A case of restricted literacy: writing in ‘Ajami in the Haalpulaar society of Fuuta Tooro (Senegal/Mauritania)

Mary-Eve Humery (IIAC-EHESS, Paris)

ABSTRACT

In this talk, I deal with the specific case of ‘ajami writing in the Haalpulaar society of Fuuta Tooro, on both sides of the Senegal river (the frontier between Senegal and Mauritania). Firstly, I present the sociolinguistic situation in the area of our fieldwork (four senegalese villages: two in a quite isolated island of the River and two others along the main road crossing the Valley). Then, the scale is enlarged to Senegal and Mauritania. This description includes the rates about reading and writing in the three main languages — french, arabic and fula (or pulaar) — that are written in the villages where we have made extensive census. These data will underline that ‘ajami skills are spread at a very low level among villagers.

Then, we’ll examine the usage of ‘ajami in this very islamic region of Fuuta Tooro. Texts in ‘ajami are not easily accessible. They are handwritten, as printed books seem to be extremely scarce. They usually deal with religious matters. Thus, literacy rates in ‘ajami and uses of reading and writing in an arabic based script are quite limited. Moreover, the phonological and orthographical norms of transcription are not shared by everyone that uses ‘ajami.

Nevertheless, writing fula in an Arabic based script is much more ancient and it is more an « indigenous » writing practice than writing the native language with the Roman based script. Then, we can wonder why this Roman based writing (abajada) has so largely supplant ‘ajami, which has remained a restricted literacy (Goody) in pulaar, in spite of the support of some Arabic institutions to extend ‘ajami in West Africa? On this point, the impact of french colonialism can only be convocated as an indirect one. In fact, the crucial moment is around the decolonisation period, when Haalpulaar’en and Fulbe have chosen to promote their culture and their language by
spreading the writing of fula with the *abajada* alphabet. This strong mobilization, that we’ve called the *mouvement pulaar*, has known a certain grassroots success, and we’ll analyse it in its predominant lines. Various stages and forms have characterised it during the five last decades, until it has scattered on the internet.

After a comparison of the situation of ‘*ajami* in the Haalpulaar society with some other fula contexts and showing how the relationships with the cultures in contact are determinant (e.g. with the Wolof), we’ll conclude by confirming the thesis (Rodinson, 1963) that the adoption and the success of a script system is more a matter of political and ideological stakes than technical or pedagogical ones, even if these last issues have to be seriously considered to explain the weakness of a writing system or to assist its development.