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Tal Tamari

# Bamana Texts in Arabic Characters: Some Leaves from Mali

**Abstract:** This study analyses five Bamana-language texts composed in the earlier twentieth century by Amadou Jomworo Bary, a Fulbe scholar from the Masina (Mali), that were hand copied in 1972 by the Fulbe scholar and researcher Almamy Maliki Yattara. The writing system, which uses modified Arabic characters to note phonemes specific to Bamana, is compared to other West African adaptations of Arabic script. The article also examines the doctrinal positions developed and world view implicit in the texts, which concern water rites in San (Mali), Islamic belief and practice, and healing. Attention is drawn as to how knowledge of local cultural contexts can contribute to a better understanding of these manuscripts.

## 1 Introduction

In 1994, I published a study of five short texts (totalling five and a half pages), written in Arabic characters in the Bamana language. These texts had been copied by Almamy Maliki Yattara, a Muslim scholar then employed by the Institut des Sciences Humaines in Bamako, from originals held by a friend of his, Aboubacar (commonly known as Bory) Bary, in 1972 in San (Mali). Research conducted in the intervening twenty years has confirmed the analysis of the writing system, and has led to few changes in the transliteration (Arabic to Latin characters), transcription (reconstitution of the Bamana discourse) and translations of these texts. On the other hand, personal fieldwork undertaken in the interval, as well as general progress in the understanding of West African writing practices, makes it possible to place these texts in much sharper historical and cultural perspective. In particular, one may now confirm that Amadou Jomworo Bary was the author of these texts, and provide further details of his life. These new data also suggest that the Fulbe scholar's decision to write in Bamana may have been inspired by the practice of writing Fulfulde in Arabic script, now better attested in Mali as well as in certain neighbouring countries, and by his familiarity with French.

My initial article was based on the texts themselves, the then-available documentation about African languages (especially Manding and Fulfulde) tran-

scribed in Arabic script, and interviews with Almamy Maliki Yattara and Sambourou Bary (a pupil of Almamy Maliki Yattara and son of Bory Bary) – only. In the intervening two decades, I have travelled to San, Sienso and Penga (places which Amadou Jomworo Bary had visited or in which he lived), and met numerous other members of the family, including Bory Bary and his eldest son Amadou Bary, another son – Kola Bary –, and a son-in-law – Amadou Cissé.<sup>1</sup>

The writing system devised by Amadou Jomworo Bary, seemingly labouring in isolation, for Bamana, is phonologically more perfect than that of most or all other West African *'ajamī*-s currently identified – including several associated with extensive written literatures (such as Fulfulde and Hausa) – and several major Asian ones (including the ones employed for Persian and Turkish). I had for long mused as to why this might be so, when I was contacted by several family members, who stated that their elders had mentioned that Amadou Jomworo Bary not only spoke French, but could read it and write it. This circumstance may well explain why – rather than the three or at most four vowels distinguished by most *'ajamī*-s – the author was careful to note five vocalic degrees for Bamana (which has seven vowel phonemes).

However, additional information also leads to new questions. Why did Amadou Jomworo Bary choose to write in Bamana, rather than Arabic, Fulfulde, or French? And why did he choose to describe the San ceremonies, rather than the equally spectacular water rites at Sienso, the nearby village where he occasionally resided?

It must be emphasised that the texts transmitted by Almamy Maliki Yattara are his handwritten copies. Several attempts to locate the originals, both during Bory Bary's lifetime and afterwards, having now proved unsuccessful, it is to be

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<sup>1</sup> Almamy Maliki Yattara (c. 1922 – November 1998) was a highly respected, traditionally-trained, Fulfulde-speaking scholar (also fluent in Songhay, Tamashek, and Bamana, as well as Arabic), originally hailing from the Guimbala region of Mali (just north of the Masina). He collaborated with Amadou Hampâté Bâ, as well as with numerous Western scholars; his life history has now been published by Bernard Salvaing (Yattara/Salvaing 2000, 2003). Amadou Bary is his grandfather's homonym. Bory, Amadou and Kola Bary were all educated at French-language government schools, then going on to the civil service or other modern sector employment. Sambourou Bary, now a teacher at a Franco-Arabic school in Bamako, received both traditional and modern Islamic schooling. Amadou Cissé, husband of Bory's daughter Dikko, is a recently retired commercial traveller and accountant, who received both traditional Islamic and French-language education. Bory Bary is mentioned several times in Almamy's memoirs (Yattara/Salvaing 2003, 37, 39–40, 43, 48, 57–59, 89, 92–93). I would like to thank the above, as well as members of the Tera and Traoré families in San, interlocutors in Penga and Sienso, and representatives of the association 'Alliance Dofera ni Banabako de San' in Bamako, for their welcome and information, as well as the article's anonymous referees for their helpful comments.

feared that the original documents – which may once have been part of a larger corpus – are now irretrievably lost.

The researchers Gérard Dumestre and Valentin Vydrin have recently published (2014) a study of these same texts, which strangely makes no reference to my work and is, more importantly, marred by a considerable number of errors, affecting both the interpretation of the writing system and the meaning of the texts. In the several instances in which I have found their readings useful, this is explicitly indicated in the main body of this essay. It has, however, been necessary to devote a separate, final section to an analysis of the misinterpretations advanced by these two authors.

## 2 Manding and Malian ‘*ajamī*-s in historical context

While two West African languages – Fulfulde and Hausa – have developed substantial literatures, and Old Kanembu also has an extensive written corpus, the evidence for Manding is sketchier. Nearly all known examples of the latter group of languages in Arabic script concern varieties of Mandinka, in Senegal, The Gambia, and northern Guinea-Bissau, where their use in correspondence and personal record-keeping has been reported.<sup>2</sup> However, several historical manuscripts are known to exist, and two (written partly in Arabic and partly in Mandinka) have been published.<sup>3</sup> Considerable use of African languages (including Manding) in Arabic script has been reported in Sierra Leone<sup>4</sup>, while several Jula documents from the Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso have been described.<sup>5</sup> The

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<sup>2</sup> Hamlyn 1935, 101–106; Rowlands 1959, 1; Addis 1963; Schaffer 1975, 2003, 7–15; Giesing/Costa Dias, 2007; Giesing/Vydrine 2007; and (with reference to Bamana and Malinke in Mali) Binger 1886, 31–35. The oft-cited passages from Carreira 1947, 254 (with reference to Guinea-Bissau) and Bazin 1906a, 693, 1906b, xxiii (with reference to Bamana in Mali) are in fact ambiguous: it is unclear whether the authors are referring to the use of Arabic characters for the writing of Manding or Arabic.

<sup>3</sup> Schaffer 1975; 2003, 8–15; Vydrine 1998, 46–62; Giesing/Dias 2007, Giesing/Vydrine 2007. Camara 1996, 776–777, 1999, 64–66 reports that the Diabate griots of Kela, Mali (who serve the royal Keita lineage residing in Kangaba) claim to have a written version of the Sunjata story, but was unable to gain access to it.

<sup>4</sup> Skinner 1976, 503–505.

<sup>5</sup> Delafosse 1904, 259–261; Donaldson 2013.

documents studied here are the first Manding-language documents from Mali, and also the first in Bamana, to have been identified and published.

The first reference to a Manding *'ajamī* seems to be that of Michel Jajolet de La Courbe, in his account of his travels, in 1685–1687, in Senegambia. After describing the Quranic schools in what may be identified as the Mandinka kingdom of Niumi, he affirms that ‘there is hardly anyone among them who does not know how to write, and they also use the Arabic characters to write their own language’.<sup>6</sup> Robert Maxwell Macbrair, who in 1835–1836 visited several localities in what was to become The Gambia, mentioned what he regarded as personal jottings of Mandinka words in Arabic characters; he states that the writing system is defective and that each person can only understand his own notes or texts which have been read aloud to him.<sup>7</sup> The first description of this writing, by William Hamlyn, dates only from the 1930s, but that it is stated to be used by a large proportion of the population<sup>8</sup> suggests that it was a long-established as well as

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**6** [...] Il n’y en a guerre entre eux qui ne sachent écrire et les lettres arabesques leur servent aussy a écrire leur langue naturelle [...], La Courbe in Cultru 1913, p. 191. The misclassified manuscript was belatedly discovered and published by Prosper Cultru. I was set on the trail of this reference by Cornelia Giesing’s and Eduardo Costa Dias’ quotation (2007, 63) from Jean-Baptiste Labat’s *Nouvelle relation de l’Afrique occidentale*, 1728, vol. 4, 354. However, as Cultru demonstrated, Labat’s work is a literary amplification of several, usually unacknowledged, written and oral sources – La Courbe’s manuscript being the main one. In these sections, the differences between La Courbe’s and Labat’s accounts are due primarily (but not exclusively) to Labat’s flights of fancy and florid style. Wright 1997 is a detailed history of Niumi (comprised in present-day Gambia).

**7** Macbrair 1839, Appendix II: ‘On the best method of disseminating the scriptures in North-western Africa’, especially 320–321: ‘It is also a custom with some of the people to write down in Arabic characters any thing that they wish to remember in Mandingo; and they have their own forms for this purpose. It is true that none but themselves can decipher what is thus written, without first hearing it read; but a little trouble might bring any convenient form into general use’. The better-known passage in Macbrair 1842, p. vi, is less affirmative: ‘Many of the Mahometan aborigines are slightly acquainted with the Arabic letters, but this alphabet is very unsuitable for the expression of Mandingo...’. Macbrair (life dates: 1808–1874) went on to prepare an *'ajamī* version of at least one gospel (Saint Mark’s – finally published in 1904), as well as Latin-alphabet-based versions of the other three. Could any of his proposals for the improvement of Arabic writing as applied to Manding (see 1839, *ibid.*) have influenced the further development of *'ajamī* in Senegambia? Although Macbrair’s translations were prepared with the help of both native and non-native speakers of Mandinka, they are certainly an important document about that language as it was spoken in the 1830s, and would reward further study.

**8** Hamlyn 1935, 101: ‘Thus, though a fair number of men in every larger community can write Arabic more or less correctly, a still larger number can only write “salutations” and headings in Arabic – and employ Mandinka written in Arabic characters in the body of their compositions’. R.T. Addis, in 1963, 1, wrote: ‘Very roughly a quarter of the population is now able to read and

socially significant practice. The history from Pakao, Senegal, appears to have been completed c. 1843.<sup>9</sup>

La Courbe's statement puts the age of Manding writing in Arabic script on a par with the earliest dates currently advanced for Fulfulde and Hausa, and the oldest surviving, dated documents in Old Kanembu; though the uses of writing are, in each case, partially different. The activities of the Old Mande Research Network have brought to light a considerable number of Soninke manuscripts, and a small number of Manding ones, mainly from the Senegambia region, and may push back the confirmed dating for these languages while providing evidence for greater diversity in the uses of writing.<sup>10</sup>

Data concerning the use of African languages in written composition in Mali remain limited, but increasingly, pertinent documents are coming to light. While written Fulfulde in Mali does not appear to have had the high status it enjoyed in Futa Jalon and in the Sokoto Caliphate, some poems in manuscript form have been identified.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, a preliminary examination of the documents conserved in Mali's manuscript libraries suggests that a significant amount of material, in all the principal languages of Islamic culture – especially but not limited to Fulfulde, Songhay, Tamashek, and Soninke – exists in the form of marginal and interlineal annotations. The position of Fulfulde is of particular relevance, since as shall be seen, the author of the Bamana texts to be examined here was of Fulbe

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write its own language in Arabic script to some degree'. Jan Knappert (1972) argued, on general historical grounds, that there have probably been attempts, over several centuries, at writing Manding in Arabic characters, predicting that pertinent documentary evidence might yet surface.

The contrast between the very high rate of literacy implied by La Courbe's account and the more moderate one indicated by later accounts, and more especially between the position of Islam as it appears in some early accounts and the non-Islamic character of Mandinka society depicted by oral traditions, poses an historical conundrum. Are these differences due to the sources' biases, to an intervening (partial) de-islamisation, or to differences in religious practice correlated to different social categories (with the rulers, in this instance, being non-Muslim)? Many southern Manding societies distinguish between a hereditary category of observant Muslims and others who may be less observant or non-Muslim (see more below, p. 255). Regarding the historical position of Islam in Mandinka-speaking societies of the Senegambia, see e.g. Niane 1989; Wright 1997 (especially 80–82, 104–105, 156–159).

<sup>9</sup> Schaffer 1975, 98–100.

<sup>10</sup> Founded at the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures, Hamburg University, in December 2012, and stemming from the insights of Nikolay Dobronravin (University of Saint Petersburg). Ogorodnikova 2016 is the first publication emanating from this research group.

<sup>11</sup> Seydou 2008, 221. This is in addition to poetry composed by Futa Toro authors temporarily stationed in what is now Mali; see Gaden 1935; Robinson 1982; Kane et al., 1994.

background. Wolof *'ajamī* developed and expanded considerably in the twentieth century, due largely to its role as a vehicle for the Muridiyya Sufi order.<sup>12</sup> It shares many of its graphic features with Fulfulde.<sup>13</sup>

### 3 Author's biography

Almamy's handwritten copies of the Bamana texts were accompanied by several notes, written by him in French, explaining their provenance. These include statements about the identities of the author and the owner of the manuscripts, as well as the alleged date and reasons for composition. Both Almamy, with whom I discussed these texts in Bamako in 1992, and Bory Bary, whom I first met in San in 1998, confirmed that the latter was the source of information for these notes.

Almamy's French notes clearly imply that a certain 'Amadou Bary' was the author of the texts.<sup>14</sup> However, when I discussed them with him in 1992, Almamy

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**12** See especially Camara 1997, Lüpke/Bao-Diop 2014, Ngom 2016.

**13** See more below. That the vocabulary of *wann*, a branch of advanced Quranic studies intended to facilitate memorisation, is largely of Fulfulde origin (Ndiaye 1985, 48–52) suggests that most influences flowed from Fulfulde to Wolof (rather than vice-versa).

**14** 1° Le détenteur du document 'Karantela kolonba, le puits sacré de San' Bory Bary, écrit par son père en caractères arabes à San pour lui en 1911 à San. Le copiste Almamy Malick Yattara à San en 1972. 2° Le détenteur du document de 'Janaba koli', le même Bory Bary hérité de son père qui écrit pour enseigner les Bambara en religion. Le copiste Almamy Malick Yattara. 3° Le détenteur du document 'Kalan bi damine ni Ala togo ye', Bory Bary hérité de son père le même Amadou Bory qui écrit pour enseigner les Bambara. Le copiste Almamy Malick Yattara à San en 1972. 4° Le détenteur du document 'Médicament pour la hernie qu'on appelle "Kokili fura"', le même Bory Bary écrit par son père Amadou Bary marabout. Le copiste Almamy Malick Yattara en 1972 à San. 5° Le détenteur du document 'Kilisi fura', toujours Bory Bary. Trouvé dans les affaires de son père, Amadou Bary le marabout. Copié par Almamy Malick Yattara à San en 1972 à San.

(Corrected spelling. For the original spelling, see the photographic reproduction of this document, below. The uncorrected spelling is also reproduced in Vydrin and Dumestre 2014, 232, notes 8, 9, 236 note 10, 237 note 12, 240 note 14, 242 note 16.)

Almamy learnt the Latin alphabet while briefly attending a French-language government school to which he had been recruited against his own and his family's wishes, then as an adult in evening classes in Mopti (Yattara/Salvaing 2000, 107, 194–196). He honed his skills with Christiane Seydou, who instructed him in Fulfulde transliteration when they first began carrying out field research on oral literature together, in 1970.

English translation: 1° The owner of the document 'Karantela kolonba, the sacred well of San', Bory Bary. Written by his father in Arabic characters, in San for him[self?] in 1911. The copyist

was not so sure; he suggested that Amadou Bary may have merely copied or collected the texts. However, Bory Bary, both in 1998 and on several subsequent occasions, confirmed that his father had written the texts.

This claim is supported by additional evidence. Bory Bary confirms that his father spoke Bamana. Furthermore, the texts include several locutions that suggest they were written by a non-native speaker. In two instances, the relationship between a living being and a part of its body is indicated by the particle *ka* (which normally marks alienable possession) rather than by the zero marker, indicating inalienable possession. Thus, text II, line 10, reads *i k tonna*, which I interpret as *i ka tɔn na* ('the nape of your neck'), whereas a more typical formulation, by a native speaker, would be simply *i tɔn na*. Similarly, an invocation addressed to a tree reads *mīn bīi ka bulūwla* (V.7), that is *mīn b'i ka buluw la* ('which are in your leaves'), whereas a native speaker would typically say *i buluw*. Furthermore, the name of San's famous, permanent-water lake is given as *Sankeer(e)* (I.11 and I.13), whereas its name is normally pronounced *Sanke* or *Sange* by the Bamana-speaking inhabitants of San. Since *-re* is the Fulfulde locative suffix, this specifically suggests that the writer was a Fulfulde-speaker. There are two other atypical formulations in these texts (III.7, IV.4 – see more below), but in these instances, it is difficult to know whether one is dealing with unidiomatic expression by a non-native speaker, errors by the copyist, or even language change. Thus, there is no longer any reason to doubt that Amadou Bary, father of Bory, was the author of these texts.

The other major piece of information contained in Almamy's notes concerns the date of composition of these texts – indicated as the year '1911'. When I met them, neither Almamy nor Bory Bary could explain this date, which was presumably based either on a note associated with the texts (but then, why wasn't it copied?), or on that of another document found near them, or on oral information transmitted by Bory Bary. The precision of this date contrasts awkwardly with the

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Almamy Malick Yattara in San in 1972. 2° The owner of the document 'Janaba koli', the same Bory Bary. Inherited from his father, who wrote in order to instruct the Bamana in religion. The copyist Almamy Malick Yattara. 3° The owner of the document 'Kalan bi damine ni Ala togo ye', Bory Bary. Inherited from his father, the same Amadou Bary, who wrote in order to instruct the Bamana. The copyist Almamy Malick Yattara in San in 1972. 4° The owner of the document 'Remedy for the hernia called "Kokili fura"', the same Bory Bary. Written by his father Amadou Bary, a marabout. The copyist Almamy Malick Yattara in 1972 in San. 5° The owner of the document 'Kilisi fura', again Bory Bary. Found among the belongings of his father, Amadou Bary the marabout. Copied by Almamy Malick Yattara in San in 1972.



otherwise limited information Almamy and Bory possessed about these manuscripts, whom the latter found by rummaging through his father's belongings.<sup>15</sup> It is also curious that – if written by Bory's father – this date would have been expressed in the Gregorian calendar only (omitting the hijri year). The texts themselves, as copied, include no internal chronological indications. For all these reasons, the date of these texts cannot be regarded as certain. It should be remarked that, if the date is accurate, then Amadou Bory would have been a very young man at the time he composed them (see more below).

The first note, to the effect that Amadou Bory wrote the text 'for him[self]', is probably a calque of the Arabic *katabahu li-nafsihi* '[the author or copyist] wrote it for himself', very frequent in West African and other colophons. The grammatically imperfect French is ambiguous, but if the date of composition, given as 1911, is even approximately correct, then one may exclude the possibility that the father wrote it for his son.

From interviews over the years – with his son, grandsons, and Almamy – the following synthesis may be offered concerning Amadou Bory's life and activities.

His full name was Amadou Jomworo Bary. *Jomworo*, a title encountered among the Fulbe of the Masina, signifying 'master of the pastures', implies certain supervisory responsibilities vis-à-vis all Fulbe herders in a given area, and is usually inherited.

