



# BOSTON UNIVERSITY

**TRANSCRIPTION, CROSS-CHECKING AND THEIR CHALLENGES**

**WORKSHOP: THREE YEARS OF NEH 'AJAMĪ PROJECT**

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Presented by Ousmane Cisse

# Outline

**Challenges**

**Some suggestions for improvements**

**Reflection and takeaways**



## Challenges

While cross-checking the transcriptions, I encountered quite a few speedbumps. The nature of these speedbumps pertains to the inaccuracy of the transcriptions, and the lack of clarity in the scripts (some of the original documents were not clear due to poor preservation). The most recurrent speedbumps are:

Alternation between two methods of recitation/writing in the manuscripts: Warsh and Hafs methods of Writing.

e.g.: confusion between Qaf / Fa

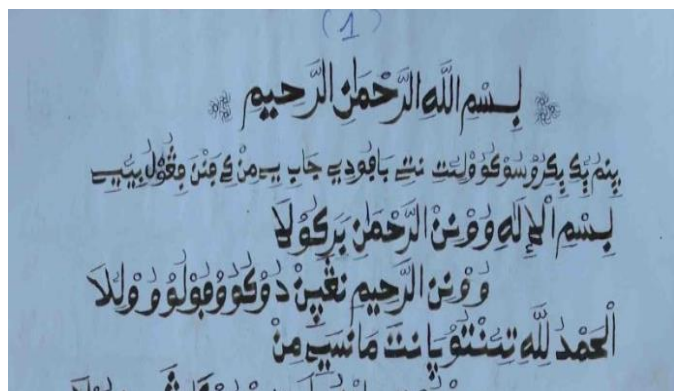
**Warsh Qaf:** ف

**Warsh Fa:** ب

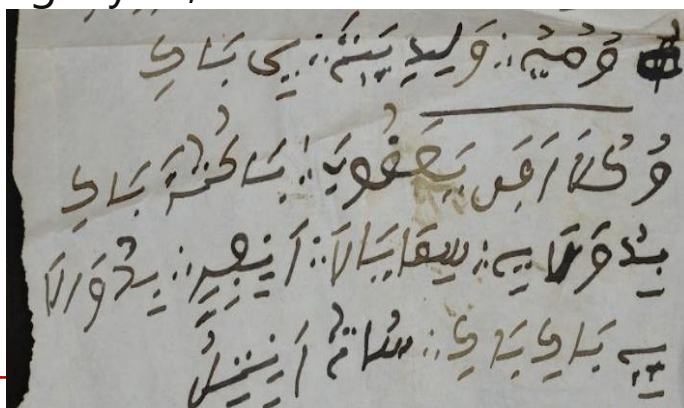
**Hafs Qaf:** ق

**Hafs Fa:** ف

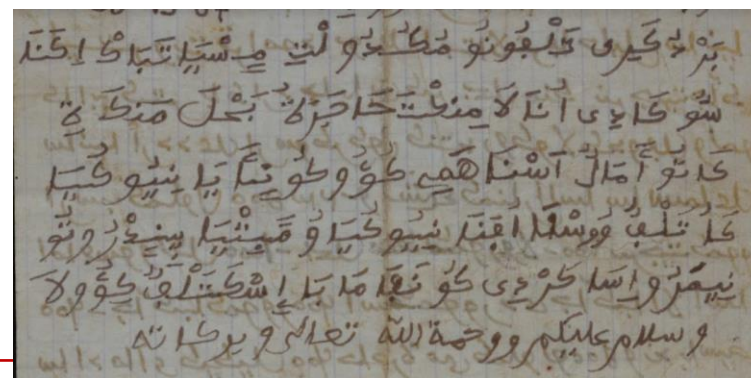
Scribbled handwriting, fonts, or writing styles, and conservation of the manuscripts



