


The Role of Islam, Ajami writings, and educational reform in Sulemaana Kantè's N'ko

Coleman Donaldson

Abstract: The written words of African Muslims have recently received renewed attention. This stems from a push to go beyond colonial archives as well as concerns with terrorism and Islamic radicalization. While Ajami—that is, African languages written in Arabic script—has been a part of this trend, Manding-language publications in the N'ko script have been overlooked. And yet, this literary industry is distinctly Islamic. Putting the writings of Sulemaana Kantè into conversation with historical authors and his contemporaries, Donaldson demonstrates that N'ko represents an iteration of Afro-Muslim vernacular thought, thereby illuminating Kantè and a body of N'ko and Ajami publications.

Résumé: Les écrits des musulmans africains ont récemment reçu une attention renouvelée. Cela découle d'une volonté de dépasser les archives coloniales ainsi que les préoccupations concernant le terrorisme et la radicalisation islamique. Alors que l'Ajami, c'est-à-dire les langues africaines écrites en caractères arabes, fasse partie de cette tendance, les publications en langue mandingue et plus particulièrement en écriture N'ko ont été négligées. Cependant, cette industrie littéraire est distinctement islamique. Mettant les écrits de Sulemaana Kantè en conversation avec des auteurs historiques et contemporains, Donaldson démontre que l'écriture N'ko représente une itération de la pensée vernaculaire afro-musulmane, illuminant ainsi l'œuvre de Kantè ainsi qu'un ensemble de publications d'écriture N'ko et Ajami.

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Resumo: As palavras escritas dos muçulmanos africanos tornaram-se recentemente alvo de redobrada atenção. Este fenómeno surge em consequência de um esforço por ir além dos arquivos coloniais, bem como da preocupação com o terrorismo e com a radicalização islâmica. Ao passo que as línguas ajami — ou seja, as línguas africanas escritas no alfabeto arábico — têm integrado esta tendência recente, as publicações em línguas mandingas, escritas no alfabeto n’ko, têm sido largamente ignoradas. E no entanto, esta produção literária é marcadamente islâmica. Colocando em diálogo os escritos de Sulemaana Kantè e os de outros autores históricos, Donaldson demonstra que o alfabeto n’ko corresponde a uma reiteração do pensamento vernacular afro-muçulmano, assim permitindo aprofundar a leitura de Kantè e de um conjunto de publicações em n’ko e em ajami.

Keywords: N’ko; Manding; Sulemaana Kantè; Ajami; West Africa; Islam

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Sulemaana Kantè is best known for his 1949 invention of a non-Latin, non-Arabic-based script called N’ko.¹ A prolific author until his death from diabetes in 1987, he used his unique script to write over one hundred books—spanning across such diverse topics as linguistics, history, traditional medicine, and Islam—which continue to be typeset and published today. Kantè’s most enduring legacy, however, is neither his script nor any one of the many books that he authored using it. Instead, it is the thousands of West Africans who dedicate themselves to the study and promotion of his creation as either a pan-African script or a Manding orthography. Understanding what animates the N’koïsans of today, though, is near impossible without a proper understanding of Kantè as the first *N’ko kàramó* (𞤎𞤵𞤲𞤴𞤸𞤺𞤽𞤿𞥀𞥁) or ‘teacher.’²

Scholarly accounts thus far (Amselle 2001; Oyler 2005; Wyrod 2003) have underemphasized connections between the inventor of the N’ko alphabet and his historical and contemporaneous Muslim counterparts in what post-colonially became “the Islamic sphere” (Launay & Soares 1999). Kantè was a particular iteration of what I call “the Afro-Muslim vernacular tradition.” He emerged from the regional West African Quranic schooling network and expressed similar sentiments to earlier Ajami intellectuals who had sought to strengthen Islam through literacy in local African languages. Like his predecessors, he faced skepticism—though colored by his particular historical moment following World War II. Put broadly, traditional scholars saw a new writing system and mother-tongue education as a threat to their livelihoods, while rival reformers, the so-called Wahhabis, favored a pan-Islamic identity over the Afro-centric one favored by Kantè that melded pan-Africanism and ethno-nationalism.

In the following three sections, I focus on Kantè, the *kàramó*, in the full Muslim clerisy sense of the term. First, I introduce his upbringing in the Quranic schooling tradition of West Africa. Second, I lay out parallels between him and his predecessors in an Afro-Muslim tradition which viewed vernacular writing in Arabic script (that is, Ajami) as a tool for both

strengthening Islam and responding to particular socio-political circumstances. Finally, I explore the specifics of Kantè's N'ko as an iteration of the above traditions influenced by the social forces that were active following World War II and into the earlier years of African independence.

