was written entirely without diacritics. In fact, even some of the main letters did not include their distinguishing dots. That is, both *fā’* ف and *qāf* ق for example appeared at times without dots (see below for a complete analysis of the graphic system in my corpus). My second participant pointed these facts out to me when I showed him the artifact and said that they were a known way of concealing the contents of one’s message to be sent. The second collection of medicinal recipes were not written in this cryptic manner. Nonetheless during the course of transcribing them and translating them, I was made aware of their sensitive nature. He reproduced the texts into a new notebook for me and then over the course of a couple days we set about studying them so that I could transcribe them into a Latin-based orthography and he could explain the meaning to me if it was not clear. While he was open in sharing the recipes and their contents with me and in front of certain friends, when others approached us studying beneath the mango trees outside of his courtyard he would no longer continue. Or if I stopped by and certain people were there sipping tea with him then he would not suggest that we work on the texts. Later he revealed to me that this was because those people had also attended Koranic school and would be able to read the texts and therefore know or use the medicinal treatments that he possessed. In fact, when I expressed my shock that I never knew that he had potentially been writing in Jula at times when I used to see him writing the Arabic script behind his courtyard, he told me that it is not surprising because many people in the village do not know either. While at times he gains some remuneration for his services—that is, the application of the treatments—it is not his main source of income and he suggested he did not want too many people in the village to know that was a *fūlabɔla*, roughly “leaf or medicine getter.”⁷

While he was enthusiastic about teaching me, another one of our mutual friends expressed frustration with it. Ajami as a practice however was not his concern. He was rather frustrated that our friend would share these treatment recipes with me freely when they were a potential source of income. He claimed

⁷ The word *fūla* is polysemic for both “leaf” and by extension “medicine.” This applies also to modern medication.

that he had seen my participant give them away before and then seen others go off to make money with these treatments in other places. Interestingly, despite the supposed secret and possibly valuable contents of the texts, my participant expressed no qualms with me learning or possibly even using the treatments back in the United States. In fact, for him, the others’ protestations were linked to the fact that he had never studied and therefore could not understand what we were doing or my motivation for studying these texts. This participant and I had a particular strand of scholarship in our friendship. During the Peace Corps I worked in association with the schools and was therefore viewed as a *kālanfā* or “teacher.” Moreover, we had spent many market days drinking tea and chatting while he helped me learn the Arabic script throughout my two years in the Peace Corps. In his comment rejecting our friend’s protestations about me gaining access to medicinal treatment recipes therefore I see unique parallels with Brenner’s (2001) concept of an “esoteric episteme” that conceives schooling and scholarship as being initiatic (explored further below). I was a *kālanfā* during the Peace Corps and am currently a *kālandén* or “student” and in some sense therefore was a part of the club, so to speak, especially given our personal history of having engaged in scholarship together.

Regardless, the point is that Ajami itself is not a secret or holy practice, but is potentially associated with the broad realm of practices that fall under the heading of the “esoteric Islamic sciences” (Brenner, 1985). These diverse practices as outlined by Soares (2005) include activities such as: special prayers; instruction in alms-giving; geomancy; mystical retreat; decision-making via divine inspiration; the confection of written texts to keep or to ingest or wash with after effacing with water; astrology; and medicine. The secrecy surrounding these practices however does not necessarily stem from them being viewed as illicit or contrary to Islam. On the contrary, they frequently derive their potency from being secrets (Soares, 2005). Barrière (1999) looks at a medicinal treatment recipe similar to the ones in my corpus in her exploration of the circulation of pre-Islamic knowledge and practices between traditional Bamanan and Muslim Bamanan in Mali. Soares (2005) however cautions that “the existence of these different groups [of practitioners], each with its own secrets—Islamic and otherwise—points to different ways of being Muslim, not only in the past, but also in the present” (p. 137).

