

# Introducing Ajami

*A Lesson for Students by Brenda Randolph*

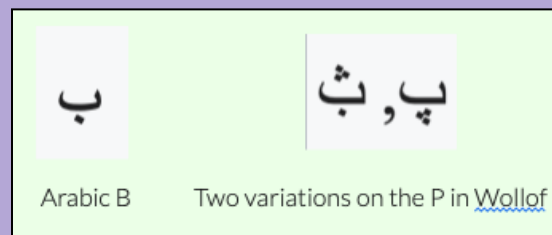
Ajami is a writing system that uses the [Arabic alphabet](#) to write languages other than Arabic. A Semitic language, Arabic is related to Hebrew and Aramaic. It is spoken primarily in western Asia and Africa. Ajami developed and spread in Africa between the 10th - 16th centuries with the spread of Islam and Arabic. In a similar way, during the Middle Ages the Latin/Roman alphabet spread in Europe with Christianity. In Britain, Christian missionaries discouraged the use of local English writing systems and encouraged the use of the Roman alphabet.

There are at least 10 African languages that use Ajami today, including four languages in West Africa: Wolof, Fulfulde, Hausa, and Mandinka. In West Africa, Ajami is used in Muslim areas of West Africa including: Senegal, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Ghana, Nigeria, and Cameroon. Ajami is also used in parts of the Muslim Swahili-speaking world in East Africa especially in Kenya and Tanzania.

The English language is written and read from left to right. Ajami, like Arabic, is written and read from right to left. Several other languages are written from right to left including Amharic, Hebrew, and Farsi.

## Ajami Enriches Arabic

Ajami users have enriched the Arabic script to express sounds that appear in their languages but not in Arabic. For example, Arabic has three vowels: e, oo and ah. African languages often have five vowels, some even have seven. Additionally, the consonants “n” and “p” occur in many African languages but not in Arabic. To write the letter “p” Wolof speakers added 3 dots to the Arabic “B” to create the “P” sound.



# Ajami Documents

Africans have used Ajami to write various documents. The advertisement below was written by a Senegalese mill owner during the colonial period when France ruled Senegal. The ad includes the French word “entreprise.” The rest of the ad is in Wolof Ajami also known as Wolofal. The English translation is: “If you want (your grains) pounded or grinded or peanut butter effortlessly; come here. “

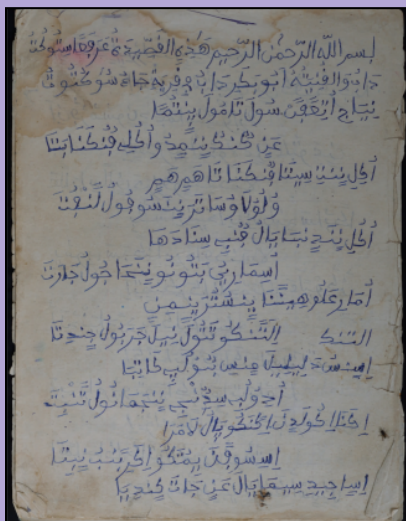


Mill Owner's Advertisement. 2015. *Precolonial Africa had written traditions*.

<https://africasacountry.com/2019/10/refuting-the-claim-that-precolonial-africa-lacks-written-traditions>.

Accessed 15 Nov. 2023. Permission granted by Fallou Ngom

There are Ajami documents about religion, science, history, geography, and the lives of leaders. There are recipes, work songs, poems, essays and private letters. Some documents, like the translated one below, appeal to Allah (God) for health and blessing. “[If You See, Nee Yas Je](#)” was written in Mandinka Ajami by Arfan Sitookoto Daabo.