Kantè as a Product of the Afro-Muslim Vernacular Tradition

Born in 1922, in the Baté (ḄḄḄ *bâte*, literally “between rivers”) region of what is now Guinea, Kantè was early on integrated into Islam, which had been present in parts of sub-Saharan West Africa since approximately the ninth century (Austen 2010:85–86; Tamari & Bondarev 2013:4; Ware III 2014:85).³ Like many West African Muslims before him, Kantè was familiar with the Arabic language (Hunwick 1964)—though his knowledge went much further than many—thanks to both the centrality of Qurānic verses to prayer and other religious acts. Kantè's interest in the written word was instilled in him and his eleven siblings from an early age. While none of them would follow their father's career path as a *móri* (ሞሪ “Qurānic school teacher” often used interchangeably with ስጋሪት *kàramó*), they all, at one point or another, attended the school that was their family's livelihood.⁴

The vast majority of the elder Kantè's students would have only attended Qurānic school at the first of two levels: the so-called basic level during which a student, for a span of time ranging from a few months to a few years, focuses on learning the “fundamental elements of Islamic religious obligation,” such as the proper techniques for ritual ablution, prayer, and the recitation of at least some verses of the Qurān (Brenner 2008:220).⁵ Given that Arabic is rarely the mother tongue of West Africans, this early focus on the Qurān inevitably entails some rote memorization, but it is far from mindless as suggested in colonial documents (e.g., Mairot 1905 in Turcotte 1983); the elementary cycle itself is divided into numerous discrete stages before students with sufficient mastery of Arabic move onto the second level with its focus on advanced subjects of the Islamic Sciences.⁶

Through this tradition and his father's teaching, Kantè came to master literary Arabic, a language with a historical status akin to the Latin of West Africa (see Hunwick 2004). This written lingua franca had spread not because of Arabic-speaking conquerors, but rather, thanks to the clerical efforts and unique status of Qurānic teachers, or “walking Qurāns” (Ware III 2014), who were free in many cases to travel and settle across West Africa for centuries prior to colonial rule.⁷ These same scholars' skills in Arabic literacy were also applied to the administrative and communication needs of various West African polities and courts such as that of Mali's Mansa Musa in the fourteenth century.⁸ Linguistic analysis has also long provided evidence of this history of Arabic as a regional language of learning and correspondence (see Green & Boutz 2016; Zappa 2011). Kantè likely noted this early on in his education; later he (2007/1958) would write:

Amselle (2001; 2003) rightfully highlights N’ko’s connection with Islam and the wider Muslim world. On his account, however, N’ko is an ethno-religious fundamentalist movement that utilizes the “invented tradition” (Ranger 2010) of French colonial *Islam noir* (“Black Islam”) to combat the efforts of West African Muslim Wahhabi reformists (Kaba 1974; Brenner 2001) and thereby preserve “a ‘Negro-african’ specificity within the Muslim community” (Amselle 2003:257).¹² His overly harsh positioning of N’ko activists as fundamentalists aside, Amselle’s analysis does not properly situate Kantè’s thoughts and actions within the West African Quranic tradition. Islam figures prominently in Kantè’s (2008a:7) characterization of his intellectual oeuvre and must be taken seriously.¹³

፲፱ ዕድህ ህገደድ ለገላገላዎች ገለጻል።
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I, Sulemaana Kantè, am more passionate about knowledge than anything else on earth. As such, I would like for all my brothers and neighbors to have some knowledge of reading and writing. Of all the kinds of knowledge, I love three the most:

First: Knowledge of Islam’s worship rituals and laws. This led me translate the Quran and the Prophet’s sayings into N’ko because they are the key of the religion.