Amadou Jomworo Bary<sup>16</sup> was born in the Masina, to a family established in Penga, a large village situated on an affluent of the Bani River; the village serves as a port to the ancient city of Dia. He received his education in the Masina. As an adult, he made regular trips between Penga and the San area, living intermittently in Sienso, a mixed Bwa (Bobo) and Fulbe village located about 8 km south of San.<sup>17</sup> Considered a 'marabout' (*mori*) or religious specialist, he was primarily

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<sup>15</sup> 'trouvé dans les affaires de son père'.

<sup>16</sup> Although the title *Jomworo* would only have been attributed in adulthood, it will be henceforth included in all references to this scholar, in order to obviate confusion with his grandson. The institution of *jomworo* is analysed in Gallais 1984, 197–207.

<sup>17</sup> In conformity with scholarly usage (both Malian and international), the term 'Bwa' will henceforth be used to refer to the Bomu-speaking communities of Mali and Burkina Faso. The term 'Bobo' is far more common in Malian spoken French, but could lead to confusion with the culturally related Bobo of Burkina Faso (who, however, speak a Mande rather than a Voltaic language). Major ethnographic studies of the Bwa include Capron 1957 (specifically with reference to the San area) and 1973, Diarra 2007, and (with particular attention to water rites) Kamaté 2011. Nazi Boni's famous novel, *Crépuscule des temps anciens* (1962), which is based largely on oral traditions, portrays the Bwa of Burkina Faso in the late precolonial period, while Karaba Traoré's 2015 novel depicts the Bwa of the Kôdou, an area adjoining San and situated in Mali, in the twentieth century.

known for his skills in the esoteric sciences, helping those who sought him out. He also visited non-Muslim areas, in order to persuade persons there of the truth of Islam (and thus engaged in what were in effect missionising tours). It is these conversion tours which are alluded to in Almamy's French notes to the effect that Amadou Bary wrote 'in order to instruct the Bambara in religion'. In this context, the term 'Bambara' should probably be understood in both of its most frequent meanings: Bamana-speaking, and non-Muslim.<sup>18</sup> Though he did not run a Quranic school, he is said to have had several older, seasonal pupils. Almamy, in our conversations, described him as a 'vrai marabout' ('true marabout'), in order to emphasise that he was primarily concerned with esoteric healing and assistance, rather than teaching.<sup>19</sup>

Whereas Almamy stressed that Amadou Jomworo Bary had engaged in extended Quranic study, his descendants claim that he had also studied 'books', i.e., engaged in the post-Quranic study of the various Islamic disciplines, such as *fiqh* (jurisprudence) and *tawhīd* (theology). Their view receives some support from the presence of the non-Quranic term *ay* ('that is') in one of the texts (I, line 12); this term is recurrent in academic treatises and teaching manuals.

Amadou Jomworo Bary married Aissatou Cissé, a Fulbe woman from a nomadic family of the Masina. The couple had three sons – Kolado, Aboubacar called Bory, and Mody; there was an age difference of about two to three years between successive siblings. Kolado inherited his father's title 'Jomworo'. Based in Penga, he engaged in commerce, for which he travelled considerably, as well as in herding and farming. The second son was forcibly placed in school, in the city of Dia, by the French colonial government. As an adult, he was successively employed in several higher-level clerical positions, initially in the public and later in the private sectors. The third son, Mody, became a well-known religious

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**18** See Bazin 1985. The third meaning, a Minianka-speaker or member of the Minianka people, whose autonym is *Bamanan*, is less pertinent, though some Minianka are also present in the area. The area surrounding San includes many Bamana- and Bomu- (Bwa-) speakers who, until recently, did not identify as Muslim. There is no evidence, however, that Amadou Jomworo Bary was familiar with the Bomu language. Manding-speaking lineages that have long been Muslim self-identify as 'Jula' or 'Marka'. See more below.

**19** While the term 'marabout', which is etymologically related to *al-murābiṭūn* – the designation for the eleventh- and twelfth-century Almoravid movement –, may have acquired derogatory connotations in English, this is not the case in French. The term *mrābiṭ* is employed, in both spoken and written Maghrebi Arabic discourse, to designate Muslim men of letters, of higher as well as of lesser attainments, including those with professorial as well as esoteric pursuits. The term 'marabout', in North and West African French, is a respectful designation, with a similarly broad range of meanings.

scholar. Literally following in his father's footsteps, he often travelled between Penga, San and Sienso. While highly regarded for his skills and success in the esoteric domain – he aided several well-known Malian public figures – he also had numerous students, who accompanied him in his travels.

A grandson, Kola (son of Bory Bary), remembers that according to his grandmother, Aissatou Cissé, his grandfather effectively exercised the role of *jomworo* of Penga – and correlatively, of village chief recognised by the French colonial administration. Furthermore, he states that his grandmother often used to recount how, during a food shortage related to the war effort in the early 1940s, Amadou Jomworo Bary distributed some of the administration's grain reserves (stored in the port of Penga) to the village's inhabitants.

Amadou Cissé, husband of Amadou Jomworo Bary's granddaughter Dikko, recalls how his own father, Oumar Cissé, a commercial representative for a French company, told him about an encounter in Sofara (a small town about 50 km south of Mopti) shortly after the Second World War: Amadou Jomworo Bary – who also engaged in some trade – was in discussion with several Frenchmen, in French. Amadou Cissé adds that according to his father Oumar, Amadou Jomworo Bary could also read and write French.<sup>20</sup>

Amadou Cissé was not told how Amadou Jomworo Bary learned (or learned about) written French. However, I have been told about some persons from the San area who, in the first third of the twentieth century, learnt French at evening schools.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, I have met, over the past three decades, several Islamic scholars who have taught themselves French (sometimes using Arabic textbooks); the motivation may have been even greater in the colonial period. In addition, it should be noted that many Malian Islamic scholars who do not understand French are nevertheless aware of the structure of its alphabet (five vowels written on the line, in the same way as the consonants).<sup>22</sup>

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**20** Like the Bary family, the Cissé family originated in the Masina area, with links to Penga. Oumar Cissé completed the government school in Mopti; he had a solid knowledge of arithmetic (necessary for his work) and wrote perfect, elegant French (as I can affirm, having examined some of his letters, preserved and shown to me by his son). Oumar Cissé passed away in 1979, at the age of about 65.

**21** The important issue of evening classes (and other forms of educational outreach to adults) in the colonial period has hardly been studied; nevertheless, Denise Bouche mentions them in her comprehensive work on the history of education in early colonial French West Africa (1974, vol. 2, 576–579). Ahmadou Kourouma mentions literacy courses for adults, in early colonial Ivory Coast, in his novel, *Monnè, outrages et défis* (1990; 67, 231–232).

**22** Almamy himself exemplifies the interest of some traditionally-trained Muslim scholars in the French language, as well as the role of evening courses. As he describes it, even before learning

Amadou Jomworo Bary died at an advanced age in the early 1960s, and is buried in Penga. His wife, who spent her final years in her second son's household, passed away at a very advanced age, c. 1991, and is buried in San. Bory Bary (1924–2008), who outlived his brothers by a considerable margin, is also buried in San. Jomworo Kolado passed away c. 1986 and is buried in Penga, whereas Mody died prematurely c. 1975 and is buried in Mopti. Amadou Jomworo Bary's descendants are currently established in Penga, Tenenkou, Markala, Dioro, San, Koutiala, and of course, Bamako.

As first marriage for men, among Fulbe families of the Masina, traditionally took place between the ages of about twenty and thirty (more usually towards the earlier pole), Amadou Jomworo Bary may have been born about 1890–1900.

The village of Penga is peopled by Bozo, who specialise in fishing and are considered the earliest inhabitants, and, since at least the nineteenth century, by Fulbe who specialise in herding (though both groups farm); in recent decades, the village has also become home to some Tamashek-speaking camel-herders. Though at present, the Bozo in Penga and environs often speak Bamana, only a very few Fulbe speak it.<sup>23</sup> It may be surmised that Amadou Jomworo Bary acquired Bamana during his travels – first perhaps in the Masina (which includes some Bamana-speaking communities), then in the San area.

Sienso is comprised of two distinct neighbourhoods: one Bwa, the other Fulbe, each with its own chief. Both chiefs are recognised by the Malian administration. The Bwa settlement is reputed to be ancient. The Fulbe, on the other

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how to write this language, he would ask acquaintances for the French equivalents of Fulfulde words. See Yattara/Salvaing 2000, 196, and above, note 14.

**23** Bozo-Fulbe relations in the Masina, and in the village of Penga in particular, have been studied in a remarkable article, based largely on oral traditions, by Claude Fay (1995). Amadou Hampâté Bâ's and Jacques Daget's collection of oral traditions (1984, first ed.: 1955) remains a major primary source for the political and religious history of the Masina, including Dia. Gallais 1984, 17–39, and in more detail, Gallais 1967, analyse the peopling of the Masina and, to some extent, also of the San area. Bedaux et al. present documentary and archaeological evidence concerning Dia's early history. Kamian (1957, 1959) presents a synthesis concerning the early history of San, as well as a detailed study of the city in colonial times. Massing 2009 presents some complementary historical and sociological data, while Schulz 2012 studies recent developments among the Muslims of San. The photographs presented here illustrate the sacred sites of San that are a focus of Text I. Méniaud 1931, vol. 2, 384 shows a drawing of San's first Friday mosque, as it appeared in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century; Schamir 1970 presents photos of San's second Friday mosque, which replaced it on the same site in 1941. Amadou Jomworo Bary would have been familiar with both structures. Images of the present Friday mosque, built in 2001, are available on [www.festivalsanke.fr.gd](http://www.festivalsanke.fr.gd). The sacred well adjoins both the ancestral compound of the Traores and the Friday mosque.

hand, emigrated from the Masina in several waves, beginning over two hundred years ago; they progressively adopted the Bamana language – none of the inhabitants, even the oldest ones, remember a time when Fulfulde was spoken in the village, or can speak it themselves. Whereas the Fulbe claim they were Muslim at the time of their installation at Sienso, the Bwa remain faithful to their traditional religion, and have complex water rites, centred like those of San, on a sacred well and a sacred lake.<sup>24</sup>

It is possible that the Bamana spoken by the Fulbe inhabitants of Sienso, in the early to mid-twentieth century, was still influenced by the particularities of the Fulfulde language, and that this in turn impacted Amadou Jomworo Bary's perception of Bamana – since Sienso was surely one of the places in which he learned or practiced this language.

Amadou Jomworo Bary's travels between Penga and San appear, thus, to have been part of a wider pattern of interregional contacts. Transhumancy patterns have long brought Fulbe herders to the San area, while commercial canoes regularly plied the Bani River, linking the two cities.

## 4 The Writing system

### 4.1 Phonology, the alphabet and diacritics

The writing system employed in these Bamana texts is more complete, accurate, economical, coherent and consistent than any other Manding *'ajamī* known so far. Indeed, in these respects, it is superior to many or most West African *'ajamī*-s – though some of these have served as vehicles for substantial literatures.

Whereas Arabic (and its writing system) distinguish only three phonemic vowels, Bamana distinguishes seven. These texts successfully represent five vocalic degrees. The standard Arabic diacritics *fathā* (َ), *kasra* (ِ) and *ḍamma* (ُ) are used to represent the short vowels *a*, *i*, *u*. A dot beneath a consonant sign (◌◌) is used to represent both *e* and *ɛ*, while a special sign (an inverted *ḍamma* – ◌◌̣ – the concave body faces right instead of left) is used to represent both *o* and *ɔ*. As in Arabic, diacritics may be placed either above (*fathā*, *ḍamma*; and by extension, the sign for inverted *ḍamma*) or below (*kasra*; the dot standing

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<sup>24</sup> René Caillié visited Sienso in March 1828, on his way to Djenné; see Caillié 1996, vol. 2, 123–124 (first ed.: 1830) and also the commentary by Pierre Viguier (2008, 70–72). The event is commemorated by a signpost at the entrance of the village. Sienso is furthermore mentioned by Kamian 1957, chapter 2; Traoré 1970, 35, 41; Fabé/Dakouo 1978, 16, 34–43.

for *e* and *ε*) a consonant that is effectively pronounced, or alternatively, one that merely serves as a graphic support (as with *alif* and/or *hamza*).

Building upon Arabic usage, the semi-consonants *alif* (ا), *wāw* (و) and *yā'* (ي) are used as 'letters of prolongation' (*ḥurūf al-madd*) to represent the long vowel sounds and diphthongs. In addition to the standard *ā*, *ī* and *ū* (noted by doubling – *aa*, *ii*, *uu* – in the official orthographies of Bamana and most other African languages), the sounds *ee/εε* and *oo/ɔɔ* are represented (first occurrences I.4 and I.8 respectively). Moreover, in addition to *aw* and *ay*, which occur in some pronunciations of literary Arabic, the diphthongs *ow/ɔw* are represented. In just one instance (V.9, second script unit; but is this a copyist's error?), *yā'* rather than (as one would expect, based on spelling practice evidenced elsewhere in the text) *wāw* is used to prolong *o/ɔ*. In two instances (IV.9 and 10), *kasra* is prolonged by the letter *yā'*, repeated twice.

In eleven instances (I.3, 23, 24; III.12, 13 – two occurrences, 16; IV.8, 11, 16, 17), in a usage again inspired by standard Arabic orthography, *ا* *alif maqṣūra* (undotted *yā'*, occurring as the last character of a word, and corresponding to the phonetic value *ā*) is used to denote *a* or *aa*. In just one instance (II.14, third script unit), *alif maqṣūra*, following *fathā* and the *alif* of prolongation, may indicate that the writer wished to mark what he perceived as an especially long vowel. In another instance (I.18, second-last script unit), what appears to be superscript *alif* <sup>ا</sup> (*alif khanjariyya*) seems to be used to represent the long vowel *ā*; or perhaps – following as it does the dot representing *e/ε* and written on top of *yā'* – this is an attempt to represent *ε* or *εε*, i.e. a sound intermediate between *e* and *a*, in what would be the unique attempt, in the five texts, to represent this vowel sound. However, in contemporary usage in San, this family name is pronounced with a closed, rather than an open, vowel.

These texts also provide examples of two contiguous short vowels within a single script unit (III.13 – 2 occurrences). In both cases, they correspond to what contemporary linguists analyse, and the official Latin-based orthography represents, as a two-word sequence; and in both also, the second vowel – characteristically written as *alif* bearing *hamzat al-qat'* (see more below) corresponds to the second person singular pronoun *i*.

As Bamana (unlike certain other Manding languages) has few phonological long vowels<sup>25</sup>, most representations of vocalic length correspond to words that may be contextually pronounced with a long vowel (often corresponding to the historical or dialectal suppression of a consonant) and (far more frequently) to contextual elision in the word sequence. However, in many instances, graphic representation

<sup>25</sup> See, e.g., Bird 1982; Derive 1990.

of vowel length does not correspond to any phonetic trait of Bamana discourse, and one must suspect the visual influence of the Arabic graphic page (characterised by a high proportion of long vowels). Exceptionally, vowels that are regularly pronounced long are represented as short. This is especially the case of *bεε* ('all'), which is consistently spelled short (I.1, V.5, V.9, and possibly II.9).<sup>26</sup>

Nasalisation is generally represented by the letter *ūnūn*, *n*, surmounted by *sukūn* (see more below). In just two cases, it is represented by *tanwīn* (which, in Arabic, is indicative not only of sound, but of certain grammatical functions; employed, here as in Arabic, in final position only): IV.4 *mūgān* (or possibly *mūgan*, since the *alif* preceding *tanwīn* in the *naṣb* (accusative) case may be purely orthographic) and V.5 *banabātonin*. The first term is spelt quite differently – with two short vowels – later in the same text (IV.12, *muga*).

The personal pronouns are generally written above or below *alif* bearing *hamzat al-qaṭʿ*, followed when necessary by a letter of prolongation or a *nūn* marking nasalisation: *i*, second person singular; *e*, emphatic form of the second person singular; *a*, third person singular; *an*, first person plural; *aw*, corresponding to the second person plural *aw*, or possibly to *anw*, the emphatic form of the first person plural; *a*, abridged form of the second person plural, often used in salutations; *u*, third person plural. (First occurrences, respectively: II.2; I.20 – 2 x; I.4; II.15; first and only occurrence, I.3; first and only occurrence, I.20; I.4.)

Thirteen letters are used to represent Bamana consonants whose pronunciation is close to that of the Arabic ones: *bāʿ*, *b*; *jīm*, *j*; *dāl*, *d*; *rāʿ*, *r*; *sīn*, *s*; *fāʿ*, *f* (Maghrebi script, with the dot under the letter); *kāf*, *k*; *lām*, *l*; *mīm*, *m*; *ūnūn*, *n* (also used, following a vowel, to indicate nasalisation); *hāʿ*, *h*; *wāw*, *w*; and *yāʿ*, *y*.

Three special signs are used to represent consonants found in Bamana but not Arabic: *kāf* surmounted by a dot, for the voiced velar plosive *g*; *ūnūn* combined *nūn* and *yāʿ* – i.e. *nūn* to which have been added the two dots, below the line, characteristic of *yāʿ* – for the palatal nasal *ŋ*; *qāf*, corresponding to the general form of *fāʿ* or *qāf*, surmounted by two dots (and thus identical to Oriental *qāf*) for the velar palatal *ŋ*. The first two signs occur frequently in these texts (first occurrences: respectively I.2 and I.12). The last-mentioned sign, which corresponds to a phoneme with low frequency in Bamana, occurs just once (III.15).<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Readings of I.1 and II.9 as *bεε* are due to Vydrin/Dumestre 2014, 232, 237. See more below.

<sup>27</sup> True, this sign appears in a word that would ordinarily be pronounced *kŋng* (*ŋg* sequence), but the fact that the writer used a single letter suggests that he perceived the sound as a single phoneme (i.e., *ŋ*).

Only one Arabic consonant sign is used equivocally to render two distinct Bamana phonemes: thus, ت *tā'*, *t* serves to render both the unvoiced dental plosive /t/ and the unvoiced palatal plosive /c/ (i.e., /tʃ/). (First occurrence with the latter value, for this rather common phoneme: I.14.)

Three Arabic consonant signs occur exclusively in items of the religious vocabulary drawn from Arabic. These are: ح *hā'*, *ḥ* in the Prophet's name *Muḥammad* (spelled exactly as in Arabic); ص *ṣād*, *ṣ* and ز *zāy*, *z* in loanwords from Arabic (all in text III).

A total of five words, whose spelling is identical to the Arabic, appear in these texts: *Allāh* (17 occurrences: II. 14, 15; III.1: 2 x, III.4: 2 x, III.8, III.11, 12 – 2 x, 13 – 2 x, 14, 17, 18; IV.14 and 16), *Muḥammad* (3 occurrences: III.2, 4 and 8), and one occurrence each: *āmin* (II. 15), *tammāt* (V.16), and *ay* (I.12). In the case of the first three words, the preservation of Arabic spelling may be a means of showing respect for God and His Prophet, and demarcating the religious sphere. Additionally, it may indicate that the writer wished these words to be uttered with Arabic, or close to Arabic, pronunciation. The fourth and fifth words are used for their Arabic meaning-values – one being immediately followed by its Bamana translation (V.17), the other expressing content not conveyed in Bamana – and must therefore be viewed as Arabic words employed within a Bamana-language discourse.

The unvoiced labial plosive /p/, absent in Arabic and relatively infrequent in Bamana, does not appear in these texts.

The following two Arabic graphic signs also occur in the San texts: *sukūn* (◌◌), which in Arabic indicates a vowel-less consonant (numerous occurrences, beginning with I.1), and *shadda* or *tashdīd* (◌◌◌), which in Arabic indicates a geminated consonant.