Our understanding then of Jula Ajami medicinal treatment practices today must not accept the view of them stemming from less pure forms of Islam or from pre-Islamic beliefs (e.g., Abdalla, 1997; Barrière, 1999) which is also echoed by voices in current Islamic reform efforts (broadly referred to as *Wahhabi* in the region) but can be traced back to Arab travelers in the region (Battuta, 1994). In fact, esoteric Islamic science Jula Ajami texts may be regarded as having roots in an Islamic tradition that can be traced back centuries (Brenner, 2000) and may have been quite “orthodox” in the nineteenth century (Brenner, 1985, p. 23). Indeed, the presence of esoteric Islamic science practices today in the region points to a “particular manifestation of Islamic culture” and writing it off as non-Islamic actually obscures what may be one of the “most dynamic elements in the diffusion of Islamic culture on the continent” (Brenner, 1985, pp. 26–27). Healing (i.e., medicinal treatment recipes) and the other esoteric sciences collectively known locally as “*tašrīf*” (تصريف) (Brenner, 1985, p. 25) may actually have been a much more integral part of the scholarly activities of Muslim West African lineages, with the

lack of written references being attributable to their private nature (Brenner, 2000, p. 50). Again, it is important to note here that these healing sciences were private not because of their illicit nature necessarily but because of their inclusion in an esoteric learning and knowledge tradition with “a hierarchical conceptualization of knowledge, the highest levels of which are made available to only relatively few specialists” in which knowledge is “transmitted in an initiatic form and is closely related to devotional praxis” (Brenner, 2001, p. 18). This esoteric episteme helps us to understand why the medicinal treatment recipes’ efficacy is not tied not simply to their ingredients nor even the ritual and method of composition but also to their limited circulation within the community.

Ajami as a practice therefore appears to live in the margins of Koranic schooling. In of itself it does not seem to be held in high regard or be particularly revered by participants. This was evidenced by their surprise that I was interested in the practice at all as well as their willingness to teach me the script and provide me with texts upon request. While in the past and even today participants suggested that it is used for small notes and messages, it seems that its most frequent domain of usage has been in exchanging esoteric Islamic medicinal treatment recipes that use local plants. Understanding the private nature of the healing sciences demonstrates how the use of Jula Ajami was developed for the very specific purposes of communicating knowledge not transmittable in Classical Arabic (local plant names) but not for the purposes of wider distribution or even preservation. Indeed, the state of the authentic texts (on ripped cardboard in a pocket and waterlogged and misplaced inside a house) and their owners’ willingness to provide them to me suggest that their primary purpose locally was transmitting a message for immediate use and subsequent memorization. It is hard to say at this point to what extent Jula Ajami is practiced by those that end up with an advanced command of Classical Arabic and form the elite of the Koranic schooling system. Regardless of its spread amongst current or former students and teachers it appears that Jula Ajami is a form of grassroots literacy that exists within the elite literacy regime based around Classical Arabic within the Koranic schooling system.

Ethnography of Text

Having examined the context of Jula Ajami production, I will now turn to the actual language in the texts themselves. As discussed above, this “ethnography of text” (Blommaert, 2008) critically allows us to utilize instances of grassroots literacy to explore the diversity of language practices in otherwise idealized homogenous speech communities. I begin with an analysis of the graphic system to give readers of a sense of the way the graphic system is appropriated and to serve as a resource for future research on Ajami practices in the region.

Graphic analysis

The most recent source regarding the writing conventions used for Jula Ajami stem from Vydrin’s (1998) review of Manding Ajami practices in which he reproduces the grapheme inventory collected by Delafosse (1904). Here I will review only instances where there is either 1) not an easy one-to-one correspondence

between an Arabic grapheme and a Jula phoneme or 2) there are conventions that deviate from Modern Standard Arabic graphic conventions. In general, the script is written in the Maghribi style (Van den Boogert, 1989) which distinguishes itself most notably by the follow traits in my corpus:

- In general, *fā’* and *qāf* are written in the Maghribi style with the *fā’*’s dot appearing below: ف, and *qāf*’s having a single dot above: ق
- *Nūn* in final position is written without a dot: ن
- Even when appearing in final position the *kāf* is written in its medial and initial form ك
- *Ṣād* ص appears without a ‘tooth’