Just as the script of Rome was eventually co-opted for penning a number of other languages besides Latin, the Quranic tradition of Arabic literacy also lent itself to the development of a written tradition for a large number of sub-Saharan African languages.¹⁴ Today, this tradition of writing local vernaculars in the Arabic script is commonly referred to in West Africanist research as Ajami (from the Arabic ‘*ajam*, عجم ‘non-Arab, Persian’).¹⁵ The earliest evidence that we have of such literacy in the region dates back to the seventeenth century, when a scholar residing in the Kanem state north of Lake Chad inserted interlinear glosses of Kanuri inside a copy of the Quran (Bondarev 2013; Tamari & Bondarev 2013). Existing documents and research thus far suggest that it was during the eighteenth century that robust traditions of Ajami began to emerge for a number of West African languages. In many cases, Ajami was a “grassroots literacy” (Blommaert 2008) that existed in the Quranic schooling system’s margins. In other cases, however, Ajami literacy was “undertaken by individual scholars to solve language problems and modify the linguistic behaviours in West African communities” (Diallo 2012:97). Such efforts to modify linguistic and literacy practices—as all instances of language planning—were part and parcel of quests for social change.¹⁶ Analyzing the voices of the Ajami tradition therefore allows us to better understand how Kantè did not simply co-opt French colonial *Islam noir* but rather innovated within a much longer tradition expressed in, though not exclusive to, vernacular thought.

In what follows, I briefly sketch the intertwined emergence of Ajami literacy traditions in four major West African languages of the Muslim Sahel.¹⁷ See Figure 1 for a non-exhaustive map of these language's Ajami traditions and their relevant locales.

Fulani and Hausa

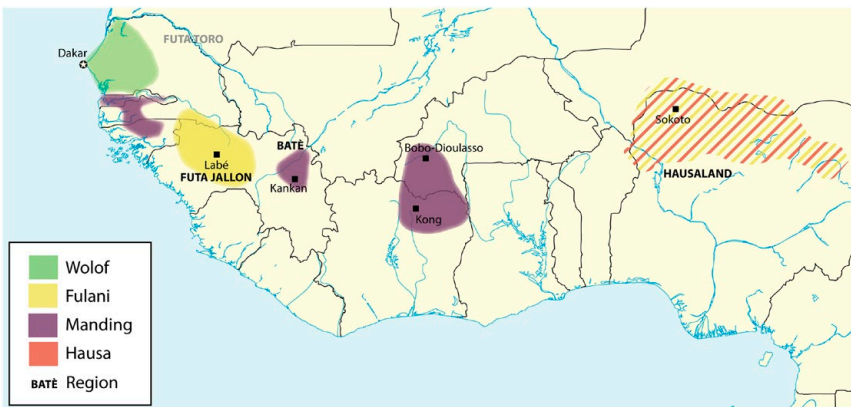
The eighteenth century gave rise to two regional traditions of Fulani Ajami in Fuuta Jalloo (spelled *Fouta-Djallon* in French) and Hausaland, in modern-day Guinea and Nigeria respectively (see Hunwick 2004; Zito 2012). In both cases, the emergence of Ajami was tightly connected to Fulani Jihads which aimed to spread Islam and which gave rise to the aforementioned polities.

In Fuuta Jalloo, the first known Ajami practitioner was Cerno Samba Mambeyaa, (1755–1852), who explicitly justifies his decision to write in Fulani as follows:

I shall use the Fulfulde [Fulani] tongue to explain the dogma.
 In order to make their understanding easier: when you hear them, accept them!
 For only your own tongue will allow you to understand what the Original texts say. Among the Fulani, many people doubt what they read in Arabic and so remain in a state of uncertainty.
 (Salvaing 2004:111–12)

To this end, Mambeyaa’s works were primarily religious texts written in verse form that may have emulated the oral commentaries traditionally performed to the public by Fulani clerics. His innovation therefore was to believe that regular Fulani should have access to these commentaries in written form. Such a shift, in his mind, would strengthen Islam and spread

Figure 1. Map of select traditions of Manding, Wolof, Fulani, and Hausa Ajami literacy



religious fervor among the Fulani people. This goal remained central; at the end of the nineteenth century, all Fuuta Jaloo Ajami writings continued to focus on religious matters (Salvaing 2004:111–12).

Similarly, Fulani Ajami emerged with Shaykh Usman Dan Fodio's (1754–1817) rise to power in establishing the nineteenth-century Sokoto caliphate in what is now largely northern Nigeria.¹⁸ Dan Fodio's zeal to spread Islam among the general populace led to the flourishing of both Fulani and eventually Hausa Ajami. While Dan Fodio himself wrote primarily in Arabic, he did pen a number of original texts as well as translations of his Arabic works into Fulani, his mother tongue, and Hausa, the dominant language of the conquered masses. Echoing Mambeyaa's concern with propagating Islam, Dan Fodio began one of his poems as follows:

My intention is to compose a poem on the [prostration] of forgetfulness.
I intend to compose it in Fulfulde [viz. Fulani] so that Fulbe [viz. Fulani]
could be enlightened.
When we compose [a poem] in Arabic only the learned benefit.
When we compose it in Fulfulde the unlettered also gain. (Diallo 2012:1)

Thus, while learned discourse took place in written Arabic, Dan Fodio believed that disseminating Islamic knowledge more broadly could be assisted by composing the kinds of verses that had served to spread Islam orally in years prior.¹⁹ This trend and encouragement from Dan Fodio would give rise to a robust tradition of Fulani and increasingly Hausa Ajami that was carried out by his disciples and those in his entourage such as his brother as well as his daughter, Nana Asmā'u (see Mack & Boyd 2000).

As evidenced by the declarations of both Dan Fodio and Mambeyaa, this evolution was not an unquestioned natural progression. Indeed, local tradition suggests that Mambeyaa's efforts were opposed by Umar Tal (1794–1864), the leader of the first major Fulani jihad that took place around the Senegal River's region of Fuuta Tooro (Salvaing 2004). Tal's position along with Fuuta Tooro's proximity to the Moors of West Africa have also been advanced as reasons for the lack of a robust Ajami tradition in this other major Fulani area (see Ngom 2009:101; Robinson 1982).²⁰ This tension and its connection to race debates within Islam in West Africa emerge even more strongly in the case of Wolof.

Wolof

The Ajami tradition of Wolof, commonly referred to as Wolofal, emerged primarily out of the Sufi Muslim brotherhood, the Muridiyya (المريدية *al-murīdiyya*), established by Shaykh Amadu Bamba (1850–1927). Wolofal is still extensively practiced in Senegal today in both formal publications and more mundane record-keeping, signs, and correspondence (Ngom 2010). Fallou Ngom (2009; 2016) suggests that the nineteenth century flourishing of

Wolof Ajami can be traced to the personality and teachings of Amadu Bamba. The Muriddiya's leader asserted a strong African identity as part of his broader Islamic message; he addressed French colonialism and its supposed superiority but he also "differentiated the essence of Islamic teaching from Arab and Moorish cultural practices with no spiritual significance" (Ngom 2009:104). Bamba, for instance, did not claim Sharifan or Arab descent for prestige or to legitimize his message.²¹ While he did not write in Wolofal himself, he supported its development and use by his senior disciples such as Muusaa Ka (Camara 1997) who used it to spread Islam and Bamba's message to the masses. In this sense, Wolof Ajami emerged for the same reason as that of Fulani and Hausa—to more effectively promote Islam and religious teachings. As Muusaa Ka explains in the introduction to one of his poems:

The reason this poem—which should have been sacred—is written in Wolof
Is that I hope to illuminate the unknowing about his Lord. (Camara 1997:170)

According to Fallou Ngom (2009), this aim is also connected to Bamba's own desire for African cultural autonomy. At least once in writing, Bamba explicitly engaged with the issue of race and hierarchy within Islam; in his work *Masālik al-jinnān* (مسالك الجنان "Itineraries of Heaven") he writes:

Do not let my condition of a black man mislead you about the virtue of this work, because the best of man before God, without discrimination, is the one who fears him the most, and skin color cannot be the cause of stupidity or ignorance. (cited in Babou 2007:62)

From this position, Bamba (similarly to Kantè in the twentieth century) had no qualms calling upon traditions such as Wolof proverbs as a means to translate his Islamic message to the Wolof masses (Ngom 2009:107). While he himself wrote in Arabic, perhaps because of a spiritual desire to "commune with God and the prophet Muhammed" (Camara 1997:170), Bamba articulated an explicit Afro-Muslim identity that gave "ideological and implementational space" (Hornberger & Johnson 2007) for local language Ajami literacy to flourish. This overt engagement with issues of race and cultural autonomy within Islam makes the Wolofal tradition seemingly unique, but ethnic relationships—mediated, today at least, in part by notions of race—are alluded to in other accounts of Ajami literature's emergence (see Ngom 2009 for Fulani/Moor and Robinson 1982 for Fulani/Manding).

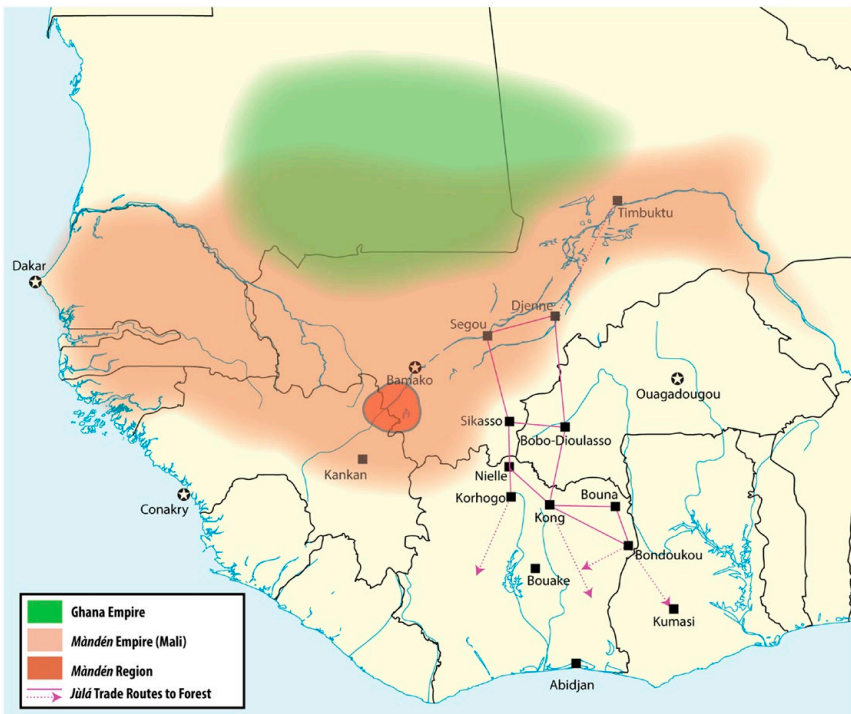
Manding

Sulemaana Kantè did not emerge directly from the Wolof, Hausa, or Fulani traditions. He grew up, however, in a place with close ties to the historical

region *Màndén*, which gave rise to what historians refer to as the Mali empire.²² While it is unclear what role Islam played among this polity's masses, we have evidence that Arabic was used in Mali's court and was even spoken by the empire's sovereign, Mansa Musa, when he performed his pilgrimage to Mecca in the fourteenth century (Hunwick 1964). Nonetheless, a Friday prayer in Arabic was translated spontaneously into Manding in the fourteenth century and therefore it seems likely that the language was a developed medium of oral scholarly discussion and religious propagation by the fifteenth century.²³ The oldest tradition of Islam among Manding speakers seems to be traceable to the *jùlá* network that originated first with Muslim Soninke traders that spread out across West Africa during the Ghana empire that preceded that of *Màndén* (see Wilks 1968, 2000) (See Figure 2).

During the Mali empire, which reached its apogee in the fourteenth century, the Muslim Jula network of traders became increasingly Manding; that is, older Soninke members adopted the language of Mali and were additionally joined by other Manding-speaking Muslims along their trading routes and outposts (Massing 2000). Thus, while the decline of the Mali empire led to many non-Muslim polities (e.g., Kaabu and Segu)

Figure 2. Map of *Màndén*, the Ghana and Mali empires, and *Jùlá* trade network (Sources: Dalby 1971; Launay 1983; Simonis 2010)



where Ajami would have been less likely to emerge, we nonetheless find evidence of Manding Ajami traditions in a number of areas (Vydrin 1998; Vydrin 2014).²⁴

Specifically, the Islamic tradition of the Jakhanke Muslim clerics (a western iteration of the Jula network) in southern Senegambia gave rise to Ajami that was attested to as early as the late seventeenth century.²⁵ It is also in and around this Mandinka-speaking region that Manding Ajami practices appear the strongest today. The earliest Western documentation of Manding Ajami elsewhere stems primarily from areas in Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire.²⁶ Valentin Vydrin (2014) suggests that this was surely an area with an older Manding Ajami tradition. Indeed, this part of the Jula network gave rise to the Kong Empire and its vaunted scholarly tradition.²⁷ Any Ajami documents that may have existed in Kong were destroyed when the town and its libraries were sacked and burned by Sāmòri Tùre in the late nineteenth century (see Fofana 1998; Person 1968; Peterson 2008).²⁸ While we know of no major Ajami collections in the zone today, Ajami is still practiced in the margins of the Quranic schooling tradition (Donaldson 2013).

Outside of the western Jakhanke- and Mandinka-speaking areas, it is only in the case of Kantè's native region around Kankan that we currently have any specific information on a potential pre-twentieth-century Manding Ajami tradition. Kantè considered himself the heir to the work of Alfa Mahmud Kàbá (I. Condé 2008b:135; N. S. Condé 2017:117).²⁹ Popularly understood as a skilled leader who unified the Batè region in the mid-nineteenth century, Kàbá was also a man of letters. He is known for his works in Arabic as well as his (presumably oral) translation of Islamic poems into Manding.³⁰ Ibrahima Condé (2008b) suggests he may have been the first to attempt to pen Manding in the Arabic script. In the early twentieth century, a contemporary and friend of Kantè's father, Jakagbè Talibi Kàbá was also concerned with translating Islamic rites and poems into Manding and is purported to also have attempted to create a unique writing system for Manding (Condé 2008b:135).³¹ Despite not having access to any texts, with both of these authors, we see that Manding Ajami arose alongside the Arabic-language tradition, in part, for the purpose of spreading the gospel of Islam.³²

In sum then, just as West African speakers of Fulani, Hausa, and Wolof pondered the place of their mother tongues in promoting Islam, so did Manding Muslims, despite a relative dearth of identified Ajami textual artifacts in the major Eastern Manding varieties of Bamanan, Jula, and Maninka. Kantè was a direct intellectual heir to Alfa Mahmud Kàbá and Talibi Kàbá of Kankan. However, given the transnational character of Quranic schooling and clerical communities in West Africa, it is important to see that Kantè was also connected indirectly with thinkers among Fulani, Hausa, and Wolof Muslims. In this sense, we have severely underestimated the role of Kantè's Quranic education in his life and work:

In his reflection on the Manding language and his interest for its different regional varieties, in his quest for a perfectly adequate vocabulary to express theological, philosophical, logic or linguistic concepts, by strongly distinguishing between Islam and Arabness, [Kantè] was pursuing preoccupations and manifesting points of view well anchored amongst clerics [Fr. *les lettrés*] (Tamari 2006:51–52)

Kantè's Desire to Reform Islamic Education

N'ko's founder represents a particular iteration of the Afro-Muslim vernacular tradition. While rooted in the ideas laid out above, Kantè also sought to respond as a Muslim educator and intellectual to his own historical moment of post-World War II and the independence era.

The aftermath of World War II “presented opportunities to political and social movements to take on imperial administrations uncertain of their continued authority and aware of their need of Africans’ contributions to rebuilding imperial economies” (Cooper 2002:26). The post-war moment also revealed tensions in what Robert Launay and Benjamin F. Soares (1999:498) describe as the newly-formed Islamic sphere, “separate [...] from ‘particular’ affiliations—ethnicity, kin group membership, ‘caste’ or slave origins, etc.— but also from the colonial (and later the post-colonial) state.” While West African Muslims had undoubtedly always discussed proper membership in the Islamic community, the debate tended to be restricted to internal discussions among the largely hereditary clerical class. The colonial period’s major shifts in political economy disrupted such traditional religious authority and carved out space for larger societal debates about Islam and Muslim identity (Launay & Soares 1999:501). As such, as elsewhere on the Continent (Brenner & Last 1985; Peterson 2006), the postwar moment in French West Africa gave rise to unique and competing Muslim experimentations with language-in-education that were designed to address both the French colonial system as well as concerns in the Islamic sphere.

Kantè's father, Amara, was likely at the origin of the N'ko inventor's interest in pedagogical reform; the elder Kantè was himself an innovator. His instructional methods facilitated an accelerated program which attracted a large body of Manding-speaking students with origins spread out across West Africa (Sangaré 2011; Oylar 2005).

Sulemaana took responsibility for teaching his father's students following his father's death in 1941 (Sangaré 2011:10–11). By 1942, though, he had decided to seek his fortune away from home and left with the intention to settle either with “people looking for a Quranic teacher” or in “one of the White man's cities” (Sangaré 2011:12–13; see also Amselle 2001:150). (See Figure 3 for a map of Kantè's travels within his broader life.)

Kantè's decision was typical; many young male Sahelian Muslims (often-times Manding-speakers) at the time were drawn to the economic opportunities of southern Côte d'Ivoire. For Kantè, it was in the city of Bouaké that the invention of N'ko was set in motion:

which established a string of modernist Muslim schools that used Arabic as the medium of instruction but followed the curriculum and practices of Western-style francophone schools.³⁴ Bouaké opened its first madrasa school as early as 1948 (Leblanc 1999:492). Such schools were the product, on one hand, of so-called Wahhabi doctrinal reformists that connected during or upon return from sojourns in the Middle East (Kaba 1974) and, on the other, of educational reformists simultaneously questioning the traditional Quranic schooling elite and seeking to prepare students in a Muslim manner for integration into the emerging modern economy (Brenner 1991:65). Their Arabic language policy stemmed in part from a prevalent rationalist tenant in modernist Islamic circles “that texts are transparent and that grasping their manifest meaning makes their prescriptions clear” (Ware 2014:70).

While any specific encounters with educational reformists or preachers such as Al-Hajj Tiekodo Kamagaté (to whom Kaba [1974] traces the origin of so-called West African Wahhabi reformism) remain undocumented, Kantè was unquestionably a part of the rising younger generation of so-called *julá* traders in Côte d’Ivoire who were hearing and debating new ideas about Islam and society. For reformists such as Kamagaté, madrasas offered both popular access to Islam through Arabic acquisition in schooling and a means to short-circuit the elite role traditionally played by Quranic teachers as religious intermediaries. Unsurprisingly, those behind this shift to Arabic were also frequently engaged in larger doctrinal critiques of traditional Sufi clerics at the top of the Quranic schooling system (Kaba 1974).

Shortly after encountering Kamal Marwa’s tract, Kantè headed south, eventually settling in Bingerville, where he set up shop as a Quranic teacher before entering the Kola nut trade. His free time was dedicated to devising a way to write Manding (Sangaré 2011:19). N’ko students today largely attribute this quest to the blind, if not racist, ignorance of Marwa. However, analyzing Kantè’s own writings regarding the reactions of fellow Quranic scholars reveals the extent to which his activities were also an attempt to intervene in the Islamic context of both Quranic schools and the newly-formed madrasas.

For three years, he initially experimented with writing Manding with the Arabic script. His efforts were discouraged by those affiliated with Quranic schooling [ቫልላዮሃተጋል *mórilamɔɔ*] (Kántè 2004:2):

ሃጠ ለል ሃጠ ለልገገገ ኃህ ሁህጠ ኃ’ለ ስዓ ና
ኃህ ሃህሃተቶ ሃህጠጠ ሃጠ ኃገገገ ስገገገገ
ገ ፡ ለል ስ ሃህ ሃጠፍ ስ’ህ ስገገገ ኃህ

They didn’t recognize it as something good that would reinforce Islamic knowledge in Black Africa as we thought it would.

Ultimately, Kantè, however, saw vernacular literacy as having major implications for his religion and its education system. (Kántè 2004:6):

In sum, Kantè's N'ko was an intellectual project that straddled two seemingly disparate worlds: that of Islam, and that of worldly political concerns pursued through ethno-nationalism or pan-Africanism. Kantè was not simply a cultural nationalist who happened to be a Quranic teacher, though. His actions and accomplishments were unique, but his goal of valorizing African and specifically Manding ways of being while also affirming equal status within the global Muslim community was not. This approach was long present in West African intellectual circles, as evident in the Ajami tradition reviewed in the previous section.

Conclusion

Kantè's legacy lives on today through the grassroots publishing, broadcasting, and education efforts of thousands of his West African students. Together, they undoubtedly produce more printed text in a year than in all of the official State-backed Latin-based orthographies for Manding combined. From where does such support stem? We can usefully begin to respond to this question through the life and work of N'ko's intellectual founding father as analyzed above.

First, the inventor of the N'ko script was firmly rooted within the "discursive tradition" of Islam (Asad 1986). His writing system was unique, but his concern with using a local African language to better spread the religion was not. Following in the footsteps of Fulani, Hausa, Wolof, and Manding West African Muslims that arose starting at least two centuries before him, he believed that African languages had an integral role to play in disseminating Islam. While these languages and Manding had long been used orally to this end, Kantè, like Samba Mambeyaa, Usman Dan Fodio, Muusaa Ka, and Alfa Mahmud Kâbá saw the benefit of reading and writing in them. Indeed, for Kantè, literacy was not just essential to learning and logical thought but also an Islamic responsibility that could be traced back to God's Messenger, Muhammad. Despite this sentiment and his Islamic scholarship, Kantè never claimed the mantle of a religious leader. From Kantè's perspective as the inventor of N'ko, his contribution in the Islamic domain was primarily a pedagogical one.

Second, Kantè's intervention spoke to his historical moment and the future he envisioned for society. Traveling and living directly amidst the reformist circles that were gaining steam in the Manding-speaking areas of Mali, Guinea, and Côte d'Ivoire, Kantè's orthographic experimentations that culminated in the invention of N'ko in 1949 were his mother-tongue response to the madrasa movement's championing of Arabic-medium education. In this sense, Kantè's actions and his subsequent thirty-eight years of writing, research, and teaching were not only responses to Kamal Marwa and French colonialism, but to his Islamic sphere contemporaries. N'ko as his oeuvre, then, is also an important example of an Islamically-educated African doing the same intellectual work around ethnic solidarity that is often seen as emanating from "the first or second generation of

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Notes

1. Henceforth <Sulemaana Kantè>, ignoring tonal diacritics and using <è> in place of <ε>, except in citations (e.g., Kántè 2008a) where I note his name using the Latin-based Manding transliteration system. I have opted to write Kantè’s first name as Sulemaana given that it is written as such by Kantè himself in the majority of his works that I have in my personal archive (see Vydrin 2012:63 for a discussion).
2. The term *kàramóó* has a range of one-to-one equivalents: Wolof *sérin*, Fulani *ceerno*, Soninke *móodi* (< Ar. *mu’addib* ‘educator,’ Baldi 2008:42). Today many translate it with the French colonial term *marabout* (< Ar. *murābit* ‘holy ascetic’). Here, I use the common Latin-based spelling *kàramóó* instead of a strict transliteration of the N’ko spelling. When writing Manding in Latin script, I use phonemic orthography synthesizing the various national standards while also marking tone. Grave diacritics mark low tones and acute diacritics mark high tones. An unmarked vowel carries the same tone as the last marked vowel before it. The tonal article on nouns is noted by an apostrophe but not in citation.
3. See Kaba (2004) and Osborn (2011).
4. See Sangaré 2011:6.
5. See Tamari’s (2016) most recent of her many investigations of Quranic education among Manding and other West African language speakers.
6. See Mommersteeg 2012; Tamari 2006:40; Tamari and Bondarev 2013:7–8.
7. Though note the important role of the Pashalik of Timbuktu (Abitbol 1992; Levtzion 1975).
8. See Hunwick 1964:30.
9. See Kántè 1968.
10. See Condé 2008a.
11. See Oyler 2005; Wyrod 2003; Wyrod 2008.
12. On *Islam Noir*, see Monteil 1980.
13. This holds true for N’ko publications more generally (Vydrin 2012).
14. For references to languages outside of those covered here, see McLaughlin 2017; Mumin and Versteegh 2014; Mugane 2017.
15. Mumin 2014; Mumin and Versteegh 2014.
16. Cooper 1989.

17. Despite recent scholarship (Kane 2016; Sanneh 2016; Kaba 2011a-c), an overarching account for the historical emergence of African language literacy in Arabic script remains to be done.
18. See Last 1967.
19. See Brenner and Last 1985:424.
20. For modern Fuuta Toro Ajami manuscripts, see “Pulaar Documents” from the Africa’s Sources of Knowledge - Digital Library Project.
21. شريف sharīf ‘noble, highborn’; typically used to refer to descendants of the Prophet Muhammad.
22. See Levtzion 1973; Simonis 2010.
23. Tamari and Bondarev 2013:15.
24. Though see documentations of twentieth century Bamanan Ajami (e.g., Dumestre & Vydrin 2014; Tamari 1994, 2017); See Sanneh 1989.
25. See Tamari 2017; Vydrin 2014. Digital collections of Mandinka Ajami Manuscripts are hosted in Boston University’s African Ajami Library (“Mandinka Ajami and Arabic Manuscripts of Casamance Senegal”) and Harvard’s Africa’s Sources of Knowledge - Digital Library (“Mandinka Documents”)
26. See Delafosse 1904; Marty 1922 cited in Hunwick 2004.
27. See Derive 1978; Kodjo 2006.
28. Commonly spelled Samory or Samori Touré.
29. Alfa Mahmud is said to have introduced the Tijaniyya brotherhood to Kankan after studying and living in the entourage of al-Hajj Umar Tal (Osborn 2011:74–82).
30. The first poem in Kantè’s (2010) first book of poems is entitled Nóro’ lù bá’ . (‘The sea of lights’) and is a translation of one of Alfa Mahmud Kàbá’s Arabic language poems (Bahr al-anwār بحر الانوار).
31. A picture of him is included in Kaba 2011a:986.
32. In 2016 in Kankan I was shown a photocopy of a Manding Ajami manuscript produced prior to the introduction of Kantè’s N’ko.
33. This perspective of Kantè, on a lack of an African written tradition, is, of course inaccurate in a strict sense; see Ngom 2017.
34. Sometimes written as *médessa* in French.
35. For the purposes of this article I will not address this part of Kantè’s thought. See Donaldson 2017.
36. A large number of African orthographies flourished at this time (Juffermans, Asfaha, & Abdelhay 2014).