Bamana syllables being typically open (CV or CV<sup>n</sup>), it is no surprise that *sukūn* is generally placed above *nūn* to indicate a nasalised vowel (first occurrence, I.1, *Karantela*), or above *mīm*, to indicate a nasal partially assimilated to the following labial consonant. There are 6 examples of the latter usage: I.1, 6, 20, *kolombā*; IV.6 *Tumbutu*; IV.15 *amba*; and V.7 *mbideli*. This last term – with the *sukūn* placed atop the first letter of the word, in order to represent two consonants pronounced in rapid succession – is, of course, most peculiar from the point of view of Arabic orthography. In nearly all the remaining instances, it is placed above the word-final plural marker -w, pronounced as a semi-vowel (first occurrences: I.3 – 2 x). There is also one example of *sukūn* used to mark the close of a syllable ending in a diphthong (III.9 *alkiyawma*).

The *shadda* occurs 9 times in these texts. Two examples, both in III.9, concern Arabic loanwords: *aljanna*, from Arabic *al-janna*, 'Paradise', and *jahannama*, from Arabic *jahannam* 'Gehenna, Hell'. Here the use of *shadda* may have been motivated



by a desire to underscore the etymological connection and/or suggest Arabic-like pronunciation. In three instances (I.16 *dimissaw*; I.21 *musso*; IV.11 *mussow*), the *shadda* may reflect the writer's perception that these sibilants are stressed or doubled. Though Bamana (unlike Soninke, for example) does not make a phonological distinction between simple and geminated consonants, many persons learning to write using the official Bamana Latin-based alphabet double certain consonants – perhaps, especially, sibilants.<sup>28</sup> In the remaining four instances, the *shadda* corresponds to a sequence involving a lexeme with a final nasalised vowel followed by a morpheme with an initial nasal. In three instances, this morpheme is the Bamana locative particle *na* (II.10 *toma* for *tɔn na*; IV.12 *nogonnā* for *nɔgɔn na*; V.14 *sedanna* for *se dan na*); in one instance, it is the postposition *ma* (I.25 *kolonnā* for *kɔlɔn ma*).

However, not all repeated or geminated consonants are represented as such in these texts. Thus, in the following examples, which concern verbs terminating with the past perfect marker *-na*, *bāna* corresponds to *banna* (I.26, IV.19 and V.17), while *sonā* corresponds to *sɔnna* (IV.6).

Although at least two of the Arabic loanwords that appear in these texts correspond to terms that, in the original Arabic, are written with ٤ *tā'* *marbūṭa* (*zakā*, *janna*), this character is never used here – perhaps because of its semantic and morphological functions. Though in both Classical and Modern Literary Arabic the pronunciation of this letter depends on the syntactic context, in Arabic as it has traditionally been read and recited in West Africa, the consonant *t* and accompanying vowel are always enunciated.

The author's spelling practices clearly manifest his intention of writing Bamana, not Arabic. Only three key religious terms, and two terms used for their Arabic meanings, retain Arabic spelling. In the cases of *ṣalīla* and *zakā* (III.1 and 5), the assimilation to Arabic concerns the initial phonemes only; the first term is even associated to a Bamana morpheme (the perfective suffix *-la*). Notation of the initial phoneme as *ṣ* also helps differentiate it from the more fully integrated Arabic loanword *salilā* (III.5, corresponding to *salī* [or *selī*] *la*, 'praying', the first element being similarly derived from the Arabic root *ṣlw*, 'to pray'). The great majority of Arabic loanwords present in the text are spelled in a way fully consistent with ordinary Bamana pronunciation.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> The above remarks, based on my personal experience, apply to persons trained in French or Arabic, as well as to those learning to write for the first time. Dumestre 1978 discusses the spelling of persons beginning to write in Bamana.

<sup>29</sup> The issue of Arabic loanwords in Bamana has been well discussed recently by Francesco Zappa 2011.

To summarise: 18 out of Bamana's 19 consonant phonemes occur in these texts, represented by 17 consonant signs. Thus, all but 2 phonemes are unequivocally represented by a specific alphabetic character. Of these 17 signs, 14 are standard in Arabic, while 3 are peculiar to these (and possibly other 'ajamī) texts. Of the 29 characters of the Arabic alphabet (including *hamza*), 17 (including *alif* and *hamza*) are used to represent Bamana sounds. An additional 3 are used to represent Arabic or Arabic-like sounds. 9 Arabic letters are not used.

As with other African 'ajamī scripts, with the partial exception of Old Kanembu<sup>30</sup>, this one does not represent tone.

A word about calligraphy may also be in order. The basic style is, of course – as with nearly all handwriting in Mali until recently – Maghrebi, as seen notably in the representation of *fā'* and *qāf*. Almamy remembers the original manuscripts to have been very carefully and elegantly written – and regrets (as he himself recognises) his own irregular and somewhat angular handwriting. It is unclear whether the very large *dāl* that figure recurrently in these texts were a feature of the original manuscripts, or are due to Almamy. However, they are currently considered, by traditionally-trained Malian scholars, as characteristic of well-written older texts. The large *hamza*, written directly on the line, is, as is well-known, a characteristic feature of many West African calligraphies.

The above information is summarised in the following tables.

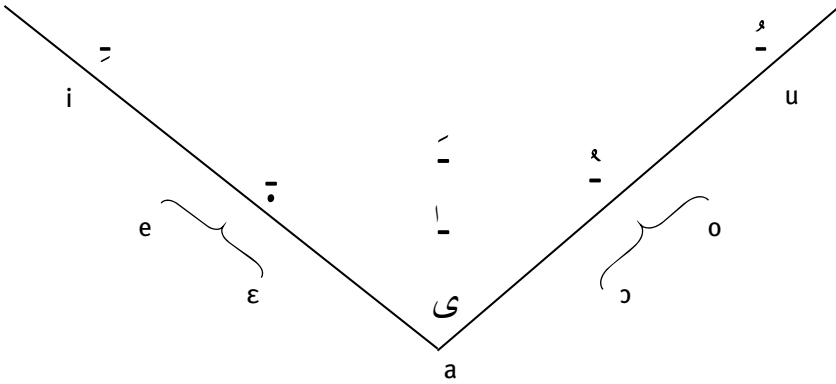
**Tab. 1:** Notation of Bamana consonants and semi-vowels<sup>31</sup>

	labial		dental		palatal		velar		post-velar	
Plosives										
unvoiced			t	ت	c [=tʃ]	ت	k	ك		
voiced	b	ب	d	د	j	ج	g	گ		
Fricatives	f	ف	s	س					h	ه
Nasals	m	م	n	ن	ɲ	ڠ	ŋ	ق		
Lateral			l	ل						
Trill			r	ر						
Semi-vowels	w	و			y	ي				

<sup>30</sup> Bondarev 2014, 114–117. See more below, p. 261.

<sup>31</sup> This presentation of Bamana phonology is based on Bailleul 2007, 4–7.

Tab. 2: Notation of Bamana vowels



Tab. 3: Letters used exclusively for the representation of Arabic consonant sounds

ḥ	ح
ṣ	ص
z	ز

Tab. 4: Additional signs

Tanwīn:

an    َ  
 in    ِ

Sukūn:

(indicates syllabic closure):    ْ

## 4.2 Script units and word segmentation

The nature of the Arabic script is such that, in the absence of a standardised orthography, which exists for only a few languages, one cannot always determine the frontiers of a script word on visual evidence alone. Nevertheless, the San texts clearly include a large number of script units that associate one or more lexemes, or a lexeme and a morpheme. Yet, the San scholar’s writing is more analytic than

that of most Manding *‘ajamī* authors and beginner users of the official Latin-based orthography.

The following illustrates some of the principal types of complex script words encountered. In most but not all cases, these graphic linkages concern elements that are, grammatically and/or semantically, very closely associated.

- Positive predicate marker + verb root: e.g., I.5 *bisā* for *bi sa*, I.7 *bitā* for *bi taa*, I.9 *bifolo* for *bi fɔlɔ*.
- Positive predicate marker + derived verb: e.g., I.15 *bigeleyā* for *bi geleya*, *bitāyā* for *bi caya*.
- Negative predicate marker + verbal root: e.g. I.9 *make* for *ma ke*, *tesoro* for *tɛ sɔrɔ*.
- Compound noun + predicate marker *don*: III.4 *tīdendo* for *ciden don*.
- *Ka* (infinitive marker) + compound verb: e.g., I.10 *katulonge* for *ka tulonke*.
- *Ka* (coordination marker, introducing a clause): followed by a noun: e.g. I.2. *kakolon* for *ka kɔlɔn (sɔrɔ yan)*; followed by a pronoun: e.g. I.4. *kā* for *k’a (lajɛ)*.
- The identity markers *ye ... ye*, associated to a following or preceding noun: e.g., I.18 *yētaraworew* and *yēmoriw* (in each case, it is visually unclear whether the following *ye* is also attached); I.20 *dugulenyē* for *dugulen ye*, I.21 *jatigiye* for *jatigi ye*.
- Verb + direct object, e.g. V.9 *bulukari* for *bulu kari*, ‘break off, i.e. pick, leaves’.
- Noun followed by a qualifier: e.g. V.11 *siɲesegi* for *siɲɛ segin*, V.11 *tilesegi* for *tile segin*.
- Verb followed by a qualifier: e.g., V.12 *muɲudowonī* for *muɲu dɔɔnin*.
- Noun + relative marker: e.g. I.2 *tumamin* for *tuma min*.
- Relative marker + verb: e.g. I.12 *minkēra* for *min kera* (affirmative perfect form of the verb *ke*, ‘to do’).
- Conjunction + noun: e.g. I.4 *nifulaw* for *ni Fulaw*, ‘if/when the Fulbe’.
- Conjunction + pronoun: e.g. I.5 *nā* for *n’a (ni + a; 2 occurrences in the same line)*.
- Noun + postposition: e.g. I.22 *tilebifē* for *tilebin fe*, I.24 *sokono* for *so kɔnɔ*.

A smaller number of sequences include three or more elements. Again, these may be of several different types, including:

- Verb phrases: e.g., III.3 *ksereyāke* for *ka seereya ke*, ‘to bear witness’.
- Circumstantial clauses: e.g. I.7 *sanwowsan* corresponding to *san wo san*, ‘every year’.

- Complex clauses, e.g.: I.15 *kelebike* for *kεlε bi kε*: noun subject + (positive) predicate marker + verb, ‘there will be war/conflict’; V.7 *mbīdeli* for *n b’i deli*, ‘I beg you’, pronominal subject + (positive) predicate marker + pronominal object + verb.

Several longer sequences do not appear to correspond to self-contained syntactic or semantic units; though this may be, in some instances, an (optical!) illusion due to the irregular spacing of words and letters. These include:

- I.4 *buḥiyē* for *b’u ḥiyen (bi u ḥiyen)*.
- I.23 *kasiginā* for *ka segin n’a*.
- I.26 *tibinimā* for *ti ben ni maa*.
- III.6 *nisebā* for *ni se b’a*.
- V.10 *bitanā* for *bi taa ni a*.
- V.13 *bifolotake* for *bi fɔlɔ ta kε*.
- V.14 *sedānnā* for *se dan na*.

Although Arabic writing practices<sup>32</sup>, as well as the visual norms of the Arabic page, might appear to strongly discourage the representation of words as single, isolated letters, this is precisely what the writer has done in a significant number of cases. In addition to the personal pronouns discussed above, several other words are, usually or often, written as a consonant and associated short vowel:

- the particle *ko*, introducing cited speech; first occurrence, I.8.
- the possessive marker *ka*; III.4, V.7.
- the mark of the injunctive *ka*; III.8 (only one occurrence).
- the non-nasalised form of the postposition *kan* (‘on, over’); III.2, IV.11.
- the focalising particle *de*; first occurrences I.3, 17, 20 – 2x.

The anaphoric pronoun *wo* (e.g., II.6, IV.11, V.3) and the postposition *la* (e.g., I.14, II.13, 14) are at least occasionally written as isolated letters. (Perhaps in the majority of instances, but the irregular nature of the handwriting makes it impossible to affirm this.<sup>33</sup>)

<sup>32</sup> Referring here to the practice of linking certain conjunctions and prepositions to the following word, and the attached pronouns to the preceding word.

<sup>33</sup> In 6 instances, this morpheme is represented with a long (rather than a short) vowel, and thus with a letter of prolongation: I.25, II.11, III.1, 5, 11, 16. In only 4 instances is it unambiguously, graphically linked to another (morphemic and/or lexical) element: I.25 and III.16 *lilā*; I. 24 *sogola*; III.17: *sigilila*.

*Dɔn*, ‘to know’, is written as either one or two characters, depending on whether or not it is nasalised: *do* – I.17 (first occurrence), III.12 (second occurrence), III.13; *don* – I.17 (second occurrence), III.7, III.12 (first occurrence).

The following elements are occasionally written as isolated letters:

- the predicative marker *bi* (IV.2, perhaps also IV.6). However (see the beginning of this section), it is much more frequently joined to other elements.
- the conjunction *ni* (II.2), elsewhere joined to subsequent elements (see above).
- *di*, the verb ‘to give’, III.12.
- the verb *fɔ*, ‘to say’, V.4; perhaps also I.3.

In text II, lines 4–6 and 8, the contraction *k'i* (for *ka*, introducing a clause, and *i*, the following second person singular pronoun) is written as an isolated consonant accompanied by its diacritic vowel sign, then the pronoun written as a second isolated letter.

In a small number of cases, the writer separates elements that another speaker might perceive (and the current official orthography treats) as a single word. One example concerns a compound verb (I.5) and a second a doubled verb (IV.13), while the remainder concern compound nouns:

- I.5 *kunna dīrā* for *kunnadiyara*, ‘to have been lucky’.
- III.3 *samā sen* for *samasen*, ‘pillar’.
- III.14 *adama den* for *adamaden*, ‘human being’.
- IV.1 and 2 *kō kili* for *kōkili*, ‘testicle(s)’.
- IV.9 *kono bara* for *kōnɔbara*, ‘belly’.
- IV.13 *tugu tugu* for *tugutugu*, ‘follow without interruption, be consecutive’.

Though this diversity in the nature of script words may be disconcerting to readers accustomed to languages with fixed orthographies, the thoughtfulness manifest at other levels of composition suggests that these graphic choices correspond to the San writer’s perception of the time intervals separating successive elements in oral discourse.

### 4.3 Consistency in spelling

Although many words are spelled consistently – i.e., in a fixed manner – throughout, others may be spelled in two, or even three, different ways. These orthographical variants are not arbitrary; rather, they correspond to alternative forms of a single word – forms whose frequency varies dialectally, but which may also coexist in the speech of a given individual or a local community. The notation of

these alternative forms shows that Amadou Jomworo Bary – for whom Bamana was a second language – was an excellent linguistic observer, and is indicative of the great care that he lavished upon these compositions. One may imagine him reflecting, as he wrote, as to how he, or a person he knew, might enunciate each element.

These variations principally concern unvoiced versus voiced *k/g*. Thus, the author writes *tjntikiyā* once (III.8), but *tjntigiyā* five times (III.8–10) (current standard spelling: *tjnetigiya*, ‘belief’). Similarly, he writes *tulonke* (I.6, 9), but also *tulonge* (I.10, 11) (current standard spelling: *tulonke*, ‘to play’). They also concern the optional elision of *g* in intervocalic contexts. Thus, he writes *jogonna* (IV.12, V.15) but also *jonā* (IV.13). (Standard dictionary spelling: *ɲɔɡɔn*; however, the pronunciation *ɲɔɔn* is more common in some dialects; basic meaning: ‘together’). In addition, and in line with observed variations in pronunciation, a final nasal may or may not be marked (see, for example, the case of *dɔn*, above).

Although vocalic length is not always accurately marked in these texts, in general, the vowels of a given lexeme or morpheme are attributed the same value throughout.<sup>34</sup> However, as a result of these inaccuracies and the complexities of word segmentation, distinct words and word sequences may be spelled as homographs. This is recurrently the case with *kā*, which may variously represent the coordinating particle *ka* (for example, II.3 – 2x, II.4), the contraction of this particle and the third person singular pronoun *a – k’a* (for example, II.7, 9), the possessive marker *ka* (e.g., II.11), and the injunctive marker *ka* (e.g. III.12, 13) – although this last is also frequently spelled *ka* (e.g., II.11). Similarly, *nā* may represent *n’a*, the contraction of *ni*, ‘if’, + *a*, the aforementioned pronoun (e.g., I.5 – 2x), *n’a*, the contraction of *ni*, ‘with’, and the same pronoun (e.g., I.19, 23), a nasalised pronunciation of the postposition *ma*, correlate of the verb *di* ‘to give’ (I.25), the future marker *na* (II.6), or the locative marker *na* (II.11). *Bā* can represent (for example) both the augmentative suffix *-ba* (e.g. I.1, 6) and the contraction *b’a*, corresponding to the predicative marker *bi* + the pronoun *a* (e.g., I.17).

<sup>34</sup> For example, the several different morphemes pronounced *ye* are regularly spelled *yē* – I.19 *ye* is an exception; the verb *ke* (‘to do’) is regularly spelled *ke* – I.10 *kē* is an exception; *mūgan* / *muga* (IV.4 and 12; already discussed above) – furthermore combined with other orthographic differences – present uniquely contrasting spellings.

## 4.4 Punctuation

The system of punctuation adopted in these texts is somewhat puzzling. It consists exclusively in dots, whose form corresponds to the full stops of modern Arabic and Western typography. Only text I seems fully and reasonably well punctuated (on the first page, rather than the second). On the whole, the texts seem to be under-punctuated, yet in some instances, a passage comprised between two dots seems too brief or incomplete. Thus, text I includes 24 dot stops for 26 lines, text II – 3 for 15 lines, text III – 7 for 19 lines, text IV – 9 for 16 lines, and text V – 7 for 17 lines. The dotting of III.7 (second unit), III.11 (middle unit), and especially IV.16 – where it interrupts the blessing formula – definitely does not correspond to the normal flow of speech, creating sentence fragments.

The question arises as to whether the writer completed the task of punctuating his compositions, and/or whether Almamy might have introduced or displaced some dots in the copying process. The form of the chosen punctuation sign raises further questions. Many older West African manuscripts use three pyramidally arranged dots ( · · · ) rather than a single dot in order to indicate stops – still a current practice in both handwritten and printed copies of certain devotional works, while some early printed books use no sentence punctuation whatsoever. While long intervals between stops are explicable in terms of models that might have been available to the author – such as the longer Quranic verses, or early printed books – the short units are more puzzling.

On the whole, the punctuation system of these texts seems to suggest a familiarity with twentieth-century printed works – a situation that may have been exceptional about 1911 but common several decades later.

## 5 Difficulties in interpretation

Difficulties and uncertainties in the interpretation of these texts result from: unclear calligraphy; the absence of tone notation; irregular word segmentation; the irregular indication of vowel length; and inadequate punctuation. Although the use of a single sign to denote two distinct consonants (/t/ and /c/) could in principle lead to ambiguities, this does not seem to be the case in practice. That we do not have the originals is, of course, a major impediment to accurate interpretation.

Several examples of moot or difficult words and passages have already been given above. Remaining cases, in which one could have doubts as to the intended meaning of a word or word sequence, are discussed here.



Text I, line 4. Both Almamy and Sambourou asserted that *Brnifulaw* should be read as *Barani Fulaw*, ‘the Fulbe of Barani’. This is because most of the Fulfulde-speakers in San and its environs came from the nearby Fulbe-dominated chiefdom of Barani (located in what is now the Province of Kossi, Burkina Faso). However, another reading proposed recently<sup>35</sup>, of this only partially vocalised segment, makes for a grammatically more perfect sentence: *bari ni Fulaw*, ‘because if the Fulbe’.