*You who have the power to make the bird and its chicks live in a nest, make my life pleasant while keeping me from difficulties. Do not reject my acts of worship, and do not differentiate my acts either. Put them all together, make them beautiful and receive them from me. I am in your hands. Whatever you want to do with me, I'll take it Your way. I worry not because your rewards are infallible.*

Daabo, Arfan Sitookoto. "Ni Yaa Je..." ["If You See"]. NEH Ajami Project, edited by Fallou Ngom et al., NEH Ajami Research Project, African Studies Center, Boston University, 2018, [sites.bu.edu/nehajami/the-four-languages/mandinka/mandinka-manuscripts/ni-yaa-je/](https://sites.bu.edu/nehajami/the-four-languages/mandinka/mandinka-manuscripts/ni-yaa-je/) Accessed 15 Nov. 2023. Permission granted by Fallou Ngom

Some Ajami documents allow us to hear voices and perspectives that were suppressed or ignored during colonial rule. Amadou Bamba, a 19th century religious leader from Senegal, encouraged his followers to resist French colonial rule by writing down their grievances. Many did, writing in Wolof Ajami.

## Calligraphy, Activism and Ajami

Calligraphy means beautiful writing. Some African Ajami writers decorate their words with calligraphy. The Senegalese artist Yelimane Fall included Wolof Ajami calligraphy in many of his colorful paintings. Fall described his work as a way of continuing the non-violent teachings of Amadou Bamba, a pacifist who protested the French colonization of Senegal.



Senegalese artist Yelimane Fall is creating a mural at the Sherman Gallery during his monthlong residency at BU.

*Senegalese artist Yelimane Fall.* 22 Nov. 2016. *BU Today*, Boston University, 22 Nov. 2016, [www.bu.edu/articles/2011/yelimane-fall/](http://www.bu.edu/articles/2011/yelimane-fall/). Accessed 15 Nov. 2023.

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Fall, Yelimane. *Yelimane Fall's Faith*. 2010. *BU Today News, Opinion, Community*, Boston University, 22 Nov. 2016, [www.bu.edu/articles/2011/yelimane-fall/](http://www.bu.edu/articles/2011/yelimane-fall/). Accessed 15 Nov. 2023. Permission Granted.





In this series of paintings, each work is made to resemble a traditional Qur'anic writing board.

Fall, Yelimane. "Quranic Writing Board." 2010. *BU Today News, Opinion, Community*, Boston University, 22 Nov. 2016, [www.bu.edu/articles/2011/yelimane-fall/](http://www.bu.edu/articles/2011/yelimane-fall/). Accessed 15 Nov. 2023. Permission Granted by Sherman Gallery

At Boston University, Senegalese scholar, Dr. Fallou Ngom has gathered and organized a collection of Ajami documents. All are available online. Many have not been translated but there is a summary of each one. The most downloaded document is by Mustafa Kulfi from Hausaland in Nigeria that provides recipes for bravery and describes how to win a court case.



Dr. Ngom discovered his dad, whom he thought could not read or write, was actually an Ajami user. He kept a journal in which he wrote about the family.

Ricciardi, Jackie. Fallou Ngom. *The Brink*, Boston University, [www.bu.edu/articles/2022/fallou-ngom-discovers-ajami-african-writing-system/](http://www.bu.edu/articles/2022/fallou-ngom-discovers-ajami-african-writing-system/). Accessed 15 Nov. 2023. Permission Granted

## Ajami in the Americas



Omar ibn Said and Ayuba Suleiman Diallo were enslaved in the U.S. Both learned to read and write in Arabic before they were enslaved. Dr. Ngom identified traces of Ajami in their writings. Evidence of Ajami is also present in the writings of Abu Bakr Al-Siddiq who was enslaved in Jamaica. When his enslaver realized that Abu Bakr was educated, he tasked him with keeping records of the plantation. Abu Bakr used Mandinka Ajami to write the records.

Dr. Ngom hopes to have a student one day who will focus on Ajami in the writings of other literate enslaved Africans in the Americas.

The writings may show connections between Africa and the Americas that have been missed completely.

*Uncle Moreau [Omar ibn Said]. 1850. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/2002060> Yale U, Randolph Simpson Collection, New Haven, JWJ MSS 54. Public Domain.*

### Can you answer these questions?

1. What is Ajami?
2. Name 4 African countries where Ajami is used.
3. Name 4 African languages that use Ajami script.
4. Why is Ajami important?