Consonants

- Geminated consonants are absent from my corpus except for *ṣād* ص which only appears in the Arabic loanword *solī* صَلِي “form of prayer”⁸
- *gb*, the initial voiced velar stop which is realized variously as /*gb*, *gw*, *g/* in Jula is transcribed as either a ghayn غ: *māngoyá* مَعْيَا “rival,” or as a modified ‘ayn ع with three dots غ: *gbé* غ “to whiten/clean”
- The intervocalic *g* (which is simply an obstruent with non-contrasting voicing and can therefore also be realized as [k, x, ɣ] or even Ø) appears most frequently as *kāf* ك: *dāgá* دَا “clay pot”. Alternatively it appears as *qāf* ق: *sāfinekun* سَمَيْتُف “bar of soap”
- *c* [tʃ] is transcribed with *jīm* ج
- *j* [dʒ] is transcribed by *dhāl* ذ. In one instance it is appears as *zāy* ز: *sànjí* سَز “rain”
- The syllabic nasal *ń*, appears in my corpus only as the first person pronoun *ń* “I, me, my”. It is omitted during transcription: *ń-bé-lógo-rá* بَلُو “I am at the market”
- *y* [j] is typically transcribed by *yaa* ي but on one occasion by ‘ayn ع: *syáman* سَعَم “a lot”
- There are no tokens of *p*, *kp*, *ɲ*, or *ŋ* in my corpus

Vowels

Jula like other Western Manding varieties has a seven vowel system which lends itself poorly to the use of the Arabic script’s diacritic vowel system.

- *a* is transcribed by *fathaa* فَاثَا
- *i*, *e*, *ɛ* are all transcribed by *kasraa* كَسْرَا
- *u*, *o*, *ɔ* are all transcribed by *dammaa* دَامَا

Nasalization

In addition, all seven Jula vowels also can appear as contrastively nasalized. Nasalization however is systematically ignored in my corpus: *min* [mĩ] م “where.”

⁸ I am currently unaware of the exact meaning of this loanword in both Arabic and Jula.

Tone

Tone is unmarked in all of the texts of my corpus.

Linguistic analysis

While a thorough morpho-syntactic analysis is beyond the scope of this paper, let us look preliminarily at some of the particularities of the language(s) used within the Jula Ajami texts that I was able to collect. The texts in my corpus are characterized by three dominant linguistic tendencies that form a unique register seemingly appropriate to Jula Ajami: the use of Kong Jula; Classical Arabic; and implicit recipe-style syntax.

Enregisterment of Kong Jula

One of the most striking features of my Jula Ajami corpus is that almost all of the texts reveal themselves grammatically as being instances of “Kong Jula” (Sangaré, 1984). Kong Jula in this usage refers to the Jula dialect spoken in Kong, Côte d’Ivoire, the seat of the area’s dominant pre-colonial polity mentioned earlier. While my participants all identified as Jula, and therefore potentially as native-speakers of the thing called Jula, it is entirely unclear whether or not they are native-speakers of the Kong dialect. Having grown up in cosmopolitan multi-lingual villages and towns of BF, the closest thing to their mother tongue could arguably be lingua franca or “vehicular Jula” (Sanogo, 2003, 2013). In this sense, the use of Kong Jula⁹ in Ajami texts by people that are arguably not native-speakers of it reveals the necessity of attending to the ways that the *enregisterment* (Agha, 2007) of linguistic behavior or a language ignores the linguist’s isomorphic boundaries. This is especially true in West Africa where Western academics’ study of language practices remains tied to the linguistic descriptions founded upon ideologies of an idealized homogeneous, monolingual, and fixed community (Bazin, 1985; Irvine & Gal, 2000).

Enregisterment refers to socio-historical processes “whereby diverse behavioral signs [...] are functionally reanalyzed as cultural models of action” (Agha, 2007, p. 55). Snapshots of this process are available to us in registers of a language. Registers are typically conceived of as different ways of speaking a single language (e.g., Kittredge, 1982). While this may be the case, the question remains as to how registers come into existence. We cannot understand why different ways of speaking a language are conceived of as distinct registers appropriate to different kinds of social activities without an understanding of language’s “reflexive” nature (Lucy, 1993). By reflexive, I simply mean that people are constantly engaged in talk about talk. It is only in these moments of characterizing or typifying other people’s acts of speech that different ways of talking come to be known to language users as forming distinct registers that can span one or multiple grammatical codes (i.e., languages or dialects). Registers therefore are “cultural models of action identifiable

⁹ Confirming Sangaré’s (1984) metadiscursive labelling though, when I expressed an inability to understand to certain constructions or double-took at certain vocabulary that I didn’t recognize upon reading, certain participants stated that it was indeed *Kpón ká jùlakán* “Kong’s Jula.” For others however it was *jùlakán yèreyere* “true or pure Jula.” Either way, none of my participants were born or had been raised in Kong.

by: linguistic features or repertoire characteristics; enactable pragmatic values or a social range; and a set of users or a social domain” (Agha, 2007, p. 169).