picture 1



picture 2



picture 3

## Challenges

- Dialectal variations (subtle regional differences in the varieties of Mandinka depending on the region).
- Interpolation of the reader's comments in the transcription (as a result of the audio-based transcription instead of reference to the original text).
- Inclusion or transfer of the reader's mistakes /errors in the transcription.
- The Ajami reader's skipping some words or phrases, which is also reflected in the transcriptions.
- Inclusion of Arabic phrases, and some loanwords (quotes from Quran and hadith, loanwords from French), which requires some background knowledge in those spheres.
- The transliteration of Arabic using Brill's standards (EI3 style).
- The representation of different vowels by similar diacritics (I call it diacritical ambiguity)

e.g.: /e/ and /i/ are written using **Kasra**

◌ِ    ب → ب

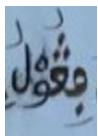
/o/ and /u/ are written using **Damma**

◌ُ    ب → ب

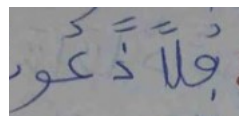
- Inconsistency in how some consonants/sounds are written ( /p/ vs /b/, /ŋ/, /g/, etc., )

e.g.: /ŋ/ → غ by writer #1

/ŋ/ → ع by writer #2



*feŋolu* 'things, clothes'



*fulanjanɔ* 'the second one'

## Some suggestions for improvements

**For preservation of the manuscripts:** give away document folders/binders with sleeves to Ajami writers for a better preservation of their manuscripts (initiative).

**For transcription accuracy:** Organize a workshop on transliteration using BRILL's EI3 style, provide training on transcription, translation and raise awareness of the recurrent challenges constituting some obstacle to transcription.

**For consistency in the writing methods:** promote the widely used method of writing (either Warsh or Hafs) (although this effort could take decades to be successful) or at least encourage writers to use one consistently throughout a manuscript.

**For diacritical ambiguity:** Come up with a conventional way to represent each vowel by one diacritical sign so that there will not be any overlap or confusion: for instance, because of this diacritical ambiguity one needs to exhaust the different readings and decide which meaning fits the context (for example, *fuloo* 'the two' vs *fuloo* 'Fulaani' vs *foloo* 'the first'; *keloo* 'a fight' vs *kiloo* 'an egg', and *kiloo* 'kilogram', etc.).

## Some suggestions for improvements

### Some potential guidelines for transcription and cross-checking the Ajami texts

1. Read the metadata of the manuscript to familiarize oneself with the text.
2. Check the region the manuscript was collected from and check what dialect is dominant in that area.
3. It would be helpful during the fieldwork to include the information about the dialect in which the manuscript is written.
4. Be mindful of the interpolations (addition of Ajami text reader's comments).
5. Use footnotes to add personal comments on the transcribed document.
6. Have a separate Excel sheet in order to list the challenges and their intext references.
7. Highlight unknown and undecipherable words in red.
8. Highlight unclear words in green after guessing their meaning.
9. Make sure the transcription's writing style (whether it is written with rhymes or prose) aligns with that of original text.
10. Follow the transcription writing convention (fonts type, font size, space, etc.).
11. Keep track of time for the purpose of payment.

## Reflection and takeaways

Cross-checking the transcription of Mandinka Ajami manuscripts was rewarding in that I learned a lot about Mandinka religious chants which are reminiscent of my childhood.

As a reader, I found some of the religious chant difficult to follow due to the inclusion of unfamiliar words (loanwords from Arabic that are fully incorporated in Mandinka). However, doing the cross-checking of the letters of correspondence, the record of historical events, and the proverbs were easy and fun.

The bigger takeaway for me is the overall skill that I learned in the process: the practice of transliteration, the different writing styles in Mandinka, Mandinka Poetry.

To conclude, I would like express some words of gratitude to Fallou Ngom. Had it not been Prof. Ngom's guidance and his insightful comments, working in the Ajami project (Mandinka) would not have been easy. I also would like to thank Balla Saho, and Ablaye Diakite for paving the way for me and laying down the foundation for me to be able to do the cross-checking. Special thanks go to Dr. Daivi for her hard work, perseverance and patience. And thank you everyone for your attention.

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## References

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