Line 15. The term *masāw*, *masaw*, can be interpreted to mean either ‘kings’ or ‘elders’; the two words are distinguished only by tone (respectively: low, high; the first syllable of each may be nasalised – *mansa*). Whereas I had initially opted for the first interpretation, the second now seems more plausible, on ethnographic grounds. Although San was founded on what was once the territory of a kingdom (Dadugu) with a sacred ruler, this entity progressively lost its political and military significance; by about 1800, its Bamana-speaking chief reigned over a single village.<sup>36</sup> (The term *masa* applies to certain hereditary political figures, with sacral functions, only.) The surrounding Bwa and Minianka are stateless, and at most have village (rarely village-confederation) chiefs. San, long governed by the assembly of its founding clans, was ruled by a Muslim religious leader, the San Almamy, or ‘imam of San’, in the decades preceding the French conquest.<sup>37</sup> In addition, the reading *masaw bi sa*, ‘elders will die’ (lines 15/16), perfectly balances the immediately following phrase, *denmisenw bi bana*, ‘children will fall ill’. It is true that the preceding sentence mentions *kelε*, ‘war’, but this is more likely to be in opposition to *herε*, ‘peace’, mentioned yet earlier in the text.

Line 16. The initial consonant of one of the final script segments of l. 16 carries one dot above and another below; one could therefore read it either as a *bā*’ or a *nūn*. In 1994, I had read *nitijnlike*, *ni tijnelike*, ‘and destruction’, but the reading *bitijnlike*, *bi tijneli ke*, ‘will destroy’, makes for a grammatically more perfect sentence.<sup>38</sup>

Line 23, one may hesitate as to the interpretation of *kō*. Should it be understood as referring to the ‘back’ (part of the body), standard orthography *kɔ* (high

<sup>35</sup> Vydrin/Dumestre 2014, 233. Concerning the chiefdom of Barani, see Diallo 1994, 1997, as well as the website of the association ‘Djangan Barani’, [www.djangan-barani.com](http://www.djangan-barani.com) (last accessed on 16/09/2016).

<sup>36</sup> Traoré 1970.

<sup>37</sup> Concerning political structures in this area, see for example Capron 1957, 1973, Jonckers 1987a, 1987b. Chiefships, including sacred chiefships, are, however, attested among Manding- and Soninke-speakers through the seventeenth century – see Pageard 1961a, 1961b and Bazin 1988, as well as Traoré, *ibid*. Bazin also provides an analysis of the concept of *mansaya*.

<sup>38</sup> Reading proposed by Vydrin/Dumestre 2014, 234.

tone), or to an expanse of water (modulated tone)? True, elsewhere in the text, where the reference is clearly to the San lake, one finds the spelling *kō* (1.8 – 2 occurrences); but this is not a decisive argument, since as seen above, a given term may have two (or exceptionally three) alternate spellings. The lake is only about a kilometer removed from the well, so it would have been quite feasible to carry a child there. Moreover, one may wonder whether the San author would have desired to specify that children are placed on the back to be taken home – since that is how they are usually transported.

Interviews held in San, both in 1998 and later, have not brought to light any recollections of ritual practices connecting infants to the well or the lake. On the other hand, research conducted in April 2016 in Sienso – the partially Bwa village on the outskirts of San, where Amadou Jomworo Bary resided intermittently for much of his adult life – provides very strong evidence in favour of the first interpretation. There, new-born Bwa are made to take a sip of water from their village’s sacred well. In the following days, they are taken to the village’s sacred lake, though it is about three kilometers distant. The child may be dipped in the lake or simply washed with its water. If, for any reason, the child cannot be brought to the lake, then water from the lake is carried to the village in order to bathe the child there.

It should be emphasised that since these texts do not note tone, the intended meaning of the two terms, *masāw* and *ko*, is undecidable on strictly linguistic grounds.

Text II, line 9. Almamy and I both read *a bila*, ‘leave (or stop) it’ (i.e., the process of pouring water). However, Vydrin and Dumestre have recently (2014, 236) read *a bela*, interpreting this to mean *a bæ la*, ‘everywhere’. The vowel sign looks more like a somewhat vertical *kasra* (indicative of *i*), but the second interpretation (though both are possible) is more interesting. On the first interpretation, the sentence would mean ‘Examine yourself, and if water has reached, stop [the pouring]’; on the second, ‘Examine yourself, whether water has reached everywhere’. In doubt, I have maintained my initial interpretation, while indicating the second one in a note.

Text III, line 7. Almamy was convinced that he had made a mistake in copying, and that *kābāra* was a mistake and should have been *kaban* (see Tamari 1994, 113, n. 28). Though the former expression is not idiomatic<sup>39</sup>, the meaning one could attribute it contextually, in the phrase *dɔn k’a baara*, makes perfect

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39 One would expect *ka baara ni a ye* or *ka baara ke ni a ye*.

sense: ‘to know and apply’.<sup>40</sup> The present translation thus revises my previous (and still possible) interpretation, *dɔn ka ban*, ‘to know thoroughly’.

In Text III, lines 7 and 8, *numanya* is the Bamana technical term corresponding to the Arabic *ihsān*, a concept that has its sources in the Quran (especially Sura 9, v. 100) and ḥadīth, and ramifications in Islamic mysticism. It denotes absolute faith leading to appropriate, sincere conduct, and constitutes one of a triad of related concepts, the other two being *īmān* (faith) and *islām* (complete submission to God). Since *ihsān* does not have a standard translation in European languages, it is rendered here with reference to the etymological meanings of the Bamana and Arabic terms.<sup>41</sup>

Text IV, line 4. In the word sequence *wo fura ke sugū*, the last word – *sugu*, ‘sort, species’ – is not idiomatic in contemporary Bamana, and Almamy suggested it was written mistakenly, instead of *cogo*, ‘manner of doing, process’. But looking back, it seems unlikely that either the writer or the copyist would have erred concerning both the initial letter (everywhere else in these texts, Bamana *c* is rendered by Arabic *tā*, *t*) and the two vowels – written with *ɗamma*, not reversed to designate the medial back vowels *o*, *ɔ*. Rather, the word choice here – as in the previous example – may be taken to suggest that the writer was not a native speaker of Bamana. On either reading – *sugu* or *cogo* –, the meaning of the sentence remains substantially similar: respectively, ‘This is the nature of the treatment’, ‘This is how the treatment is to be carried out’.

In lines 14–15 of the same text, the writer asserts: *Ala ko fura ka ke ni kalan ye ni yiri ye*. The term *kalan* has several meanings (study, reading, recitation), and one may wonder as to which is the most pertinent in this context. The author’s grandson Sambourou Bary suggests it is ‘recitation’ – a suggestion adopted in the present translation – and perhaps more specifically Quranic recitation. This type of recitation is not explicitly mentioned in the San manuscripts – in which all cited invocations are addressed to the personified well and *Guiera senegalensis* tree; but it is, indeed, often organised on behalf of the sick.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>40</sup> See Vydrin/Dumestre 2014, 238.

<sup>41</sup> The Bamana term is formed from the derived nominal *numan*, ‘good’, and the suffix indicating abstraction *-ya*; it is translatable as ‘goodness’. The Arabic term is the verbal noun of the IVth, intensive form of the root *ḥsn*, ‘to be good or beautiful’.

<sup>42</sup> Of the three basic meanings of the term *kalan*, it seems possible to exclude one (‘reading’) in this context. In 1994, I had suggested the meaning ‘writing’, with reference to the practice of associating a written text with plants, in certain talismans (see e.g. Dieterlen/Ligers 1959; Barrière 1999). However, ‘writing’ is not literally one of the meanings of *kalan*; this is more appropriately conveyed by *seben* or one of its derivatives. Vydrin/Dumestre’s interpretation of this particular passage appears arbitrary (see below, appendix)

## 6 The texts: images, transliteration, transcription and translation

We now proceed to a presentation of the texts: images of Almamy Maliki Yattara’s handwritten copies of the original documents, as well as his French notes; the transliteration of the Arabic characters; the transcription, i.e. the reconstitution of the Bamana discourse, taking into account those dialectal particularities that may be inferred from the Arabic orthography; and an English translation. However, even when the manuscripts point to more than one pronunciation of a given lexeme, I have retained only one in the transcription. The two words that are used exclusively for their Arabic (rather than Bamana) meaning values are printed in boldface in the transcription and translation.

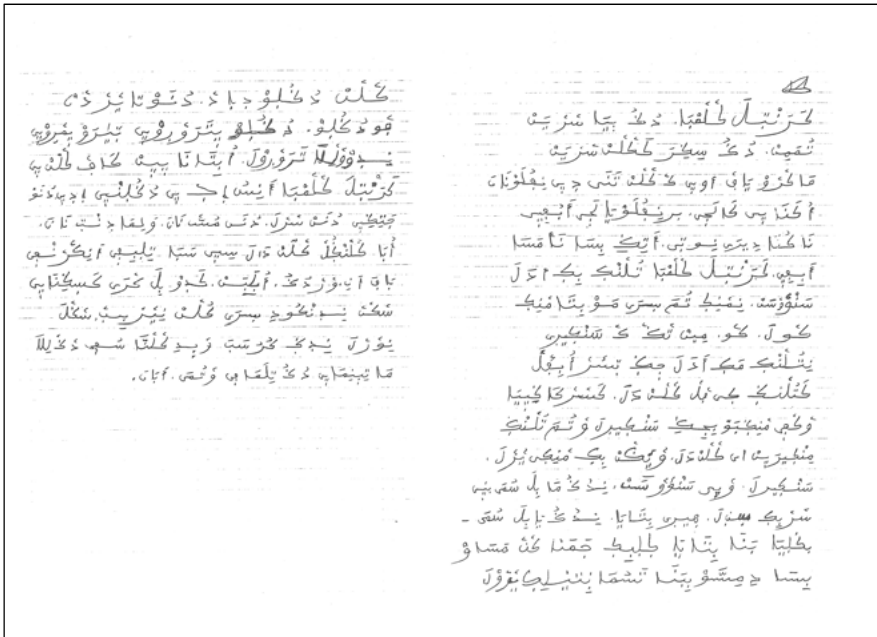


Fig. 1: Almamy Maliki Yattara’s handwritten copies: Text 1(a), Text 1(b).





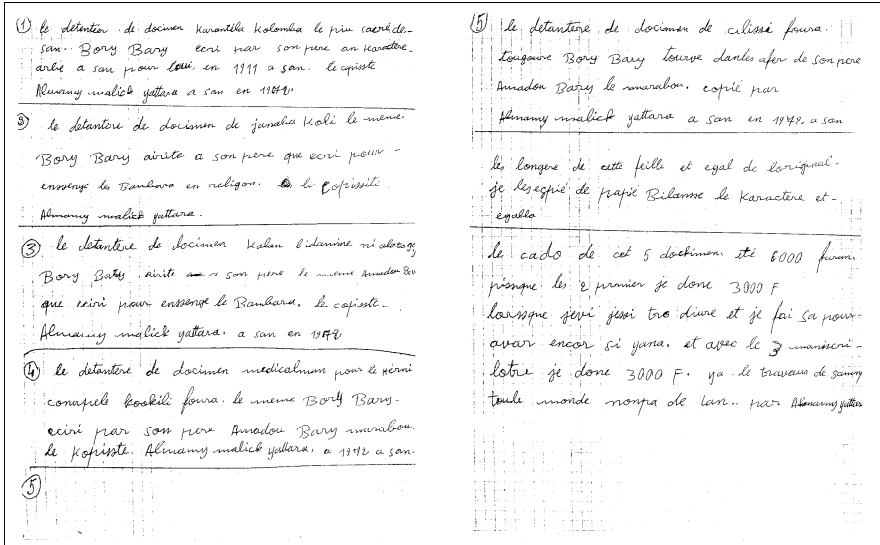


Fig. 6: Almamy's notes – page 1, page 2.

## I.

- 1 karantela kolombā. dugu beyā soro yan
- 2 tumamin. dugu sigira kakolon soro yan
- 3 mākorow yā fo awyē ko kolon tanā de yē nifulaw nāna
- 4 ukanā yē kā lajē. brnifulaw yā lajē abufiyē
- 5 nā kunā dīrā niwtē. atigi bisā nā masā
- 6 a bifiyē. karantela kolombā tulongke bike adala
- 7 sanwowsan. nimonike tuma serā maw bitā monike
- 8 kōla. kō. mīn togo ko sankērē
- 9 nitulongke make adala jege tesoro u bifolo
- 10 katulonge kē folo kolon dala. kasoro kā giyeyā
- 11 wokofē monigebaw bijigi sankērela wotuma tulonge
- 12 minkēra yen ay kolon dala. wopogon bike monikē yorola.
- 13 sankērla. wo yē sanwowo san. nidugu mā bila sumā bñē
- 14 soro bike sene la. hērē bitāyā. nidugu yā bila sumā
- 15 bgleyā banā bitāyā kelebike jamanā kono masāw
- 16 bisā dimissaw bibanā tasumā bitŋlike yorowla.
- 17 kolon dugulew de bā do. dunaw tā yoro don

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18 fō dugulew. dugulew yetaraworew yē teyāraw yemoriw yē  
 19 nidew wololā taraworewla. ubitānā yeyen kāfo kolon yē  
 20 karantela kolombā anisu e de yē dugulenyē e de yē dunaw  
 21 jatigiyē dunan sorola. dunan musso nāna. walimā dente nāna.  
 22 ubā kulungulo kolon dāla siyē sabā tilebifē anikoronfē  
 23 bāfa ani worodugu. u blaban. kadew bila korā kaseginā yē.  
 24 sokono nidenkūdi serā kulon niyoro bibo sogola  
 25 niworola nidege kuru saba wobedi kolonnā sufē dogolilā  
 26 mā tibenimāyē dugu tilamā fē wo tumā. a bāna.

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## II.

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1 ninyē janāba kūliyē.  
 2 janāba kōli bike abike ni jī sanyālenyē ibifolo ka  
 3 i korola kō kā i teke fila kō kā i dāmuguri  
 4 kā i nun kō ki i ɲedākō ki i bolo  
 5 fila kō ki i kungolo masā ki i tulo masa  
 6 ki i sen kō wo tuma i binā kōli dmine  
 7 i bifolo nikungoloyē kā kō siɲē saba  
 8 ki i fankele kō kinī bulofē kā numabolo  
 9 kō kā lajē nijī sera a bila i bijī lase  
 10 i k tōnnā kā jīgi ijūkunawmā ibiji lase  
 11 i kā kānā. kājīgi i bara koromā i kajanto iyerelā  
 12 ikanā se i keyāla nii buloyē wotuma wkōli  
 13 kele abīwasā selijī la. wo de yē janāba kōliyē  
 14 minfōra Allāh sirāā la  
 15 Allāh mā an demenā āmīn.

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## III.

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1 kalan bi damine ni Allāh togoyē an šalīla Allāh tīra lā  
 2 mīn togo ko Muḥammad hinē nikisi bāka. ako silāmeyā  
 3 samā sen ye dūru yē ksereyāke tɲbatu masa make  
 4 fō nimasa kelenyē minyē Allāh Muḥammad fanā Allāh ka tīdendo  
 5 kaijijan salilā ani saniyā kasun sunkalō la kāzakā bō.  
 6 kahijike nisebāye nindūru. nunun deyē silāmeyā yē

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7      nimā yē ninun don kābāra. akēra silāmayē numanyā.  
 8      numanyā yenumawnyē i ka Allāh tīntigiya kā Muḥammad tīntikiya ika melekew  
 9      tīntigiya kāaljanna tīntigiya ka jahhannama tīntigiya fanā kāalkiyawma  
 10     dowo tīntigiya wode bemāke silāmā numanyē. silāmā  
 11     abiwakali Allāh lā. wakali numanyē. wakali deyē nimā yemin soro  
 12     akā don Allāh de yā dīmā nimā mīn soro ikā do Allāh demā  
 13     dīmā nii bananā ikādo Allāh de yā sīmā nii sāra Allāh deyā sīmā  
 14     jīje Allāh de yā da nisegyē niadama den sorola anā segē  
 15     nadeserā anā sege na koṇonā anā sege nāfāra anā segē nā tisinogo  
 16     anā sege nāmīnā sinogora anā sege nā mīna jōlilā anā sege nā mīn  
 17     sigilila anā sege wotuma mā kā Allāh don nigudeyē ani bangē ye wbimogo  
 18     wodebimogo kisi Allāh mā an kisirā  
 19     a bāna.

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#### IV.

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1      niyē fura kumayē kō kili fura.  
 2      fura mīn be kō kili fura ke. kōkili  
 3      nā bananā a bike barakoro dimiyē  
 4      wo fura ke sugū ebi gōkun mūgan  
 5      ani kele. bō i bō tobi kā mō kosobe  
 6      wotuma. i bā woro ibi tumbutu kogo dōnī  
 7      kāla fāk timiyā i bā sī sokonō kā datugu.  
 8      kā sō fanā datugu adāla nidugu giyāra  
 9      i bōta kā dun fākī kono bara fā nijī bāla  
 10     i būmī. niyē ngeleni soro i bā faga kā kilibō  
 11     kā dun kā fara a ka wotumā ibījantō iyere la mussowfē.  
 12     fā kasē tile muga ṅogonna wotuma  
 13     i kenyārā. furā a bike kā tugu tugu ṅonā  
 14     fā kā dafā nādafāra inā nafayē. Allāh kō  
 15     fura kake nikalan yē ni yiriyē. ambā nafā soro  
 16     nī masā. sōnā mīnyē Allāh yē.

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## V.

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1 ninyē kilisi fūra yē nimogo bananā  
 2 imanā banā geleyalen yē mogofē i bā bolomine  
 3 kā ɲesi yirimā wo yirinin togo ko kunjē  
 4 i bā fo yirimā yiribā kunjē e de yē yiri koro yē yiri  
 5 koro de bibanā koro fura kē. banabātonin a serā mākorow bela  
 6 umasē kābanā koro fura kē kā keneyā kunjē.  
 7 mbideli nifurayē mīn bii ka buluwla tilebibulu  
 8 nikoronfē bulu nibāfa bulu niworodugu bulu yē  
 9 wotuma ibijō downī wotuma i bulukari fānbefē  
 10 ibō mara i bitanā yē ikasō ibā tobi banabāto  
 11 bā mī kā kō kāmī kā kō kā kō fō sɲesegi  
 12 tilesegi konō bnbāto a bkeneyā. a ba muɲudowonī  
 13 tugu tile segi nā mā keneyā. i bisegi ibifolotake  
 14 fā kā sedānā ibitā sō i bā tobi kake folo  
 15 tā ɲogonyē. fō sɲjē segi nibnbāto mā keneyā  
 16 wola wotuma abisā. wodeyē kunjē fūra ye. tammat.  
 17 abāna.

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## I.

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1 Karantela kɔɓnba. dugu bεε y'a<sup>43</sup> ɔɔɔ yan  
 2 tuma min, dugu sigira ka kɔɓn ɔɔɔ yan.  
 3 maakɔɔw y'a fɔ anw<sup>44</sup> ye, ko kɔɓn tana de ye, ni Fulaw nana  
 4 u kan'a ye k'a laje. bari ni<sup>45</sup> Fulaw y'a laje, a b'u fiyen,  
 5 ni a kunnadiyara, ni wo te, a tigi bi sa. ni a ma sa,  
 6 a bi fiyen. Karantela kɔɓnba, tulonke bi ke a da la,  
 7 san wo san. ni mɔɓnikε tuma sera, maaw bi taa mɔɓni ke  
 8 kɔ la, kɔ min tɔgɔ ko Sankeere.  
 9 ni tulonke ma ke a da la, jege te ɔɔɔ. u bi fɔɓ  
 10 ka tulonke ke fɔɓ kɔɓn da la, ka ɔɔɔ ka a ji jeya.

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43 Alternative, earlier reading: *dugu be yan*.

44 Alternative, earlier reading: *aw*.

45 Alternative, earlier reading suggested by Almamy Maliki Yattara: *Barani Fulaw*.

11 wo kɔ fɛ, mɔnnikebaaw bi jigi Sankeere la. wo tuma tulonke  
 12 min kera yen, ay kɔɔn da la, wo ɲɔɲɔ bi kɛ mɔnnikeyɔɲɔ la,  
 13 Sankeere la. wo ye san wo san. ni dugu m'a bila, suman bi ɲɛ,  
 14 sɔɲɔ bi kɛ sɛnɛ la. hɛɛ bi caya. ni dugu y'a bila, suman  
 15 bi geɛɛya, bana bi caya, kɛɛ bi kɛ jamana kɔɲɔ, masaw  
 16 bi sa, denmisɛnw bi bana, tasuma bi ɲɛɛli kɛ<sup>46</sup> yɔɲɔ la.  
 17 kɔɲɔ, dugulenw de b'a dɔn, dunanw t'a yɔɲɔ dɔn,  
 18 fɔ dugulenw. dugulenw ye Taraworew ye, Teeraw ye moriw ye.  
 19 ni denw wolola Taraworew la, u bi taa n'a ye yen, k'a fɔ kɔɲɔ ye:  
 20 'Karantɛla kɔɲɔnba, a ni su, e de ye dugulen ye, e de ye dunanw  
 21 jatigi ye. dunan sɔɲɔla, dunanmuso nana, walima dɛnɛ nana.'  
 22 u b'a kulongulo<sup>47</sup> kɔɲɔ da la siɲɛ saba, tilebin fɛ ani kɔɲɔ fɛ,  
 23 bafan ani worodugu. u bi laban ka denw bila kɔ la, ka segin n'a ye  
 24 so kɔɲɔ. ni denkundi sera, kɔɲɔ niyɔɲɔ bi bɔ sogo la  
 25 ni woro la, ni dɛgɛ kuru saba, wo bi di kɔɲɔ ma su fɛ, dogoli la,  
 26 maa tɛ ben ni maa ye, dugutilama fɛ, wo tuma. a banna.

## II.

1 nin ye janaba koli ye.  
 2 janaba koli bi kɛ, a bi kɛ ni ji saniyalɛn ye. i bi fɔɔ ka  
 3 i kɔɲɔla ko, ka i tɛgɛ fila ko, ka i da muguri,  
 4 ka i nun ko, k'i ɲɛda ko, k'i bolo  
 5 fila ko, k'i kungolo masa, k'i tulo masa,  
 6 k'i sen ko. wo tuma, i bi na koli damine.  
 7 i bi fɔɔ ni kungolo ye k'a ko siɲɛ saba,  
 8 k'i fan kelen ko kinibolo fɛ, ka numanbolo  
 9 ko, k'a lajɛ, ni ji sera, a bila.<sup>48</sup> i bi ji lase  
 10 i ka tɔn na, k'a jigi i jukunanw ma. i bi ji lase  
 11 i ka kan na, k'a jigi i barakɔɲɔ ma. i ka janto i yɛɛ la,

<sup>46</sup> Earlier reading, correlated to a different interpretation of the Arabic handwriting: *tasuma ni ɲɛɛlike*.

<sup>47</sup> Alternative, currently more frequent pronunciation: *kolonkolon*. (See Bailleul 2007, 227.)

<sup>48</sup> Alternative reading, which assumes that one of the vowel signs of the seventh script unit of the Arabic text (as transliterated) was badly or mistakenly copied or written: *a be la* standing for *a bɛɛ la*.

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- 12 i kana se i keya la ni i bolo ye. wo tuma wo koli  
 13 kelen, a bi wasa seliji la. wo de ye janaba koli ye  
 14 min fɔra Ala sira la.  
 15 Ala maa an demena. amiina.
- 

### III.

- 
- 1 kalan bi damine ni Ala tɔɔ ye. an salila<sup>49</sup> Ala cira<sup>50</sup> la,  
 2 min tɔɔ ko Muhamadu, hine ni kisi b'a kan. a ko, silameya  
 3 samasen ye duuru ye: ka seereya ke tijeɓato masa ma ke  
 4 fɔ ni masa kelen ye min ye Ala, Muhamadu fana Ala ka ciden don;  
 5 ka i jijan sali la ani saniya, ka sun sunkalo la, ka zaka bɔ,  
 6 ka hiji ke ni se b'a ye, nin duuru nunun de ye silameya ye.  
 7 ni maa ye ninun dɔn k'a baara<sup>51</sup>, a kera silame ye. numanya.  
 8 numanya ye numanw ye: i ka Ala tijeɓatiya, ka Muhamadu tijeɓatiya, i ka meɓekew  
 9 tijeɓatiya, ka aljana tijeɓatiya, ka jahanama tijeɓatiya fana, ka alkiyamadon,  
 10 wo<sup>52</sup> tijeɓatiya, wo de bi maa ke silame numan ye. silame,  
 11 a bi wakali Ala la, wakali numan ye. wakali de ye, ni maa ye min sɔɔ,  
 12 a k'a dɔn Ala de y'a di i ma, n'i ma min sɔɔ i k'a dɔn Ala de ma a  
 13 di i ma. ni i banana i k'a dɔn Ala de y'a se i ma, ni i sara Ala de y'a se i ma.  
 14 dije, Ala de y'a da ni segen ye. ni adamaden sɔɔla, a na segen.  
 15 ni a desera, a na segen. ni a kongɔna, a na segen, ni a fara, a na segen. ni a te sinɔɔ,  
 16 a na segen. ni a menna sinɔɔ ra, a na segen. ni a menna jɔli la, a na segen. ni a menna  
 17 sigili la, a na segen. wo tuma, maa ka Ala dɔn, ni gundo ye ani bange ye, wo bi mɔɔ,  
 18 wo de bi mɔɔ kisi. Ala maa an kisira.  
 19 a banna.
- 

<sup>49</sup> The verbal root is generally pronounced *sɔli* in contemporary Bamana.

<sup>50</sup> Usually pronounced *kira* in contemporary Bamana.

<sup>51</sup> Alternative, earlier reading suggested by Almamy Maliki Yattara: *ka ban*.

<sup>52</sup> Following Vydrin and Dumestre's reading (2014, 239), I have here added the anaphoric pronoun *wo* (which does not appear in my earlier transcription). This reading better accounts for the Arabic orthography *dowo* (though it in no way changes the substantive meaning of the sentence).

## IV.

---

1 nin ye fura kuma ye, kəkili fura,  
 2 fura min bi kəkili furake. kəkili,  
 3 ni a banana, a bi ke barakɔɔ dimi ye.  
 4 wo furake sugu<sup>53</sup>, e bi ngɔkun mukan  
 5 ani kelen bɔ. i b'o tobi k'a mɔ kosɛbe.  
 6 wo tuma, i b'a wɔɔ, i bi Tunbutu kɔɔ dɔonin  
 7 k'a la, f'a ka timiya. i b'a si so kɔɔ ka a datugu,  
 8 ka so fana datugu a da la. ni dugu giyara<sup>54</sup>,  
 9 i b'o ta ka a dun f'a k'i kɔɔbara fa. ni ji b'a la,  
 10 i b'o min. ni i ye ngelenin sɔɔ, i b'a faga k'a kili bɔ,  
 11 ka a dun k'a fara a kan. wo tuma, i b'i janto i yere la musow fe,  
 12 f'a ka se tile mukan ɔɔ na. wo tuma,  
 13 i keneyara. fura, a bi ke ka tugutugu ɔɔ na,  
 14 f'a ka dafa. ni a dafara, i n'a nafa ye. Ala ko,  
 15 fura ka ke ni kalan ye, ni yiri ye. an b'a nafa sɔɔ  
 16 ni masa sɔɔna, min ye Ala ye.

---

## V.

---

1 nin ye kilisi fura ye. ni mɔɔ banana,  
 2 i mana bana geleyalen ye mɔɔ fe, i b'a bolo mine  
 3 k'a jɛsin yiri ma. wo yiri nin tɔɔ ko kunje.  
 4 i b'a fɔ yiri ma: 'yiriba kunje, e de ye yiri sɔɔ ye. yiri  
 5 kɔɔ de bi bana kɔɔ fura ke<sup>55</sup>. banabaatɔ nin, a sera maakɔɔw bɛɛ la,  
 6 u ma se k'a bana kɔɔ furake k'a keneya, kunje.  
 7 n b'i deli, ni fura ye min b'i ka buluw la, tilebin bulu  
 8 ni kɔɔnfe bulu ni bafan bulu ni worodugu bulu ye.'

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53 Alternative, earlier reading suggested by Almamy Maliki Yattara, on the ground that *sugu* was a mistake for *cogo*: *fura kecogo*; on this assumption, *furake cogo* would also be a possible reading.

54 The forms *jera* and *jeyara* are more common in contemporary Bamana.

55 Or alternatively, with a similar meaning: *furake*.

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9 wo tuma, i b'i ɲ ɔ ɔ ɲ ɲ in. wo tuma, i bulu<sup>56</sup> kari fan bɛɛ fɛ  
 10 i b'o mara, i bi taa ni a ye i ka so, i b'a tobi, banabaato  
 11 b'a min, ka ko ka min ka ko ka ko fɔ sɲɛ segin,  
 12 tile segin ɔ ɔ ɔ. banabaato, a bi kɛnɛya. a b'a muɲu ɔ ɔ ɔ in  
 13 tugun tile segin. ni a ma kɛnɛya, i bi segin i bi fɔ ɓ ta kɛ,  
 14 f'a ka se dan na. i bi taa so, i b'a tobi k'a kɛ fɔ ɓ ta  
 15 ɲ ɔ ɲ ɲ ye, fɔ sɲɛ segin. ni banabaato ma kɛnɛya  
 16 wo la, wo tuma a be sa. wo de ye kunɲɛ fura ye. **tammat.**  
 17 a banna.

---

## I.

---

1 The great well Karantela. The whole village found it here.  
 2 At the time the village was founded, the well was already there.  
 3 The old people say that the well's prohibition is that when the Fulbe come,  
 4 they must not look closely at the well. Because if the Fulbe scrutinize it, it will blind them  
 5 – if s/he's lucky, otherwise s/he'll die<sup>57</sup>. The person will either die  
 6 or go blind. Games take place near the great well Karantela,  
 7 every year. When the fishing season comes, people go fishing  
 8 in the lake, the lake called Sankeere.  
 9 If the games aren't held near it, fish won't be caught.  
 10 They begin by holding games near the well, so as to purify it.  
 11 Then, the fishers go down to Sankeere, and [as for] the games  
 12 that take place there, **that is** near the well, similar ones are held at the fishing place,  
 13 at Sankeere. So it is every year. As long as the village doesn't forsake it [this custom],  
 14 the crops will be good,  
 15 cultivation will be successful. There will be peace and prosperity. [But] if the village  
 abandons it, crops  
 will be insufficient, there will be much sickness, there will be war in the land, elders<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Vydrin/Dumestre 2014, 244 propose the reading: *i b'olu*. This is possible but not plausible, since the vowel indicated is a *ɗamma* (*u*) rather than a reversed *ɗamma* (*o*), and word repetition is highly characteristic of oral discourse. On my reading, this phrase is in the imperative mood.

<sup>57</sup> As in many other West African languages, Bamana pronouns do not distinguish gender. Also, Bamana oral discourse switches easily from the singular to the plural and vice-versa, as exemplified here (lines 3–6) and below (lines 19–23).

<sup>58</sup> Alternative translation of *masaw*: 'kings'. See the discussion, p. 230.

- 
- 16 will die, children will fall ill, fire will ravage a number of places.  
 17 The well, it is the natives that know it. Strangers aren't familiar with it,  
 18 only natives. The natives are Traore, [whereas] the Tera are Muslim scholars.  
 19 When children are born to the Traore, they bring it [the child] there, then address the  
 well:  
 20 'Great well Karantela, good evening. You are the true native, you are the host of  
 strangers.  
 21 We have received a stranger. A female stranger has come, or else a boy has come.'  
 22 They roll it three times [on each side of] the well, west and east,  
 23 north and south. Finally, they dip the children in the lake<sup>59</sup>, then return home with them.  
 24 On the occasion of the name-giving ceremony, the well receives its share of meat  
 25 and cola nuts, as well as three millet balls. [All] these are given to the well secretly at  
 night,  
 26 in deepest night, at dead of night. The end.
- 

## II.

---

- 1 This is the [explanation of the] major ablution.  
 2 The major ablution is accomplished with water, with pure water. You begin by  
 3 washing your private parts and the palms of both hands, rinsing your mouth,  
 4 cleaning your nose, washing your face, washing your two hands,  
 5 passing your hands over your head and your ears,  
 6 and washing your feet. Then, you begin the [major] ablution [properly speaking].  
 7 You begin with your head, washing it thrice,  
 8 then, you wash each side [of your body], the right then the left,  
 9 and you examine yourself: if water has reached, then cease [this phase of the purifi-  
 cation is now complete].<sup>60</sup> You pour water  
 10 about your nape so that it runs down to your buttocks, then you pour it  
 11 about the front of your neck so that it runs down to the pubic region. Be careful  
 12 not to touch your male organs with your hand. With this, the purification
- 

<sup>59</sup> Or perhaps, simply 'bring the children to the lake'. The verbo-nominal *bila*, which has an especially wide semantic range, can among its varied meanings, signify either 'place by' or 'place in' (depending on the context). Alternative translation of *u bi* [...] *denw bila kɔ la*: 'they put the children on their backs' (in order to carry them home). See the discussion, pp. 230–231.

<sup>60</sup> Alternative translation, corresponding to the transcription *a bɛɛ la* (in lieu of *a bila*): '[...] yourself, whether water has reached all places'. See above, p. 231.

- 
- 13 has been completed, it [also] satisfies the requirements of minor ablution. That is the major ablution,  
 14 prescribed by the divine Law.  
 15 May God help us. Amen.
- 

### III.

- 
- 1 Study begins with the name of God. We have pronounced the blessing formula upon the Messenger of God,  
 2 whose name is Muhammad, mercy and salvation upon him.<sup>61</sup> It is said<sup>62</sup>: Islam's  
 3 pillars are five. To bear witness that the only True Lord  
 4 is the One Lord – Who is God. As for Muhammad, he is God's Messenger.<sup>63</sup>  
 5 Earnestly endeavour to accomplish prayer and purification, to fast in Ramadan, to give alms,  
 6 and – provided you have the [necessary] means – to perform the pilgrimage. Islam consists in these five.  
 7 If a person knows them and acts accordingly<sup>64</sup>, he has become a Muslim. Goodness.<sup>65</sup>  
 8 Goodness consists in [the following] goodnesses: you must believe in God, and in [His Messenger] Muhammad, and in the angels,  
 9 and in [the reality of] Paradise – and also Hell and the Day of Resurrection,
- 

**61** This is a reference to the blessing formula regularly pronounced after the name of the Prophet (*ṣallā Allāhu 'alayhi wa-sallama*), often translated into English as 'Peace and mercy upon him'. *Hine ni kisi b'a kan* is the standard Bamana translation of this Arabic formula. See more below, pp. 250, 267–268. It is uncertain whether the use of the perfective in the Bamana phrase *an salila* ('We have pronounced' – *-la* is an intransitive perfect suffix) should be construed merely as a calque on the Arabic verb, or as referring, additionally, to past instances of recitation. Therefore, this phrase could equally well be translated using the present tense, as was the case in my initial (1994) publication.

**62** The words *a ko*, which typically introduce a quotation, are particularly frequent in scholarly discourse, where they generally refer to the source (often a written work) of the information or interpretation being presented. It is usually not necessary to translate them explicitly, since their meaning is adequately conveyed by quotation marks. In scholarly discourse, they tend to be used repetitively, often becoming a tic.

**63** The passage *tinyebato* [...] *don* (lines 3–4) is a Bamana translation of the *shahāda* (Muslim creed) *lā ilāh illā Llāh wa-Muḥammad rasūl Allāh* ('There is no God but God, and Muhammad is His Messenger.'). See more below, 268.

**64** Alternative translation, corresponding to the transcription *ka ban* (in lieu of *k'a baara*): 'If a person knows these thoroughly, [...]'. See above, 231–232.

**65** Here and in the following sentence, 'goodness' corresponds to *jumanya*, the Bamana technical term that corresponds to the Islamic concept of *iḥsān*. See above, p. 232.



- 
- 10 that is what makes a person a good Muslim. A Muslim,  
 11 he places his trust in God, a full trust. Placing one's trust means that, if a person obtains something,  
 12 he should know that it is God Who gave it to him. That, if you didn't obtain something, you should know that it is God Who didn't  
 13 give it to you. If you fall ill – you must know that it is God Who brought it [this illness] upon you; that, if you die, it is God Who has imposed this upon you.  
 14 The world, God has created it [full of] effort and suffering. When a human being obtains satisfaction, he suffers.  
 15 When he fails, he [also] suffers. If he goes hungry, he suffers. If he is sated, he [also] suffers. If he doesn't sleep,  
 16 he suffers. If he sleeps for a long time, he suffers. If he stands for a long time, he suffers. If he sits for a long time  
 17 he suffers. Thus, a person will know about God, that which is secret and that which is manifest, that makes a person –  
 18 that is what may save a person, may God save us.  
 19 The end.
- 

#### IV.

- 
- 1 This is a healing formula, a remedy for the testicles,  
 2 a remedy that heals the testicles. When the testicles  
 3 become diseased, the loins become painful.  
 4 The nature of this remedy<sup>66</sup>: you take twenty-one water lilies.  
 5 Cook them well,  
 6 then, take them [the individual seeds] out of their sheaths, and add a little salt from Timbuktu,  
 7 enough to give them an agreeable taste. Leave it [this food] overnight in a closed receptacle,  
 8 and also shut the door of the house. At dawn,  
 9 take it and eat of it until you're sated. If there's some liquid,  
 10 drink it. If you can get hold of a ground squirrel<sup>67</sup>, kill it and remove its testicles,
- 

<sup>66</sup> Alternative translations, based on the readings *fura kecogo* and *furake cogo*, respectively: 'How to prepare this treatment: [...]' and 'This is the course of treatment'.

<sup>67</sup> *Xerus erythropus*.

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11 eat of it [the squirrel including its testicles] and add [the remainder] to the above<sup>68</sup>.  
Now then, be careful [not to approach] women,  
12 for about twenty days. Then,  
13 you will have healed. The remedy should be taken regularly [on consecutive days]  
14 until its term. When this has been completed, you will realise its benefit. God has  
commanded  
15 that remedies be prepared using recitation and plants. We will benefit from them  
16 if the Lord – Who is God – so wills it.

---

## V.

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1 This is a magical remedy. Sometimes, when a person becomes ill –  
2 should you observe that a person is severely ill, take him by the hand  
3 and make him face a tree, a tree called *kunje*<sup>69</sup>.  
4 You will address the tree: ‘Great *kunje* tree, indeed you are a venerable tree, only a  
venerable tree  
5 can cure an old malady. This patient has already consulted all the old persons,  
6 they have been unable to treat and cure his long-standing illness. *Kunje*,  
7 I beg you [to help him], should there be a healing principle in your leaves: the western  
leaves,  
8 the eastern leaves, the northern and southern ones.’  
9 Then, you pause a while, after which you pick leaves from all [four] sides.  
10 You keep them, take them to your home and cook them; the patient  
11 will drink of it [the decoction] and wash with it, drink and wash, and wash repeatedly,  
eight times.  
12 The patient will recover within eight days. He will wait a little,  
13 again another eight days. If he hasn’t recovered, you will repeat your initial actions,  
14 up to the limit [of eight days]. You will go home and cook [the leaves], in the same  
manner as the first time,  
15 up to eight times. If the patient hasn’t recovered  
16 with this, then he will die. That is the remedy provided by the *kunje*. **The end.**  
17 The end.

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68 I.e., to the casserole of seasoned water lilies. I am grateful to one of the anonymous referees for the suggestion that in this sentence, *fara* should be interpreted as the verbo-nominal meaning ‘to add’.

69 *Guiera senegalensis*.



**Fig. 7:** Sidy (nicknamed 'Koké') Traoré, caretaker of the sacred well of Karantela, August 1998. ©Tal Tamari



**Fig. 8:** Inside view of the sacred well of Karantela, showing brickwork, April 2016. ©Tal Tamari



**Fig. 9:** The San lake, covered with flowering water lilies, April 2016. © Tal Tamari



**Fig. 10:** The sacred well at Sienso, April 2016. © Tal Tamari

## 7 Cultural and doctrinal interpretation

These texts are in many ways typical of the doctrinal and religious outlooks of traditionally-trained West African scholars. The points enumerated in the third, theological text – belief in the unseen world, notably comprising the angels, Paradise and Hell, as well as the One, omnipotent and omniscient God – are not only expounded in the basic theological texts (most significantly, the *Umm al-barāhīn* of Muḥammad al-Sanūsī, as well as its various extracts and abridgments)<sup>70</sup>, but are among those most frequently stressed (in my experience) in religious education sessions aimed at adults as well as in public preaching. Many teachers begin or close each session by reminding their listeners of the reality of – and obligatory belief in – this unseen world. The fact that the second sentence of the text (line 1) is enunciated in the second person plural *an salila* [or: *solila*] *Ala cira la*, ‘We have pronounced [or: ‘recited’] blessings upon the Prophet’ – suggests that it is the summary of the essential points of a lesson, which may begin with devotional litanies. The inevitable weariness and disappointments of this-worldly existence are recurrent elements of West African (or at least Malian) teaching and preaching, expressed with exceptional poignancy in this text.<sup>71</sup> The reference to ‘the secret and the manifest’ (in the Revealed Book and the Creation) is a significant theme in North and West African Muslim thought, evidenced in the *Umm al-barāhīn*, and one that has also attracted other Malian scholars.<sup>72</sup> Personal cleanliness and the ablutions are also emphasised by religious teachers, especially in instruction aimed at adults (see text II).

Most scholars have some expertise in the treatment of illness, and many specialise in particular ailments. They often possess some written documents pertaining to these treatments, as well as other forms of esoteric action. Though in

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**70** The influence in West Africa of the work of this Tlemcen-born author (life dates: ca. 1435–1490) has been studied in depth by Louis Brenner; see, for example, Brenner 2005 (first ed.: 1984), 79–86.

**71** For example, in his commentary on the first *sūra* of the Quran (*Al-Fātiḥa*), a highly-regarded scholar from the Segou area declares: ‘Regarding any of the pleasures of this world – even if you had some happiness, one day it comes to an end. Now then, one day, something happens which displeases you, you are anxious. But Paradise is not like that. You won’t sorrow, you won’t become ill, you won’t age, ever again.’ (Tamari 1996, 73, 78.) According to these scholars, every earthly pleasure necessarily has its correlated frustration.

**72** For example, a Segou scholar stated, in recounting a late-medieval Arabic romance, that the young hero ‘implored God, by all His secrets and all that He had rendered manifest’ (*a labanna sa ka damakasi Ala ma, a ka gundow ani a ka bangew bee lajelen la*) (Tamari 2013b, 241, 244.)

my personal experience so far, in Mali, these documents have been in Arabic, recent research in Bobo-Dioulasso has uncovered several Jula manuscripts.<sup>73</sup>

The association of writing, recitation and plants – and, somewhat more rarely, animal substances – in the preparation of amulets or the course of treatment is also typical, as noted by several researchers<sup>74</sup> and observed by the present writer in the course of fieldwork. The role of sympathetic magic in Muslim and other forms of esotericism is well-known, and these texts provide several examples. There is an analogy between the venerable age of the tree and the long-term nature of the illness to be treated (text V), and between the organs of the ground squirrel (*Xerus erythropus*) and those of the patient (text IV). The complete closure of the house or room in which the water lily (*Nymphaea lotus*) seeds must be kept overnight enhances and reinforces that of the lidded cooking receptacle (text IV). Washing and ingestion are the most usual ways of absorbing healing ingredients, and are often prescribed concurrently. Reference to the four cardinal directions (texts I and V) is another characteristic feature of both Muslim and non-Muslim West African magic. So is number symbolism: the numbers three, four, eight, and twenty figure in these texts.

It should be noted that both water lily seeds and the ground squirrel are common foodstuffs in rural Mali; indeed, the former is a major element of the diet in the Masina and, formerly, this was also the case in San. Mineral salt, mined in the Sahara and transported via Timbuktu, is considered particularly healthful in the diet and is often prescribed by traditional medical practitioners (though many persons are now also aware of the goitre-preventing action of the iodine in imported sea salt). Boiled leaves of the *Guiera senegalensis* tree (see text V) are used in the treatment of numerous illnesses.<sup>75</sup>

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**73** Donaldson 2013, 26–28, 31–32.

**74** With respect to the Bamana milieu, see: Dieterlen/Ligers 1959; Barrière 1999; Mbodj-Pouye 2012; Traoré 1965, *passim*; Dumestre/Touré 2007, *passim*.

**75** See Traoré 1965, *passim*; Berhaut 1974, t. 2, 378–381; Garnier 1976, 10, 23, 37, 1986, 135; Thoyer-Rozat 1979, 83–85; von Maydell 1992 (1st ed.: 1983), 278–279; Malgras 1992, 140–141; Arbonnier 2009, 267; Forgues/Bailleul 2009, 92. Malgras 1992, 141 comments that the *kunje* is believed to be ‘the oldest tree in the world’; this suggests that the efficacy of the remedy outlined in Text IV is related not only to the age of an individual tree, but to the role of the species in a mythological scheme of Creation. According to Garnier 1976, 10; 1986, 135, 149, the tree’s two designations, suggested by the greyish colour of its leaves – *kunje* (literally: ‘white’ ‘top’, ‘summit’ or ‘head’) and *musokorɔninkunje* (lit.: ‘white haired old woman’) – refer to white hair as a sign of age. Birnbaum 2012 studies some of the plant species mentioned here in their ecological context.

In the Malian context, *dege* refers to various foods, both cooked and uncooked, prepared from millet (*Penicillaria spicata*: Bamana *saɲɔ*, French *petit mil*).<sup>76</sup> The uncooked varieties are used in ritual, whereas the cooked ones have been – at least in recent decades – also consumed in non-ritual contexts, as a choice food. In at least one Bamana region, balls of *dege* have, up till recently, been distributed in traditional (non-Islamic) child-naming ceremonies, in place of or in addition to cola nuts.<sup>77</sup>

As is typical of magical treatments in many ‘traditional’ societies, text V (lines 15–16) makes provision for the maintenance of belief despite the eventuality of failure: if the patient does not heal, this is because his disease is incurable, and he will die.<sup>78</sup> Text IV (l. 15–16) considers the matter from an explicitly Islamic vantage point: the patient will heal, if God so wills it.

One can only speculate as to whether the difference in the titles of texts IV and V (respectively *fura kuma*, ‘healing formula’ or ‘healing instructions’, and *kilisi fura*, ‘magical remedy’<sup>79</sup>) implies the perception, on the part of the writer, of a difference in the nature of the two treatments. In the former instance, is the hoped-for healing simply the usual correlate<sup>80</sup> of certain ‘natural’ ingredients, processes and actions, whereas in the second, is it the invocation to the tree (or perhaps some other invocation, not explicit in the text) which is the crucial element? Does the term *kalan* (‘reading’, ‘recitation’, ‘study’) mentioned in text IV.15 refer to the recitation of the Quran and/or Islamic benedictions, or to some other procedure?

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**76** In the Malinke country of northern Guinea, the term *dege* refers to rice-based culinary preparations, used primarily (or exclusively?) in ritual, both traditional and Islamic; the corresponding, locally employed French expression is *pain blanc* (‘white bread’).

**77** Fieldwork in the Beledugu region – specifically, in the area corresponding to the administrative division (‘Cercle’) of Kolokani – in 1985–1988. While cola nuts have long been used in divination, it seems that their other ritual uses have gained in importance over the course of the twentieth century, concomitant to the growth of trade and islamisation.

**78** As classically analysed by Evans-Pritchard in his study of the Zande 1937 or (with reference to a medieval and early modern European context) by Bloch 1924.

**79** *Kilisi* signifies ‘magical formula’ or ‘incantation’, *kuma* means ‘word’ or ‘speech’, and *fura* means ‘remedy’.

**80** The word ‘correlate’ is used advisedly, since Asharite theology, which is widely studied in West Africa, denies any natural causality, basically claiming that God is the sole Mover. Discussions of the merely apparent effects of fire or a knife blade, and of miracles as a particularly clear illustration of the absence of natural causality – all ultimately based on the numerous written commentaries of al-Sanūsi’s *Umm al-barāhīn* – are recurrent in the discourse of Malian scholars.

Texts I and V raise the question of the author's views as to the reality and efficacy of 'supernatural' agencies not explicitly recognised in Islamic belief, exemplified here by the personified well and the *Guiera senegalensis* tree. Taking into account the theological text (III), one may suggest the following interpretation, which also corresponds to my fieldwork experience: many Malian (and probably more generally West African) Muslims do not deny the agency of a diversity of supernatural powers, but stress that these are firmly subordinated to that of the One God. For example, a highly learned scholar from the Segou region affirms, in his commentary on a passage of the Quran, that in the hereafter, the *boli* ('power objects' or 'fetishes') will be bound powerless in Hell, but he does not explicitly deny them agency in This-World (*al-dunyā*).<sup>81</sup> In his retelling of a late-medieval Arabic chivalric romance, another highly learned scholar from the Segou area points out that the anthropomorphic idol and magical ring that play a crucial role in the action are in fact animated by jinn<sup>82</sup> (entities that are repeatedly cited in the Quran and fully recognised by nearly all currents of Islamic thought). Almamy, in his youth, killed an animal ('The Master of the Waters') sacred to the non-Muslim Bamana-speakers among whom he resided. However, he fell ill and was severely reprimanded by his teacher, who engaged in intense prayer in order to save him.<sup>83</sup> Almamy's biography provides many examples of the powers of both good (Muslim) and evil (non-Muslim) jinn.<sup>84</sup>

Amadou Jomworo Bary, whose description of the ceremonies held at the emblematic well and lake of San conveys a sense of wondering admiration, contests neither the holding of the rituals nor the prohibition on approaching the well that affects Fulbe like himself. In the present state of knowledge, this text (I) is perhaps a unique example of an *'ajamī* composition that memorialises customs other than those of the author's home region.

Rites involving wells, ponds and other bodies of water are particularly characteristic of the Bwa, who constitute a significant proportion of the population of south-eastern Mali (as well as adjoining regions of Burkina Faso) and control some of the oldest villages in the San area (including Parana and Terekungo, both

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**81** Commentary on S. 55, v. 35: '[...] we should know that idols can neither aid us nor harm us in the hereafter. [...] They have no happiness there, they will never again have any power over us. [...] The idols that you worshipped, those of stone and those of wood, you will find them crushed down in hell.' (Tamari forthcoming.)

**82** See Tamari 2013b, 230–233, 240, 245–246.

**83** See Yattara/Salvaing 2000, 224–227, 406–407.

**84** *Ibid.*, 243–248, 340–351.



of which participate in the annual ceremonies).<sup>85</sup> However, annual fishing rites (towards the end of the hot, dry season, and just before the rains) may take place wherever there are suitable permanent lakes – including Bamba (in the Dogon country, administrative Region of Mopti), near Dia in the Masina, and in the Maninka country of northern Guinea. While these rites often involve invocations addressed to non-Islamic entities, they may become islamised through the enunciation of Islamic blessing formulae (as is the case in Dia) or secularised – the occasion for a variety of folkloric and artistic manifestations – as is currently the case in San.<sup>86</sup> Since 2009, the annual San fishing and water rites have been included in UNESCO’s listing of humanity’s ‘intangible cultural heritage’.<sup>87</sup>

While the Masina where Amadou Jomworo Bary grew up is often thought of as a region that has been highly islamised since Shaykhou Amadou’s jihad in the early nineteenth century, and the San area as including, until recently, only pockets of Muslims (in the city and a few other settlements), the situation is actually more complex. The Masina (and adjacent regions, as depicted in Almamy’s autobiography) have included large numbers of Bamana-speakers faithful to the ‘traditional’ religions well into the twentieth century. While some lineages in San and its area claim to have been Muslim for hundreds of years, and the Tera, with the title of *alimami*, ruled San from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century, many other lineages (including some established in the city) only converted to Islam (or in some instances Christianity) in the course of the twentieth century (or are converting now). In other words, Amadou Jomworo Bary probably experienced in the San area, a situation analogous to that with which he was already familiar from the Masina – characterised by the imbrication and often but not always peaceful coexistence of Muslim and non-Muslim lineages and communities. While many or most Bamana-speaking ‘Marka’, as well as the Fulbe, would have been at least nominally Muslim, the Bamana, Minianka and Bwa would

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**85** Studies of the San fishing rites include several unpublished student papers and magazine articles: Bamoussa/Dakouo 1978, Tienro 1985, Samaké 1987, Doumbia 1995, Koïta 1998. There is also a website, maintained by the ‘Alliance Dofera ni Banabako de San’ in cooperation with the Traoré family: [www.festivalsanke.fr.gd](http://www.festivalsanke.fr.gd) (last consulted 26.09.2016). Kamaté 2011 is a vast study of water rites among the Bwa, while Kamaté 2016 more specifically concerns the San fishing rites. Other studies of water rites include Diarra 1976 and Kamaté 1983, and (with respect to Burkina) Werthmann 2014.

**86** Comments based on my field observations in Dia (in 2004, 2008) and in northern Guinea (2005).

**87** See the article ‘Sanké mon, collective fishing rite of the Sanké’ on [www.unesco.org./culture/ich](http://www.unesco.org./culture/ich). (last accessed on 23/09/2016).

have been almost exclusively non-Muslim. The emergence of a ‘neo-traditionalist’ religious movement, among Minianka-speakers in the San area, in the 1940s and 1950s<sup>88</sup> attests to the vitality of local religions.

The distinction between the Tera *moriw* or ‘marabouts’ and the Traore, which text I presents as the earliest inhabitants of San (l. 18, *dugulenw*), is of a type with the hereditary distinction between ‘scholarly’ or ‘Old Muslim’ *mori* and ‘warrior’ lineages (designated as *soninke* or *tuntigi*, depending on the region) which is especially characteristic of southern Manding-speaking societies. The *mori* observe Islamic ritual and legal prescriptions with a certain rigour, whereas members of the second category were, through the earlier twentieth century, either lax Muslims or non-Muslims.<sup>89</sup>

The term *tulonke*, used in Text I, is of particular interest. Although in everyday discourse, this compound word (from *tulon*, ‘play, amusement’ and *ke*, ‘to do’) most frequently refers to children’s playing or to sports activities, it is also systematically used by non-Muslims (and syncretic Muslims) to refer to religious ceremonies – perhaps, especially, ones which have a theatrical or ‘show’ component. Does this usage imply that these Bamana-speakers perceive a fundamental distinction between ritual, and other, more banal, types of action? While in the present instance I have rendered *tulonke* by ‘games’, the translation ‘ceremonies’ is at least equally appropriate.<sup>90</sup>

All five texts are admirably composed, packing considerable content into a concise compass. All five have an initial sentence that clearly indicates their topic, and four (all except III) may be considered to have a title – either set apart (text I) or included within the first line. Each also has a clear narrative structure – progressively describing several distinct but related ceremonies (I), presenting a reasoned theological argument (III), or describing – in chronological order – the different steps of a recommended process. Although the vocabulary is restricted and fairly repetitive, it is somehow expressive – perhaps because there is no redundancy of content (with the sole exception of one brief statement, expressed both in Arabic and Manding – V.16–17) – and no banal statements (with the possible exception of I. 23).

<sup>88</sup> See especially Cardaire 1954, 35–46, Royer 1999, Mann 2003.

<sup>89</sup> See, e.g., Launay 1992, 9–76; Weil 1998. In 1994, based on Almamy’s statement that ‘Tera’ and ‘Traoré’ were alternative pronunciations of the same name, I identified the two groups. This major error must now be corrected. The genealogies and familial lore of the Tera are retraced in an important new book (Thera 2013). Concerning the interpretation of the ‘Marka’ social category, see e.g. Gallais 1984, 143–171, as well as – with greater attention to the San area – the above-cited articles by Pageard (1961a, 1961b).

<sup>90</sup> The choice made in my initial French translation (1994, 118–119).

## 8 Comparisons and historical inferences

Comparison to other known ‘*ajamī*-s shows that, in terms of phonological representation, this is one of the fullest and most successful devised on the African continent (and perhaps beyond). It also suggests some historical links to other West African ‘*ajamī*-s.

The present system is one of only two Mande ‘*ajamī*-s known to represent five distinct vowels, the other being that of the Mogofin of Guinea (whose islamisation, and associated adoption of an ‘*ajamī*, has been hypothesised to have taken place in the twentieth century).<sup>91</sup> In addition to the standard Arabic diacritics denoting *a*, *i*, and *u*, each of these ‘*ajamī*-s possesses two special signs, respectively denoting *e*, *ε* and *o*, *ɔ*. A recent Mandinka document from Casamance, Senegal, makes only occasional use of a special sign for *o*, and does not have a special sign for *e*.<sup>92</sup>

It would appear that only a minority of Manding ‘*ajamī* documents possess a special sign to denote *e*. W.T. Hamlyn (1934), describing the writing practices of the Mandinka of the Gambia, states (102–103) that *e* was variously indicated by *fathā* or *kasra*, while ‘short *e*’ could be indicated by *sukūn* (which also served to indicate a vowel-less consonant) and ‘long *e*’ by three pyramidally arranged dots. R.T. Addis (1963) states that a dot under the line (which I identify with the *imāla* dot, see more below) was exceptionally used for *e*, but that the use of *kasra*, to designate both *i* and *e*, was more usual; he adds that the dot in question ‘is more common in Wolof’ (p. 9). In the ‘Pakao book’, composed by Mandinka in Casamance, Senegal, c. 1843, *sukūn* is used in certain phonological contexts to denote either *e* or *i*.<sup>93</sup> In the ‘Ta:rikh Mandinka’, a historical document of the Mandinka of Guinea-Bissau, *kasra* is generally used to denote both *i* and *e*, while *sukūn* is used to denote elided *i* and *u*. However, the association of a *kasra* with one of the emphatic Arabic consonants ط *ṭā*, ṭ, ص *ṣād*, ṣ, ض *ḍād*, ḍ (this last often pronounced *l* in West Africa) is used in order to denote *e*; *kasra* after one of the corresponding non-emphatic consonants denotes *i*. Thus, this manner of graph-

<sup>91</sup> Vydrine 1998, 19–21, 2014, 207–208. See N’Daou 1999 for historical background information concerning this group.

