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**LANGUAGE AND LITERACY IN DARFUR:
IN SEARCH OF THE FUR AJAMI**

ABSTRACT. Darfur (Sudan) is characterized by significant linguistic diversity (Nilo-Saharan, Niger-Congo and Afro-Asiatic languages). However, many languages and dialects in the five states of this Sudanese region are endangered or already extinct. The sphere of oral communication is dominated by the Sudanese Arabic dialect. In the realm of writing and literacy, only literary Arabic is officially recognized, although for several centuries there has been an “invisible” written tradition in the Sudanese dialect. The article discusses practically all the known cases when the use of the Fur language in Arabic script (Ajami) was attested by Sudanese and foreign scholars. It is noted that the local variety of Ajami in the Fur language in Darfur apparently has never become widespread, unlike the different forms of Ajami in Borno, despite the historical ties between these two regions. The Fur Ajami has remained “invisible”, while literary Arabic has dominated the field of written communication. The article also tackles a number of modern attempts to adapt Arabic or Roman script to the Fur language (in Sudan and in the Darfurian diaspora abroad).

KEYWORDS: Fur language, Sudanese Arabic, Arabic script, “invisible” written tradition

УДК 811.424.1

DOI 10.31250/2618-8619-2019-4(6)-161-167

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Five states in the West Sudan, collectively known as Darfur, or Greater Darfur, present a rare case of language diversity. The area is home to several hundred languages and dialects, Nilo-Saharan, Niger-Congo (Atlantic), and Afro-Asiatic (Semitic, Berber, Chadic). In times of peace many of these idioms used to attract Sudanese and foreign linguists. The conflict in Darfur, which has lasted for more than a decade now, made such research very problematic.

The difficulties of research in Darfur were not confined to the effects of the prolonged conflict, which led to massive displacement and emigration. Even before the war many of the Darfurian languages were already endangered. Some of them had died a few decades before the war, like the Saharan language of the Berti in North Darfur.

In all the cases when local languages were disappearing, they were replaced by Sudanese Arabic. This Semitic dialect is by no means uniform or standardized. As one of my informants puts it, every community in Darfur has its own variety of Arabic. For example, the Masalit in West Darfur have their own Arabic, as well as the Zaghawa in North Darfur. In general, all the varieties of Arabic in Darfur have been described as “Darfur Arabic” (Roset 2018). All of them seem to be different from the Arabic dialect of the Nile Valley and probably closer, but not identical, to the Arabic dialects of neighboring Chad.

In many cases the language shift did not lead to ethnic assimilation and Arabicization. There is no doubt that the Darfurians see themselves as Sudanese nowadays, but the non-Arab groups have mostly retained their particular identity. To complicate the situation even further, there are cases when some groups identify themselves as Arabs, but speak a different language, like the Misiriya Arabs of the Jebel Moon (Jabal Mūn) area.

While Sudanese Arabic is reigning in oral communication in Darfur, with very few exceptions such as the remote villages in the so called “liberated territories” of Jebel Marra (the zones controlled by various factions of the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army), written communication presents a different picture. Since 1956, Arabic has been the only official language in Sudan. The official form of Arabic is significantly different from the local varieties of the language and is usually learnt in school.

The use of official Arabic (*al-fuṣḥa*) is not restricted to written communication. All official speeches as well as some TV and radio programs also use this form of Arabic. The more informal the contents of the speeches or media production, the more elements of Sudanese Arabic penetrate into them. An excellent example of such interaction can be seen in the slogans of the ongoing revolution in Sudan, which started in December 2018.

In fact, Sudanese Arabic has been found in writing since at least the eighteenth century. However, this was a kind of invisible literacy. The writers used the dialect extensively, but did not see it as a separate idiom at par or competing with Standard Arabic.

A similar case of invisible literacy is also found in Darfur in relation to the major non-Arabic languages, and primarily to Fur. The Fur language belongs to the Fur group of the Nilo-Saharan languages. Some loanwords from Fur are common in Darfur Arabic. Before 1916, when the Sultanate of Darfur was conquered by the British and annexed to the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, Arabic was the vehicle of written communication, while the oral practice was mostly in Fur.