From this perspective, we can see that Kong Jula is not simply or always a dialect—that is, a geographically defined speech variety. Certainly it was and is at times. Some participants, when I struggled with certain constructions or vocabulary, confirmed Sangaré’s (1984) metadiscursive labeling in comforting me that it was *Kpón ká jùlakán* “Kong’s Jula.” For others however it was *jùlakán yèreyere* “true” or “pure Jula.” In characterizing Kong Jula as a prestigious form, participants offer a partial explanation of its deployment in my corpus. Kong Jula is enregistered as an appropriate form of Manding-Jula language use in Ajami texts despite the fact that from a dialectology perspective it is not their native vernacular. When someone who arguably is a native-speaker of vehicular Jula uses Kong Jula in their daily interactions or while authoring an Ajami text, it is therefore perhaps best not to suggest that they are bidialectal but rather that they are accessing different registers of a socio-historically defined language that does not adhere to Western Linguistics’ model of African dialects.

While accounts of the social domain and social range of this register are beyond the scope of this paper, some of the repertoire characteristics that distinguish it phono-lexically in my corpus are explored in Table 1.

Table 1: *Some Distinguishing Features of the Phono-lexical Register of Jula Ajami*

	Ajami Jula	BF Vehicular Jula	Difference
Perfective Affirmative Predicate Marker	<i>kà</i>	<i>yé</i>	lexico-grammatical
‘to call’	<i>kíri</i>	<i>wéele</i>	lexical
‘corn’	<i>kàwá</i>	<i>kàbá</i>	phonological
‘a lot’	<i>syáman</i>	<i>cáman</i>	phonological
‘rice’ ‘to pray’ ‘to study’	<i>màró</i> <i>séri</i> <i>kàrán</i>	<i>màló</i> <i>séli</i> <i>kàlán</i>	phonological

Medicinal treatment recipe genre

As explained above, the use of Kong Jula in Jula Ajami texts and people’s typifications of it as being pure or true Jula suggest that it is better conceived as a unique register in Jula speakers’ communicative repertoire. At the same time, Jula Ajami texts reveal that Kong Jula is but one part of a unique discursive register used in the medicinal treatment recipe genre. The texts are characterized by a mixed use of grammatical code. Each recipe starts in Classical Arabic with the opening formula *Bisimi ’āl-lai ’āl-raḥmani ’āl-raḥīmi* “In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful,” which is the first line of the first *sūra* (سورة, roughly, “chapter”) and the prequel-like verse preceding all other *sūra* of the Koran. Moreover, amidst the instructions for the recipe appears the Arabic loanword for prayer which is written *صَلَا* *ṣali* but was read out orally as *solī* by my research participant, presumably as a result of phonological adaptation. In

this sense the word shows evidence of functioning “bivalently” (Woolard, 1998); the graphic form belonging to Classical Arabic while the oral form belongs to Jula. Similarly, in two of the recipes the Arabic word for “seven” appears not as a numeral but as a written out word, *سبع* *sab ‘a*, that is used to give the instruction to do something seven times. The register use in the recipe genre is also characterized by implicit instructions through the use of stand-alone noun phrases such as the following excerpt from one text:

Nugunuguna ✱ *kùrú sàwá* ✱ *í yé soli ké dàgá rá* ✱

Nugunuguna tree ✱ three bundles ✱ Read the prayer into the pot ✱

In these instances there are no explicit instructions on what to do with the “Nugunuguna tree” or with the “three bundles.” Someone well-versed in the practice of administering medicinal treatments however is able to seamlessly decipher the preparation task.