<sup>92</sup> Composed in Casamance, Senegal, in 1968; see Sharawy 2005, 453–471. The sign for *o* appears to have originated among the Fulbe of Futa Jalon, see more below. Sharawy also presents documents, both reprinted and hitherto unpublished, concerning several of the other languages discussed here.

<sup>93</sup> Schaffer 1975, 2003, 1–15; Vydrine 1998, 4–15, 46–62, 2014, 215.

ically distinguishing between *i* and *e* is operative in certain restricted phonological contexts only.<sup>94</sup> Louis-Gustave Binger (1886), describing the writing practices of the great merchants of Bamako, Maurice Delafosse (1904), summarising his observations in the northern Ivory Coast, and Coleman Donaldson (2013), describing Jula medical texts he had recently viewed in Bobo-Dioulasso (Burkina Faso), mention the three basic Arabic vowels only.<sup>95</sup>

In contrast, the use of a dot below the line to denote *e* is attested in Fulfulde writings from Futa Jalon (Guinea), Futa Toro (Senegal), northern Nigeria and the Adamawa plateau of Northern Cameroon, Wolof, Hausa, and Old Kanembu.<sup>96</sup> In view of this widespread distribution, it can hardly be doubted that this sign has its source in the *imāla* dot – indicating a *fathā* that is contextually pronounced as *e* – of the Warsh canonical Quranic ‘reading’ system long dominant in the Maghreb and West Africa.<sup>97</sup> This hypothesis is further confirmed by the designations

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**94** Giesing/Vydrine 2007. It is regrettable that only two pages from the original manuscripts are reproduced. The authors’ Arabic typescript (presented in columns parallel to a transcription and a French translation) can in no way substitute for the original documents, whose publication would greatly enhance the value of this ground-breaking work.

**95** Binger 1886, 31–35; Delafosse 1904, 260–261; Donaldson 2013, 29.

**96** See Sow 1971, 202–169 for the photographic reproduction of a manuscript copied in 1935, and the discussion of its dating, 22; BnF Arabic ms. 6851 – Fulfulde marginal annotations to the Arabic text of this late nineteenth century manuscript (in course of detailed study by the present writer); Seydou 2008 – image on cover, reproduced from a Futa Jalon manuscript; Futa Toro: Delafosse/Gaden 1913, 7, 9 (comments on cited Fulfulde words within two late nineteenth-century Arabic manuscripts); Gaden 1935, x: analysis of the writing system of two copies, made before 1930, of a Fulfulde manuscript composed near Segou (Mali) over a nearly thirty-year period, by a Futa Toro author (d. 1911) who had been to Futa Jalon; northern Nigeria: Taylor 1929, 19, 26–31; Adamawa region, Northern Cameroon: Lacroix 1965, vol. 1, 371; Wolof: Addis 1963, Ngom 2010, 16–17, who however states that most of the Wolof ‘*ajami*’ texts he has examined use the three standard Arabic vowel signs only; Hausa: Migeod 1913, 252–253 (the information about Manding is entirely derived from Delafosse 1904); Taylor *ibid.*; Skinner 1968, 104; Piłasciewicz 2000, 43–44, describing the writing system employed by the great Kano-born scholar al-Haji Umaru (c. 1858–1934); Old Kanembu and Tarjumo (its recent, equally scholastic descendant): Bondarev 2014, 114–117. However, an early twentieth-century Hausa manuscript from Ghana (Piłasciewicz 1992, 25; the transliterated and translated manuscript is also reproduced in facsimile) uses only the three basic Arabic vowel marks, and the same also seems to be true of the manuscripts presented by Charles Robinson (1896, 1925).

**97** *Warsh*, so named for an early transmitter, is a variant of one of the seven canonical ‘readings’ (*qirā’āt*, i.e. systems of oral recitation) that came to be accepted in the Islamic world. Concerning these readings, see e.g. Leemhuis 2004.

– *yamala*, *yamalere*, *yamalāra* or *yamla* – attributed to it in certain Fulbe and Hausa milieux.<sup>98</sup>

Given its widespread use, it is likely that the author of the San texts was already familiar with this application of the *imāla* dot from Fulfulde writings circulating in the Masina; though it is also conceivable that he personally had recourse to the sign he was familiar with from his Quranic studies. One can understand that West Africans eagerly embraced this sign, which allowed them to better render the vocalic richness of their native languages.

On the other hand, only a few West African ‘*ajamī*-s have a specific sign for *o*. Several Futa Jalon or Futa Jalon-related texts use a *ḍamma* with a small dot inserted (◌̣).<sup>99</sup> Gaden states that some Futa Toro writers make use of this sign, but more usually, employ unmodified *ḍamma* for both *u* and *o*.<sup>100</sup> Some other Futa Toro manuscripts use *ḍamma* accompanied by three dots to indicate an *o* sign, three superposed dots (◌̣̣̣) being the sign generally used, in this region, to indicate that the pronunciation of a grapheme differs from its usual Arabic value.<sup>101</sup> Most Wolof manuscripts make no special provision for *o*, but a few use a *ḍamma* with a small dot inserted<sup>102</sup> – the sign employed in many Fulfulde manuscripts. The recent Mogofin writing also uses this sign<sup>103</sup>, presumably borrowed from Fulfulde. Materials on Hausa do not mention a special sign to specify *o*. Only one Fulbe scholar from Adamawa – in what appears to be an idiosyncratic usage – employed the same sign as the San writer, i.e. an inverted *ḍamma*, to indicate *o*; other Adamawa scholars did not differentiate between *u* and *o* in their writing.<sup>104</sup> Two Old Kanembu manuscripts use a complex digraph, associating preceding *ḍamma*, *wāw* and *alif* surmounted by *sukūn* to represent final *o*; in all other contexts, as well as in other manuscripts, both *u* and *o* are represented by *ḍamma*.<sup>105</sup>

**98** Sources: Hausa: *yamala* – Taylor 1929, 26; Fulfulde *yamalāre* and *yamalere*: Taylor *ibid.*; Fulfulde *yamla*: Mohamadou 1995–1996.

**99** Sow 1971, 1966, unnumbered photographic plates inserted between pp. 12–13; Seydou 2008, book cover; BnF Arabic ms. 6851.

**100** Gaden 1935.

**101** Delafosse/Gaden 1913, 7–12.

**102** Ngom 2010, 16–17.

**103** Vydrine 1998, 20–21.

**104** Lacroix 1965, vol. 1, 371–372. This sign also happens to be identical to that used by the minority of Swahili scribes who distinguish *o* from *u* (see Allen 1945, 10); but in this instance, the analogy is almost certainly due to a convergence of reasoning rather than historical influence. The same writers use a small vertical stroke below the letter to represent *e*. Swahili ‘*ajamī*-s successfully represent its different consonants (by adding dots), but usually only three vowels.

**105** Bondarev 2014, 114–117.

It therefore appears likely – pending a fuller investigation of Fulfulde documents from the Masina – that the San writer may have personally devised his representation of this vowel; though he may have been familiar with other graphs for representing this same sound.

Though it has been suggested that certain sign combinations in the San texts denote  $\epsilon$ , it is more likely that they are calligraphic artefacts.<sup>106</sup>

As with all West African ‘*ajamī*-s, the San author uses the Arabic letters of prolongation (*ḥurūf al-madd*: *alif*, *wāw*, and *yā*’) to represent long vowels. As with other Manding ‘*ajamī*-s, he is not completely consistent in representing vocalic length.<sup>107</sup> Some ‘*ajamī*’ writers, but not the San author, attach isolated vowels to ‘*ayn*’ rather than *alif*.<sup>108</sup>

While it is thus apparent that the San author’s vocalic notation system constitutes a distinct improvement on virtually all the other West African systems that have come to light so far – noting five rather than four or just three vowels – one may well ask ‘Why only five rather than all seven Bamana vowels?’ Perhaps the author was influenced, in this respect, by his native Fulfulde, which distinguishes only five phonological vowels, as well as by written French – which also distinguishes five basic vowels.

The San author is also more successful than most West African ‘*ajamī*’ writers in representing the consonants specific to his language.

Thus, W.T. Hamlyn noted in 1934 (102–104) that the Mandinka of the Gambia used a *yā*’ surmounted by three dots (or sometimes only one dot) to denote *n*, and that this sign was borrowed from the Wolof. The ‘Ta:rikh Mandinka’ from Guinea-Bissau either uses a character based on a combination of *nūn* and *yā*’, or simply a *nūn*, thus not graphically differentiating between *n* and *j*.<sup>109</sup> Alfâ Ibrâhîm Sow mentions that the oldest Futa Jalon manuscripts render *n*, as well as *c*, *j*, and several other characters by ج *jîm*, *j*;<sup>110</sup> the same is true of the famous *qaṣīda* from Futa Toro.<sup>111</sup> The Futa Toro chronicler (or his copyists) used both *jîm* and *yā*’, surmounted by three dots, to render *n*; moreover, the former character additionally served to represent several other non-Arabic sounds.<sup>112</sup> The Fulfulde of northern Nigeria may use either *jîm* or add an extra dot to this letter.<sup>113</sup> In manuscripts from

**106** See above, p. 219.

**107** See, for example, Vydrine 1998, 9–11.

**108** Hamlyn 1935, 105, Addis 1963, 10.

**109** Giesing/Vydrine 2007, 24.

**110** Sow 1971, 22–23.

**111** Gaden 1935, 9–10.

**112** Delafosse/Gaden 1913, 7–8, 11–12.

**113** Taylor 1929, 35.

Adamawa, *n* may be variously represented by a *jīm*, a *yā'*, or a *nūn* followed by a *yā'*; as will have been remarked, each of these signs also has other values.<sup>114</sup> Wolof uses either *jīm*, or *jīm* surmounted by three dots.<sup>115</sup>

*η*, which the San author represents, in its single occurrence, as a Maghrebi *qāf* with an extra dot, is represented by Senegambian writers as a *nūn* (thus not distinguishing it from *n*) – except in word-final position, where they regularly indicate it by *tanwīn*.<sup>116</sup> The oldest Futa Jalon manuscripts denote this, as well as *g* and several other sounds, by *qāf* (written, Maghrebi-style, with one dot above). The Futa Toro manuscripts may use either this, or *qāf* surmounted by three dots, to represent *g*, *η*, or *n*; additionally, they use *kāf* surmounted by three dots, with the same significations.<sup>117</sup> However, in the Adamawa, *ġ ghayn*, *gh* is used to denote *g*, *η* and *n*.<sup>118</sup> Wolof uses either *ghayn*, *ghayn* with three dots, or *kāf* with three dots; however, the first and last signs may also indicate *g*.<sup>119</sup>

The San writer consistently denotes *g* by dotting *kāf* *ك̣*. In contrast, the Mandinka writers of the Gambia have used *kāf* to represent both *k* and *g*, while Jula writers from the northern Ivory Coast used either *qāf* or *ghayn* (each of which represented several other sounds as well).<sup>120</sup> Jula manuscripts examined in Bobo-Dioulasso use either *kāf* or *qāf*, apparently for *k* as well as *g*.<sup>121</sup> Older Fulfulde manuscripts from Futa Jalon represented *g* as well as several other sounds by *qāf*; the Futa Toro writers used either a simple *qāf*, or else *kāf* or *qāf* surmounted by three dots (all of which may also stand for other sounds); whereas the Adamawa writers use *ghayn* for this and several other sounds.<sup>122</sup> The Fulfulde and Hausa of northern Nigeria use *ghayn*.<sup>123</sup> Transliterated African words, cited within the Arabic text of the manuscripts edited under the title of *Ta'rikh al-Fattāsh*, use *kāf* surmounted by three dots as well as *qāf* and *ghayn*.<sup>124</sup> The San writer's grapheme is comparable to the Persian *ک̣*, also representing *g*; the Persian character adds a stroke to the basic Arabic character whereas the San author adds a dot.

114 Lacroix 1965, vol. 1, 372.

115 Ngom 2010, 14.

116 Hamlyn 1935, 102; Schaffer 1975; Giesing/Vydrin 2007, 24–25.

117 Sow 1971, 22–23; Delafosse/Gaden 1913, 7–8, 11–12; Gaden 1935, 9–10.

118 Lacroix 1965, vol. 1, 372.

119 Ngom 2010, 13–15.

120 Addis 1963, 5, 8; Delafosse 1904, 260.

121 Donaldson 2013, 29.

122 Sow 1971, 22; Delafosse/Gaden 1913, 10–12; Gaden 1935; Lacroix 1965, vol. 1, 372.

123 Migeod 1913, 252; Taylor 1929, 24–25, 43.

124 'Introduction' xv–xvi; there are numerous examples of this special character in Houdas/Delafosse 1981 (first ed.: 1913), for example on pp. 68, 215.

/c/ is the one consonant for which the San writer did not find an unequivocal representation, using ت *tā*, *t*, also employed for the frequent Bamana phoneme /t/. The ‘Ta:rikk Mandinka’ manuscripts from Guinea-Bissau are said to use the same character for *c* and *n*.<sup>125</sup> Older Fulfulde manuscripts ambiguously use *jīm* to represent this as well as *j*, *n*, and several other sounds. Futa Toro manuscripts may in addition use ش *shīn*, *sh* – perhaps the regular practice in some Adamawa manuscripts.<sup>126</sup> Wolof manuscripts use either *jīm* or *jīm* surmounted by three dots – each of which also has several other values.<sup>127</sup> Hausa may use ث *tha*, *th*.<sup>128</sup>

Whereas the San writer systematically uses *jīm* to note *j*, many other ‘*ajamī*’ writers prefer ځ *dhāl*, *dh*, or use both concurrently.<sup>129</sup> The Bobo-Dioulasso manuscripts, which systematically employ *jīm* for *c*, correlatively employ *dhāl* for *j*.<sup>130</sup>

Unlike many other West African ‘*ajamī*’ writers, the San author does not alternately use two or more Arabic letters to represent a single African consonant sound. As demonstrated above, whenever he provides two (or more rarely three) alternative spellings for a given word, this corresponds to observable pronunciation variants.

All the consonants employed by the San author in writing Bamana also exist in Fulfulde (which, furthermore, has several additional consonant phonemes).

As indicated above, the San writer does not indicate tone. Old Kanembu is, as far as is known, the only African ‘*ajamī*’ to indicate tone, in certain consonantal contexts only.<sup>131</sup> On the other hand, the N’ko writing system devised by Souleymane Kanté in the 1940s, initially for the Maninka of northern Guinea, does provide an adequate representation of tone (equivalent to or better than that of most current Latin-based transcriptions).<sup>132</sup>

Alfā Ibrāhīm Sow states that an orthographic ‘reform’ took place in the Futa Jalon in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and implies that further efforts at refinement were pursued well into the twentieth century.<sup>133</sup> On the basis of an

<sup>125</sup> Giesing/Vydrine 2007, 24, Vydrin 2014, 210.

<sup>126</sup> Sow 1971, 22; Delafosse/Gaden 1913, 12; Lacroix 1965, vol. 1, 372.

<sup>127</sup> Ngom 2010, 15.

<sup>128</sup> Migeod 1913, 251; Skinner 1968, 101.

<sup>129</sup> Jula of northern Ivory Coast: Delafosse 1904, 260; Mandinka of Guinea-Bissau: Giesing/Vydrine 2007, 24; Fulfulde of Futa Toro: Delafosse/Gaden 1913, 11.

<sup>130</sup> Donaldson 2013, 29.

<sup>131</sup> Bondarev 2014, 214–217.

<sup>132</sup> Concerning the social and historical background of the N’ko movement, see especially Amelle 2001; Oyler 2005. For the practical notation of tones, see the various manuals published by the N’ko organisation.

<sup>133</sup> Sow 1971, 22–23.



examination of manuscript colophons, as well as authors' biographies, David Robinson has argued that followers of al-Hajj Umar became acquainted with Fulfulde *'ajamī* in Futa Jalon, whence they brought it to Segou, the Masina and Futa Toro.<sup>134</sup> Shared features of Fulfulde and Wolof *'ajamī*-s suggest that the former has significantly influenced the latter.

It is thus clear that the San writer's orthography is superior, at least in phonological terms, to the other Manding, as well as to the Wolof, Fulfulde and Hausa *'ajamī*-s described so far – though the two latter are associated with substantial literatures. In terms of vocalic representation, it may also be superior to Persian, Ottoman Turkish and Swahili, which do not regularly represent either *e* or *o* (though both exist in these languages). The fact that these cultures refer to Quranic 'readings' that do not recognise the *e* sound may explain why they do not have a special sign for this phoneme. The Persian گ *g* may be the source of the Swahili character with the same shape and value.

Paradoxically, then, the apparently isolated (as far as current knowledge goes) texts from San present in certain respects a better writing system than several great, centuries-old literatures. This surely reflects the author's perspicacity, but probably also a familiarity with Fulfulde *'ajamī* and with written French.

## 9 Summary

Amadou Jomworo Bary, the author of the five San texts, was a traditionally-trained itinerant Fulbe scholar from the village of Penga in the Masina (Mali) who lived c. 1890–1960; he assumed significant social responsibilities as a teacher and as chief of Penga, and had at least some contacts with the French administration. Two of the five texts that have come down to us express what he believed were some of the most fundamental points in Muslim belief and practice. All the texts demonstrate his deep conviction as to the omnipotence and omniscience of the One Sovereign Lord, in conformity with Asharite theology. Although Amadou Jomworo Bary undertook missionising tours among non-Muslims in the San area, and several of the texts appear to have been written with proselytising or pedagogical intent, he apparently perceived no contradiction between the rituals held at San's sacred well and lake and his own Muslim belief. His remedies, which involve the use of plant and animal substances as well as the recitation of set formulas, fall well within the sphere of Malian Maliki belief and practice.

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<sup>134</sup> Robinson 1982, 252–255; see also Kane/Robinson 1994, 385–387.

Given that Fulfulde *‘ajamī* is now known to have been used in the Masina (possibly introduced or reinforced by persons who had been to Futa Jalon), it is likely that this was a major factor inspiring him to compose these Bamana texts. His writing system successfully represents five of Bamana’s seven vowels (*a, e, i, o, u* – but does not make a distinction between *e* and *ɛ, o* and *ɔ*), and three of the four characteristic Bamana consonants (shared, moreover, with Fulfulde) that appear in these texts: *ɲ, ŋ* and *g*, but not *c*.<sup>135</sup> His system thus appears to be, phonologically, one of the most accurate *‘ajamī*-s used or devised by traditionally-trained Muslim scholars to have come to light so far in West Africa. Nevertheless, there are some ambiguous passages, primarily due to inconsistencies in the notation of vocalic length and in punctuation, and the absence of any notation for tone. Amadou Jomworo Bary was probably familiar, from *‘ajamī* writings circulating in the Masina, with the *imāla* dot representing *e*. Research is required on the Fulfulde *‘ajamī* of the Masina in order to ascertain the extent to which Amadou Jomworo Bary may have adopted existing characters and/or devised new ones. It is likely that his awareness of French writing practices contributed significantly to his success in representing Bamana.

Perhaps a desire to have documents – meant as records or aids? – in the very same language he was using in preaching and healing, explains his decision to write in Bamana in preference to the other languages available to him, including his native Fulfulde.

Comparison to other West African *‘ajamī*-s makes apparent just how understudied the subject of *‘ajamī* orthography is, and how sketchy the information available. It also suggests that most West African *‘ajamī* writers hesitated to introduce new characters to note sounds specific to their own languages – perhaps out of reverence for Arabic writing.