William George Browne, who lived in Darfur in the late eighteenth century, wrote: “In most of the towns, except Cobbé, which is the chief residence of foreign merchants, and even at court, the vernacular idiom is in more frequent use than the Arabic; yet the latter is pretty generally understood. The judicial proceedings, which are held in the monarch’s presence, are conducted in both languages, all that is spoken in the one being immediately translated into the other by an interpreter (*Tergimân*).

After those who fill the offices of government, the Faquí, or learned man, i.e. priest, holds the highest rank. Some few of these Faquí have been educated at Kahira, but the majority of them in schools of the country. They are ignorant of every thing except the Korân” (Browne 1799: 297).

In another place Browne gave a slightly more positive picture of Darfurian writing culture: “There are in the town four or five *Mektebs*, where boys are taught to read, and, if they wish it, to write. Such of the *Fukkara* as fill the office of lecturer, instruct gratuitously the children of the indigent; but from those who are in easy circumstances they are accustomed to receive a small remuneration. Two or three lecture in the Korân, and two others in what they call *Elm*, theology” (Browne 1799: 244). Browne also noticed a case when only Fur was used at the court and tried to explain this phenomenon: “The Sultan was hearing a cause of a private nature, the proceedings on which were only in the Fûrian language” (Browne 1799: 211).

In the early nineteenth century a certain Mohammed, the Darfurian informant of Ulrich Jasper Seetzen in Cairo, described the situation in the following words: “All the inhabitants of the country profess the Mahometan religion; they have the Koran, and many of them instruct their children in the reading of this work, and teach them to write Arabic. This language is the only one used in correspondence, to the truth infrequent, by letters that there may be.” (“Tous les habitans du pays professent la religion mahométane; ils ont le Koran, et plusieurs d’entr’eux font instruire leurs enfans dans la lecture de cet ouvrage, et leur apprennent à écrire l’arabe. Cette langue est la seule qui soit employée dans la correspondance, à la vérité peu fréquente par lettres, qu’il peut y avoir”) (Seetzen 1813: 149).

For two centuries after Seetzen, similar descriptions have been found in most works on Darfur, e.g.: “While all that was written was written in Arabic the spoken language of the court was generally Fur. Although the sultans and their courtiers usually knew both languages, Fur was preferred as the spoken language. It would, however, be very difficult to deduce this from the documents themselves, where only a handful of Fur titles and placenames appear in the Arabic script. This functional bilingualism remained until the end of the sultanate; even ‘Alī Dīnār, who apparently knew enough Arabic to compose a poem in praise of the Prophet, dictated his correspondence in Fur which was taken down directly into Arabic. Whatever the spoken language of daily life and administration, be it Fur or one of the other languages current in Dār Fūr, all official correspondence was in Arabic and, unlike West Africa, seemingly no attempt was made to reduce any of the local languages to writing” (O’Fahey, Abu Salim 1983: 22).

Until now even bilingual manuscripts, for example those with glosses in Fur, have not been found. This phenomenon still needs explanation, as the written culture of Darfur was certainly an offshoot of the Kanem-Borno tradition, where Ajami had a century-old history (see e.g. *Bondarev*, Tijani 2014).

While the preponderance of written Arabic has been visible in Darfur for a few centuries, there seems to have been some extant tradition of the Fur Ajami in the former Sultanate. In 1886, Robert W. Felkin wrote: “The Fors have priests or fakirs, who go by the name of puggees. They are in no sense hereditary, and there is no ceremonial induction into their office. Any one may become a puggee if he chooses, but he must first be educated by a priest, in reading and writing, in the Koran, and in the For law; for the Fors have a written law, which differs considerably from that found in the Koran. The date at which it was reduced to writing I was unable to ascertain, but it is certainly more than 300 years old. (...)

The only writing in Darfur is in the Arabic character. Few people use it, but it must have been introduced centuries ago, as all the books of For law, and those giving instruction in the preparation of drugs and charms, are written in the For language in Arabic characters. I was unable to obtain any specimen of it, much as I tried to do so” (Felkin 1886: 220, 264).

The “For law” mentioned by Felkin was most probably the famous *Kitāb Dālī* or *Qānūn Dālī*. It has never been found, and nothing can be said about its language. