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Moodibbo Bello Aamadu Mohamadu and the *Daada Maaje*, a Handbook in an Indigenous Fulfulde Script

Abstract: This note introduces the biography and the activities of Moodibbo Bello Aamadu, a Muslim scholar based in northern Cameroon who has invented an original alphabet for the writing of Fulfulde. Although Moodibbo Bello's Fulfulde alphabet has not been in use beyond a restricted circle of his students, this attempt constitutes an important addition to our knowledge of indigenous African writing systems. The apparently curious record of Fulfulde, a language for which at least three different alphabets (besides '*ajamī*') have been already documented in the literature, can be explained by the historical role of the Fulfulde-speaking Muslim scholars as vehicles of literacy across the western, central and eastern Sudan.

1 Introduction

Over the last few years, I have been involved in a survey of '*ajamī*' manuscripts in the Lamidate of Maroua (in the Extrême Nord region of Cameroon). During this project, I have also collected the biographies of several Muslim scholars (in Fulfulde, *moodibbo*, pl. *moodiɓɓe*) of the region. In general, the *moodiɓɓe* produce two distinct kinds of manuscripts: those in Arabic and those in '*ajamī*'. As highlighted by Idrissa Yansambou,¹ Arabic manuscripts are either original texts composed by local scholars in the different disciplines or copies of classical works intended for individual or collective use in educational circles. The quality of the Arabic used in these various texts depends on the educational level of the author of the manuscript. Some texts are difficult to access even for specialists, if the latter are not familiar with the mother tongue of the author of the manuscript

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1 Yansambou 2003.

consulted, as well as with Arabic. This is due to the linguistic interference of the author's own language, which sometimes produces complex phrasal forms in Arabic. As for the *'ajamī* manuscripts, they are written in African languages using the Arabic alphabet with some creative adaptation used to render the phonemes that are not represented by any existing Arabic letter. Apart from a few isolated attempts, this was by far the most widely used system to transcribe African languages before the irruption of the Latin alphabet during colonial times. As already stressed by Yansambou, both the above categories of manuscript show the level of mastery of literacy by African scholars and disprove the claim that writing was brought to Africa by the European colonialists.²

Notwithstanding the wide use of Arabic in pre-colonial West Africa, there are cases in which original scripts (whether alphabetical or otherwise) have been devised locally for the writing of selected languages. In 1969, the number of indigenous African scripts was assessed by David Dalby at fourteen.³ The best studied are the cases of the N'ko writing for Mande (Mali, Guinea),⁴ of the Vai script in Liberia,⁵ of the Kikakui script used for Mende (Sierra Leone)⁶ and of the Bamun script in Cameroon.⁷ Two Fulfulde scripts devised by individual scholars in Mali and never popularized beyond their private circles were also identified in 1969 by David Dalby.⁸ This brief note adds to the literature on African (and in particular, Fulfulde) indigenous scripts by introducing the biography and the works of a Muslim scholar of northern Cameroon who has devised and used his own original system for the writing of Fulfulde. Interestingly, with the addition of the alphabet devised by Moodibbo Bello Aamadou Mohammadu here described to those of Oumar Dembélé and Adama Ba already identified by Dalby, Fulfulde holds the curious record of featuring three distinct alphabets. This is not so surprising, however, if one considers (1) the geographical extent of the areas in which Fulani communities live and (2) the degree of their interaction with (and the influence of) the written culture of Arabic.

² Yansambou 2003.

³ Dalby 1969, 161–181. The author wishes to thank Andrea Brigaglia for drawing his attention to Dalby's article.

⁴ Oyler 1994.

⁵ Dalby 1967.

⁶ Tuchscherer 1995, 169–188.

⁷ Dugast/Jeffreys 1950.

⁸ Dalby 1969, 168–174.

2 Moodibbo Bello Aamadu Mohammodu and the *Daada Maaje*

Moodibbo Bello Aamadu Mohammodu was born in April 1926 into a family of Fulani herdsmen and scholars, then living in present-day Sudan.⁹ The east-west movement of Fulani families between the Lake Chad region and the eastern Sudan is a known historical phenomenon. The Fulani, in fact, do not occupy a continuous territory, but live in scattered, often nomadic communities throughout the Sahel zone, from the Atlantic Ocean to the Lake Chad and the eastern Sudan. This region is particularly suitable for cattle herding, which is still the favorite activity of many Fulani communities.