The process of researching and analysing these texts, which in my case now extends over twenty years, makes apparent the importance of fieldwork and a knowledge of the cultural context for understanding and interpretation. While comments by any one informant may sometimes be misleading, many issues can be resolved through further fieldwork. The crucial importance of fieldwork will become even more apparent in the critique of some alternative interpretations of these texts, presented as an appendix.

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**135** *P* is the sole (and quite rare) Bamana consonantal phoneme not to appear in these texts; Fulfulde has only five vowels, but several additional consonants.

## 10 Appendix: A critique of Vydrin and Dumestre's analyses

The study recently published by Valentin Vydrin and Gérard Dumestre (2014) of these same texts is marred by a surprising number of misreadings as well as an inadequate analysis of the graphic system employed. The high reputation of these two scholars, as well as their bizarre omission of any mention of my work published twenty years earlier – and of the transliteration and translation I personally provided Dumestre, at his request, in 1989 – obliges me to discuss the points of divergence in some detail.

### 10.1 Writing system

With respect to the systematic overview of the graphic system provided on pp. 245-246, it is necessary to make the following remarks.

The two authors did not realise (240, 246) that the character ڨ (identical to an Oriental *qāf*; III.15) represented *ŋ* (or possibly *ng*), and instead assumed that it represented *g* – though this sound is systematically noted, elsewhere in these texts, by a *kāf* surmounted by a dot.<sup>136</sup>

The ‘*ayn* the authors think they see in II.15, ‘with its meaning remaining unclear’ (237, 246), is in fact a *hamza* written on the line, preceding the *alif* to which it is associated. This *hamza* is a common feature of West African calligraphy, ultimately deriving from early Maghrebi models. The authors’ error is particularly surprising, given that *āmīn* (‘Amen’) is one of the most basic elements of the Islamic religious vocabulary.

The authors assume (245) that *z* ‘is used representing *j*’. While it is indeed true that *jaga* and *jaka* are the most common Bamana pronunciations of the term designating Islamic alms, scholars (and some others) often pronounce *zaka*. Surely, it is this scholarly pronunciation that the writer wished to represent.

The authors believe they see (239, 244, 246) a *yā*’ with three subscript dots in III.8 and in V.15. As regards the first case, a likely explanation is that the writer (or copyist) has attached two vowels – *ḍamma* as well as the dot representing *e* – to the same consonant ductus; one could then read this script unit (as proposed above) *yeḥumawnyē*, ... *ye* ... *numanw* ... *ye* (*ye...ye* being a formula expressing the

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<sup>136</sup> The table on 245 has a Maghrebi rather than an Oriental *qāf*. This is, presumably, a typographical error.

identity of two terms). In the second case, it is likely that the dot of the initial *nūn* (here figuring, in my view, as a constitutive unit of the composite grapheme representing *n*) was erroneously placed below rather than on top of *nūn* (probably by the copyist rather than the original writer). In West African calligraphies, *nūn* is generally provided with a dot in initial and medial positions; but it is often (and in some texts and regions, systematically) omitted in word-final position. The inconsistency with which *nūn* is dotted (or not) may well reflect the influence that Almamy's extensive perusal of both manuscripts and printed books had on his calligraphy. As far as I can tell on visual grounds, the letter in III.8 is provided with a superscript dot. The fact that both these recurrent terms are spelled – in immediate proximity and elsewhere in these texts – using the letter that Vydrin, Dumestre and I all recognise as representing *n*, strongly suggests that the issues here relate to practical calligraphy rather than to the graphic representation of phonemes.

The authors claim (235, 245-246) that in I.22, *yā'* represents *n*. However, the term generally spelled *siyen* or *siɲɛ*, in Mali's official orthography, is sometimes pronounced without medial nasalisation (as the first-mentioned spelling, in fact, implies). It is likely that the writer wished to represent this pronunciation, rather than the strongly nasalised pronunciation noted elsewhere in these five texts. Of course, it is also possible that the writer or copyist merely forgot to mark the *nūn*.

These errors lead Vydrin and Dumestre to consider that the San author's writing system is far less coherent than it actually is. Whereas I noted that a single sign is used to represent both /t/ and /c/ (a point also made by Vydrin and Dumestre), they additionally posit that /j/ and /g/ are each represented by two different characters, while *n* is represented by three different characters.

## 10.2 Arabic and Arabic-derived vocabulary

The two authors fail to identify the two Arabic words, used for their Arabic meaning values, present in the text:

- *ay* (I.12), 'that is' (a particle employed primarily or exclusively in the written language, and a perfect synonym of the homophonous i.e., *id est*);
- *tammāt* (V.18), 'the end' (very literally, 'it is over'; 3<sup>rd</sup> person fem. sing. perfective form of the verbal root *tmm*).

These terms, which Vydrin and Dumestre signal by question marks in their transcriptions, are left untranslated. Furthermore, the second script unit is transliterated *tt*, as the authors did not notice the medial *mīm*. (See 233 and 244.)

Moreover, the two linguists treat deviations from Arabic spelling, in Bamana words of Arabic etymology, as a failure, perhaps due to ignorance: ‘The author of these texts makes an effort to maintain the original orthography in Arabic loanwords, although he does not always succeed [...]’ (248). They then advance an alternative hypothesis: ‘In any case, the author writes Arabic loanwords which have undergone phonological changes following Bamana Ajami orthographic tradition...’ (ibid.). Perhaps they mean ‘phonological changes in the course of adaptation and integration to Bamana speech’; pending the discovery and analysis of additional texts, one can hardly speak of a ‘Bamana Ajami orthographic tradition’.

They do not seem to recognise that, in general, the San author strove to write Bamana words, including those of Arabic etymology, in accordance with what he perceived to be their usual, to some degree contextually variable, pronunciations; but that with respect to certain key elements of religious vocabulary – signalled by the use of consonants appropriate to Arabic only – he wished to indicate a specifically scholarly pronunciation.

### 10.3 Transcriptions and translations

The inaccurate interpretation of the alphabetic signs employed in the manuscripts inevitably results in several misreadings. Additional misreadings are due to insufficient familiarity with certain cultural domains. For reasons of space, only the most obvious and egregious examples can be listed here.

In III.15, the misinterpretation of  $\eta$  as  $g$  has led the authors to read the word in which it occurs as *kɔgɔra*, ‘to have reached maturity’. In an attempt to confer some plausibility to this reading, the second-last letter of the word, which had been correctly transliterated as *nūn*, *n*, is transcribed as *rā*, *r* (240). (The last syllable of the word corresponds to the perfective ending *-ra/la/na*, the consonant sound being conditioned by the previous syllable; *-na* occurs in nasal contexts only.) I read this word as *koŋonā*, *kɔŋɔna*, ‘to have gone hungry’.

This choice of reading also leads the authors to misinterpret a following word. *Fāra* is taken to mean *faara*, ‘killed’ (usually written *fagara* in the official orthography, which privileges the longest form; verbal root: *faga*), rather than *fara* (verbal root: *fa*, ‘to be satiated’) – even though the following sentences concern various bodily states (standing, sitting, sleeping).

In I.14 and 15, *tāyā*, *caya*, ‘to increase’, is read as *taa na*, to ‘advance’ or ‘get ahead’ (234). Although the authors correctly note (in Table 1) that *tā*, *t* serves to

denote both /t/ and /c/, they fail to recognise the latter value here. This furthermore leads them to arbitrarily transcribe as *ɲ* the character which they had correctly transliterated as *y*.

The authors also experience difficulties in the lexical interpretation of items that are acceptably transliterated and transcribed. Thus, in IV.4, the authors (241) misunderstand a key term relating to the natural environment. Implicitly interpreting *gōkun* as a compound word, they transcribe it as *gōkun*, and hesitate between identifying it with the beans of the plant that Charles Bailleul – by far the foremost lexical authority on Bamana – transcribes as *ngɔ* (furthermore defining it as a variety of *Canavalia ensiformis*), and *nkokun*, ‘head of a species of locust’. In fact, the reference is clearly to the water lily (*Nymphaea lotus*, and perhaps one or more other, closely related species), whose Bamana designation Bailleul spells *nkɔku*, and whose pods constitute a major, and highly appreciated, source of food in many regions of Mali.<sup>137</sup> Although the beans of the creeper *ngɔ* are widely used for decorative purposes, in divination and as good-luck charms (as noted by Bailleul and confirmed by my fieldwork), the variety found in Mali is never used as a nutrient and may in fact be poisonous.<sup>138</sup>

It is the religious vocabulary, however, that poses the greatest challenge to the two authors – despite the fact that – with a single exception – these texts use only those terms familiar to most contemporary, Bamana-speaking Muslims (as distinct from the highly complex, technical lexicon specific to scholars).<sup>139</sup>

These problems are especially marked with respect to text III (238–240), an exposition of the elements of Muslim religious doctrine.

Line 1. As noted above, *ṣalīla*, *salīla*, the perfective form of the verb generally pronounced *ɔli* in contemporary Bamana, is borrowed from the Arabic *ṣallā* (root *ṣlw*), referring to the practice of pronouncing the blessing upon the Prophet, *ṣallā Allāhu ‘alayhi wa-sallama*. Vydrin and Dumestre translate it by ‘greeting’. This

**137** This plant is cited by Pierre Garnier (1976, 23, 37; 1986, 188), who also mentions that it is used as food.

**138** The lexical items *ngɔ*, *nko* (‘variété de criquet’) and *nkɔku* are discussed in Bailleul 2007, 324, 332, 333 respectively. With reference to a human or animal body, *kun* usually designates the head, but in some other contexts, and especially in composition, it may mean ‘unit’ (cf. Bailleul 252). These various terms are also mentioned in Dumestre’s dictionary 2011, 587–588, 749, 763. Thoyer-Rozat 1979, 129, 131 does, however, mention that a decoction of the leaves of the *ngɔ* plant may be used as a remedy for headache. Berhaut 1976, vol. 5, 80–82 mentions that in Senegal, the macerated leaves are used as a cure for oedema. He also states that the unripe beans – more especially the white ones – may be eaten, but that the ripe ones are poisonous.

**139** This vocabulary has been studied by the present writer, most recently in 2013a. The exception referred to here is *iḥsān / jumanya* (see above, 232).

also leads our authors to interpret the term transliterated *an* as *ani*, ‘and’ (whereas the intended meaning, in my opinion, is, as spelled, *an*, ‘our’).

Line 2. *hine ni kisi b’a kan* is (as seen above) the Bamana formula corresponding to the Arabic one calling God’s blessings upon His ultimate Messenger, Muhammad; this phrase is misleadingly and blasphemously (from an Islamic perspective) translated as ‘Muhammad, he is merciful and he is the Saviour’.

Line 3. The authors acknowledge that they do not understand the syntax, and fail to recognise the term *tijebato* – ‘true worship, true faith’. Correlatively, they misinterpret the verbal sequence *ma ke*, ‘has not’, as the compound term *make* (male lord).<sup>140</sup> The term *samasen* (l. 3), referring to the ‘pillars’ of Islam – as well as to pillars or other supporting elements in architecture – is inaccurately and inelegantly rendered by ‘buttresses’.<sup>141</sup>

Line 4. As a correlate of their previous choices, and because they furthermore did not recognise the presence, in this line, of the sequence *fo ni ... ye* (a standard Bamana formula expressing exception), the authors interpret *fo* to mean ‘say’ rather than ‘except’ (the words are homophonous). Moreover, they do not realise that in this passage, the San scholar has in effect translated the Muslim credo from Arabic into Bamana – further blurring their interpretation.

Line 6. The initial element of *nisebāye* is bizarrely interpreted as *n’i* (presumably the contraction of *ni i*, ‘if you’), whereas a simple *ni* (‘if’) would be grammatically more appropriate. Correlatively, the co-authors translate the beginning of this line ‘to make *hajj* if you can’, whereas it means quite precisely ‘to perform the *hajj* pilgrimage if you have the necessary (material) means’.

Line 8, the co-authors apparently do not know that *tijetigiya* is the word, employed by Muslims, Christians, and at least some adherents of traditional religions, meaning ‘to believe (in a religious truth or doctrine)’; thus they translate it on the basis of its etymological components only.

Line 17. After having inexplicably transliterated the script unit that I read *nigudeyē* as *nigub yē*, which they interpret as *ni ko bεε ye*, an expression that would normally mean ‘with all things / everything’, they blasphemously (from an Islamic perspective) translate the passage in question as ‘man should know that God is everything’. *Bange*, later in the same line, is rendered by ‘Creator’.

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**140** The constitutive elements of this term are *ma*, ‘lord’, and *ke*, a compositional suffix denoting the quality of being male. The term *make* is most usually employed with reference to a political superior, or by a wife with respect to her husband. The term *ma*, on its own, may refer either to God or to a political superior.

**141** In the same vein (l. 5), the co-authors employ the term ‘Lent’ to refer to the Ramadan fast.

whereas the reference is to what God has made manifest (i.e., certain aspects of the Creation).

Their interpretation of text II (236–237), dealing with religiously required ablutions, also includes several problematic interpretations.

II.8. *Numabolo*, though it can indeed mean – as the co-authors have translated – ‘left hand’, in this context refers to the entire left side of the body.

II.10. Not realising that the writer is not a native speaker, the authors interpret the sequence *i k tonnā* as *i koton na*, ‘the lower part of your back’, whereas, as has been seen, the reference is to the nape of the neck. In this case, their attempt to reconstruct a grammatically perfect sentence (for the *ka* possessive marker should not normally be used with a part of the body) has led to a contextually implausible interpretation.

II.13. Confusingly for their translation, the co-authors make no distinction between the ablutions (*wuḍūʿ*), which purify the worshipper from minor pollution, and the major ablutions or ‘washing’ (*ghusl*), which purify him or her from major pollution (*janāba*).<sup>142</sup> Consequently, they mistranslate the acceptably transcribed *a bʿi wasa seliji la* as ‘the ablution water has sufficed you’, rather than ‘this [manner of washing] also suffices as ablution.’<sup>143</sup> They are apparently also not aware that the Bamana term *seliji* may refer not only to the water used in ablutions, but also to the process of performing them. The San author’s point is that the procedure he has described fulfils the requirements for both the minor and the major ablutions.

Finally, l. 14, the co-authors translate the phrase that both they and I reconstitute as *min f̄ra Ala sira la*, as signifying ‘that were mentioned in God’s way’, whereas the reference, of course, is to the prescriptions of the Shariah, most usually designated, in Bamana, by the expression *Ala ka sira*<sup>144</sup>.

In Text IV, l. 14, *Ala ko*, ‘God has said’ (i.e., commanded), is translated ‘Provided that’ (242).

<sup>142</sup> See e.g., ‘Abd Allāh b. Abī Zayd al-Qayrāwānī’s *Risāla*, a treatise on *fiqh* which serves as a basic reference throughout West Africa: chapters II–V (28–45 of the bilingual Arabic-French edition; English translation: Kenny 1992, on-line). (Maghrebi author, life dates: c. 922–996.)

<sup>143</sup> The second term could also be reconstituted as the predicative marker *bi*, without the direct object pronoun *i*, as a passive construction giving the phrase a somewhat more general meaning (see above). Readings both with and without the direct object pronoun are acceptable and result in only a slight nuance of meaning.

<sup>144</sup> Literally, ‘in God’s path’; *sira* is a loanword from the Quranic *ṣirāṭ*. The Shariah (*Shariʿa*) is also designated, in Bamana, using the adapted pronunciation *s(h)ariya* (a term which may, by extension, also be applied to the laws of a state).



L. 15, *fura ka ke ni kalan ye ni yiri ye* is bizarrely translated as ‘the medicine is applied according to the instructions and with a reason’.

L. 16, *ni masa sɔnna min ye Ala ye*, is rendered (in incomprehensible English) as ‘if Lord agrees, for God’, although the first three words are a standard Bamana expression, corresponding to the Arabic *in shā’ Allāh*, ‘if God wills’.

There are also various other dubious or erroneous interpretations.

In Text I.10, both the transcription of *kā giyeyā* as *ka janya*, and its translation as ‘move away’, seem arbitrary.

In I.15, the co-authors translate *masaw* as ‘rulers’. Although this was also my initial translation, in 1994, I now believe that the interpretation ‘elders’ is far more likely (see above, p. 230).

In IV.11, the co-authors have misread *fara* as *haera*, corresponding to *hεε*. (It is true that the calligraphy of the initial letter – there seems to have been some scratching – is particularly poor, but the dot of the Maghrebi *fā*, below the letter, as well as a *fatḥa* above the letter, are clearly present.) Consequently, they have translated the phrase to which it belongs as ‘be reassured with it’. The word in fact reads *fara*, which in this context, is probably the root form of the verbo-nominal meaning ‘to add’ (see above, 247, n. 68).

In V.7 (243), the co-authors interpret the well-transliterated *min bii ka buluw la* as *min b’i kan buluw la*, ‘that you have in foliage’. However, it is more likely that the *ka* corresponds to an unidiomatic use of the possessive marker than to the postposition *kan*.

To conclude this section: it is odd that, though the person described in Almamy’s notes as the manuscripts’ author has a typically Fulbe name (Amadou Bary), it never occurred to Vydrin and Dumestre that he might be a non-native speaker of Bamana, nor to scrutinize the texts for unusual or unidiomatic expressions. Rather, the co-authors seem to view these texts as a purely internal product of Bamana Muslim culture: ‘[...] the very first sample of the authentic Bamana writing tradition published. They come from San, an ancient commercial center in the southwestern [*sic*] part of Mali, and may well represent the earliest piece ever of authentic Bamana literature’ (226).

## 10.4 Collection of the texts

In the introduction to their article, Vydrin and Dumestre state: ‘In 1972, during one of his sojourns in Mali, Gérard Dumestre dispatched a friend of his, Almamy Malik Yattara, to the ancient commercial town of San to look for old Bamana manuscripts’ (231). However, when Gérard Dumestre solicited me for work on these

manuscripts, shortly after I defended my doctoral thesis in 1988, he told me that he ‘was given’ the manuscripts (‘on me les a donnés’).

Almamy Maliki Yattara, whom I questioned about the texts in 1992, specifically denied that he had collected them for Gérard Dumestre. He stated that he had obtained them in the course of fieldwork for an architect (who was, however, more interested in architectural drawings); he remembered the architect’s name as ‘Bernard Léger’, without, however, being absolutely sure of this. This provenance, as well as transmission by Gérard Dumestre, are indicated in the liminary note to my 1994 article. My attempts to identify the person who commissioned Almamy, through enquiries in Mali and more recently by searches on the internet, have so far remained unsuccessful.

In any case, it is incredible that, supposing Gérard Dumestre had any kind of working or personal relationship with Almamy, whether at the time the manuscripts were copied or afterwards, he never asked Almamy to read the texts aloud to him, nor enquired about their interpretation in any way. It is furthermore incredible that Gérard Dumestre would not know that Bory Bary was one of Almamy’s closest friends from youth, when they had roomed together in Mopti. Almamy was able to surmise that Bory Bary might have interesting manuscripts, and copy them, because he was one of the latter’s closest friends – not merely because he was ‘a Muslim cleric’.

It is extremely regrettable that Gérard Dumestre, who has been in Mali every year since the late 1960s, never attempted to interview Bory Bary nor visit San – at a time when such research could have been highly fruitful, and a photographic record of the original manuscripts obtained.

## 10.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, Valentin Vydrin and Gérard Dumestre’s brief article is an object lesson in the importance of fieldwork, of cultural understanding and of local knowledge – as well as of an interdisciplinary approach – for the comprehension and interpretation of any discourse; and of what can go wrong when these are absent.

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