The above analysis gives some preliminary insights about the distinct style and features of the Jula Ajami medicinal treatment texts. Unfortunately, for ethical reasons I am unable to reproduce the texts in their entirety here.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to better situate underexplored Jula Ajami practices from a literacy-as-practice perspective (Gee, 2008; Street, 1984). Ajami practices readily reveal themselves as instances of grassroots literacy (Blommaert, 2008) by virtue of their being “un-standardized” and in “vernacular” (that is, unofficial) languages.

Jula Ajami texts are instances of grassroots literacy that according to the research participants are produced by those not fully inserted into the elite literacy regime of the local Koranic system—that is, those that advance far enough to be proficient in Classical Arabic. That said, Jula Ajami’s primary genre is medicinal treatment recipes. This genre belongs to what Soares (2005) following Brenner (1985) deems the “esoteric Islamic sciences.” Interestingly, Soares (2005) suggests that the sciences are carried out largely by “minor religious specialists” (p. 148). This name seems to parallel Jula Ajami’s marginal status as a grassroots literacy. At the same time, the question remains as to what extent the use of Jula Ajami for medicinal treatment recipes exists throughout Koranic schooling hierarchies. Given the particular lexicon involved in these practices (the names of local flora) and the suggestion that these may be quite formalized within local Islamic learning (Brenner, 1985), it is entirely possible that Jula Ajami is widespread even amongst more learned Koranic students and teachers. Regardless of its practitioners, the fact remains that it can be viewed as a grassroots literacy in light of its lack of standardization, use of a local vernacular and marginal status within the Koranic schooling system.

On the other hand, this analysis reveals that grassroots literacy is not a phenomenon that is particular to globalization or any notion of *super-diversity* (e.g., Blommaert & Rampton, 2011; Vertovec, 2006). This system itself however is a form of grassroots literacy within officially Francophone BF. More than

simply celebrating Jula Ajami as a legitimate and rich form of grassroots literacy, this analysis strives to show that it is nonetheless subject to varying scales of valorization even within the milieu within which it is practiced. For instance, a close analysis of texts reveals that they are not simply characterized by their use of a local vernacular. Jula Ajami texts in the milieu explored use a specific register, Kong Jula, that is not strictly speaking the local dialect of where they are produced. The bond therefore of grassroots literacies lies not in their use of vernacular or lack of standardization but rather in their existence on the margins of more normative forms of literacy that can themselves be understood as grassroots depending on one’s scale of comparison.

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An Ecological View of Language Choice in a Bilingual Program: A Dynamic Model of Social Structures

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The present paper proposes a Dynamic Model of Social Structures as a model of language choice which highlights and synthesizes two significant themes repeated throughout the history of language choice research: agency and function. This model stems from ecological frameworks advanced in the fields of language planning (Hornberger, 2002) and language learning (Lam, 2007). Central to the model is the notion of language as a social structure (Gafaranga, 2005) among infinite other social structures (e.g., broader society, social network, local context, and individual linguistic behaviors). The Dynamic Model of Social Structures integrates the concept of agency and function in demonstrating how social structures influence one another and how individuals enact social identities through the discursive functions of their individual language choices. Research from a primary school Spanish immersion program in Arizona illustrates the application of this model and its value as a framework especially suited for classroom language choice research.

Introduction

Upon entering school for the first time, all students are surrounded by a new social language (Gee, 2010) consisting of different vocabulary, routines, and academic ways of speaking; however, certain students must also learn a language different from the language(s) which they acquired from birth. In addition to learning the social language of school, these students must acquire a new language and determine which language to speak, where, when, and with whom. How do students negotiate a new language variety in their linguistic repertoire? During an interview, a student in a Spanish immersion program provided his explanation below:

DAVID: Like, sometimes a friend speaks English, and then I speak English, and then like we have a conversation in English. And the teacher's like "Hey, this is Spanish class, not English class!"

Despite its brevity, this comment is extremely insightful. A fourth-grader in his third year in the Spanish immersion program, David acknowledges the differences between practice and policy, noting how another student's language choice influences his own, despite the established rules of language use at the school. Furthermore, David acknowledges various external factors which are agents in his linguistic decision-making, including the influence of social network (*a friend*),