A conversation between the author of the present note and Moodibbo Bello, as well as a short autobiographical note found in the *moodibbo*'s personal archive,¹⁰ confirmed that Mohammodu, grandfather of Bello, had left the region of Adamawa to move to the Sudan for pastoral as well as for commercial reasons. His son Aamadu, who succeeded him as the head of a large herd in Sudan, wanted his children to learn both Arabic and Fulfulde, in order to limit the linguistic influence of the communities amongst which they had settled. It is for this reason that, instead of relying on local teachers for the education of his sons, he invited a *moodibbo* from northern Cameroon to move to Sudan and live with his family, so that he could teach his children the Quran and the writing of Arabic and Fulfulde '*ajamī*'. This teacher, known as Mousbad, was to give a new direction to the educational and professional life of Aamadu's sons, especially to the young Bello, whom he would inspire to cultivate a profound love for his mother tongue.

Before turning twelve, Bello Aamadu had learnt how to read and write in Arabic. Motivated by curiosity, he frequently visited the house of his teacher Moodibbo Mousbad and consulted any documents he could find in the latter's small private library. Moodibbo Mousbad was a scholar of repute, who had been educated in northern Nigeria before establishing several Quranic schools in Adamawa. As a teenager, Bello's peers had already started to make fun of his habit of constantly drawing or scribbling signs on the sand floor, while listening to people talking or

⁹ As already emphasized by Hamadou Adama, the Fulani should not be considered as a 'racial' group, but as an ethnic/cultural category, that is to say, a flexible identity that is characterized mainly by certain cultural traits and a common language, and also by a specific code of conduct: the Pulaaku (Amadou/Adama 1998, 71–91).

¹⁰ Moodibbo Bello Aamadu Mohammodu, private archive.

doing other activities. His teacher Mousbad, instead of reprimanding him, encouraged him.

Bello, all your friends think you're crazy. They say you're a dreamer because you don't stop scribbling things on the floor. If you want to express your talent of drawing, find yourself a better support such as paper and draw whatever you want.¹¹

With those words, Moodibbo Mousbad helped to set the career of Bello Aamadu Mohammadu as a Fulani Muslim scholar in motion, with the “mission” of promoting a Fulfulde script.

It was only later—Bello says—that my childhood friends and my elders realized that I was not spending my time drawing, but that when I was listening to people speaking, I was trying to fit their words to new characters that were coming to my mind spontaneously.¹²

For Bello, the alphabetic characters he had started to experiment with in his childhood were simply a divine gift. It is for this reason that later in his life he would dedicate himself tirelessly to the refinement and promotion of this script, even in the face of the indifference with which his experiment was received by the larger community of Fulani scholars. His interest had been sparked a few years earlier, when Moodibbo Mousbad had told him that Fulfulde could only be written with the Arabic alphabet. Bello had noticed, however, that certain Fulfulde letters were missing from the Arabic alphabet and he had started to question the rationale of relying purely on the Arabic alphabet. Later, he found books in Moodibbo Mousbad's collection that mentioned Egyptian civilization and the influence of hieroglyphics in the development of the written word, and was inspired to invent a system for Fulfulde. The system invented by Moodibbo Bello consists of twenty-eight characters as represented in Fig. 3 below. Although it is possible that in designing the shapes, Bello was somehow inspired by the Egyptian hieroglyphics he had seen in his teacher's books, the system he devised is in fact a consonantal system like the one used in the writing of Arabic, which most probably constituted Bello's primary model.

It was only at the age of twenty-five, after having spent more than ten years privately refining and practicing his system, that Bello first told Moodibbo Mousbad how he was able to write every possible Fulfulde word with a script other than Ar-

¹¹ Author's interview with Moodibbo Bello Aamadu, 22/03/2005.

¹² Author's interview with Moodibbo Bello Aamadu, 22/03/2005.

abic. Surprised, the teacher said: ‘I don’t think it’s possible to write Fulfulde without using the Arabic letters I have taught you!’¹³ ‘Indeed it is possible, my master’ —Bello replied— ‘my pseudo-drawings, in fact, are nothing but letters I have invented and by using them, all the Fulfulde letters can be written down consistently’.¹⁴

After looking at the writings on his pupil’s notebook, Moodibbo Mousbad realized that there was very little he could say as he knew nothing about this system. The notebook was then circulated among the Fulani Muslim scholars of the region, but none of them appreciated it. For some, it was inappropriate to use anything other than the letters of the Arabic alphabet while for others, the characters in the notebook were too complex to learn and would have constituted a waste of time. Thus, Bello had to put his innovation temporarily to one side. After the completion of his studies, the professional debut of Moodibbo Bello as a Muslim scholar in Sudan was not an easy one. While he persisted in promoting his Fulfulde writing system, most fellow Fulani scholars replied that they considered it irrelevant, while many of the Arab scholars saw it as a potential threat to the status of Arabic in the country. To many, the idea that the invention came from a very young scholar was an additional obstacle to their taking it seriously. To Moodibbo Bello, however, his Fulfulde script was not his invention, but a gift from God. This is the reason why he kept writing pamphlets and brochures attempting to explain the new system and defending its cause. His endeavor is illustrated in some of the figures below.¹⁵

The logo in Fig.1 has an explanation. The circle represents Africa’s sunshine, symbolizing the author’s hope for a better future for the continent and for the success of his writing system. In the author’s own words:

They [i.e. the Europeans] came to Africa [i.e. to Egypt] to learn, to study. They returned home, used and showcased the achievements of Africa and now they refuse to admit that Africa has a history. Whether they like it or not, within my lifetime or after it, my writings will shine forth by the will of the Almighty!¹⁶

Acknowledging that his writings had been rejected in Sudan and declaring that he wanted to get to know his family back in North Cameroon (to be precise, in Maroua), Moodibbo Bello left his homeland Sudan in 1972. This was, in fact, the first long distance journey he undertook in his life. Originally, his intention had been to

13 Author’s interview with Moodibbo Bello Aamadu, 22/03/2005.

14 Author’s interview with Moodibbo Bello Aamadu, 22/03/2005.

15 All the figures reproduced in this article were photographed by the author in Moodibbo Bello Aamadu Mohammodu’s personal archive.

16 Author’s interview with Moodibbo Bello Aamadu Mohammodu, 22/03/2005.

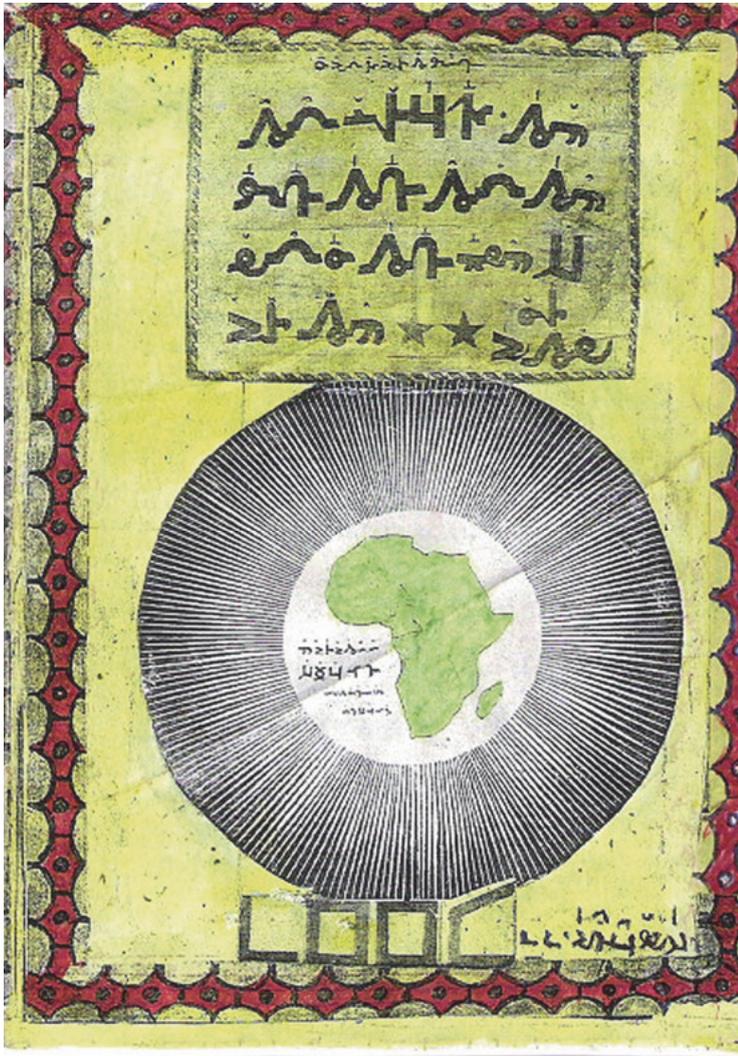


Fig. 1: The cover page of a pamphlet written by Moodibbo Bello Aamadu Mohammadu to defend his invention.

spend a short time in Cameroon before returning to Sudan. Once arrived in Maroua, however, he decided to settle there permanently. The two main reasons for staying in Maroua, were the warm welcome he received from his maternal

family, and because he saw northern Cameroon, with its mainly Fulfulde-speaking society, as the ideal environment to promote his invention and showcase his writings. His settling in the town and his being accepted by the town's elders were facilitated by his knowledge of religion and, very soon, Bello started to preach in the local mosques, earning the title of *moodibbo*. In Maroua, Moodibbo Bello was able to build strong links with the administrative authorities and the traditional rulers, a fact which was clearly indicated when the Lamido (traditional ruler) of Maroua personally intervened to solicit the assistance of President Ahmadou Ahidjo in order to ensure that Moodibbo Bello would be granted permission to reside permanently in Maroua.

During his lifetime, Moodibbo Bello has written and translated many works. From his youth in Sudan, when he first developed his original Fulfulde script, to his later years in Cameroon, he constantly collected Arabic books and translated them into his Fulfulde script. According to Moodibbo Bello, his encounter with the famous French linguist and anthropologist Henry Tournoux, a well-known specialist of the languages of northern Cameroon, was another decisive moment which further encouraged him to pursue his writing. Observing a European who dedicated his life to traveling through the villages of northern Cameroon to record the lexicon and grammar of local languages, reinforced his conviction that his own effort to preserve the richness of Fulfulde was indeed a worthwhile pursuit.¹⁷

Although he never opened a school or educational organization specifically devoted to the teaching of his Fulfulde script, a few interested people have learned it directly from him in the vestibule of his house, creating a small network of users. In order to facilitate the teaching of his script, Moodibbo Bello has produced several works. The figures and tables below are all reproduced or adapted from one of them, called *Daada Maaje* (literally, 'mother of them [books]'), which is the elementary text with an extensive handbook that he normally uses as an aid to teach beginners.

17 Author's interview with Moodibbo Bello Aamadu Mohammodu, 22/03/2005.



Fig. 2: The front cover of *Daada Maaje*.

Tab. 1: The correspondence between Moodibbo Bello’s alphabetical system and the Fulfulde letters in Latin script (in square brackets, the phonological correspondence).

ʼ = ' (glot- tal stop)	Ƶ = y	ƶ = h	Ʒ = m	Ƹ = d	ƹ = k	ƺ = z
ƻ = mb [ᵐb]	Ƽ = l	ƽ = b	ƿ = f	ƾ = j [dʒ]	ƿ = r	ƿ = ng [ŋg]
ƿ = ny [ɲ]	ƿ = ɲ	ƿ = c [ʝ]	ƿ = nd	ƿ = nj [ɲʝ]	ƿ = w	ƿ = n
ƿ = ɓ	ƿ = g	ƿ = t	ƿ = y	ƿ = d	ƿ = p	ƿ = s



Fig. 3: Sample syllabary from Moodibbo Bello's *Daada Maaje*.

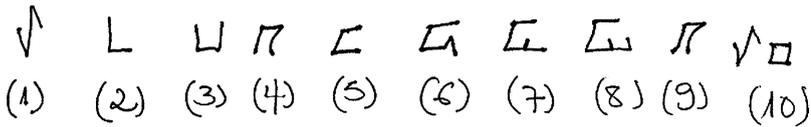


Fig. 4: The numbers in the decimal system used in Moodibbo Bello's *Daada Maaje*.

3 Conclusion

The *Daada Maaje* is a curious handbook written as an aid to teach the Fulfulde language according to the alphabetical script invented by Moodibbo Bello Aamadu Mohammodu, a Fulani scholar of Sudanese origin who is in his early eighties and who lives in Maroua (northern Cameroon). This handbook reflects the genius of this local scholar and his tireless dedication to and passion for promoting what he has always felt as his life's "mission". Moodibbo Bello Amadu Mohammodu, however, also has many other short writings to his credit, some of which are in the possession of the present author, in the form of copies. All of his writings are in the original script briefly presented in this note. In terms of their

content, many of them reflect his interest in and his love for traditional Fulani culture, as they are devoted to topics such as local pharmacopeia, traditional folktales etc. Although the experiments of Moodibbo Bello with his Fulfulde alphabet are well known in Maroua, it is difficult to assess the number of people who have actually learnt to read and write in this script. In the opinion of the present author, we can say that the number of users of the *Daada Maaaje* is probably very small. In fact, most Cameroonian Fulani scholars—just like their counterparts in Sudan who rejected Moodibbo Bello’s early experiments—continue to frown upon any attempt to use any script other than Arabic for the writing of Fulfulde. This notwithstanding, the determination of this resourceful Muslim scholar to contribute to the culture of writing in Fulfulde bears witness to his personal inventiveness and to his tireless devotion to the promotion and preservation of the heritage of an African language.

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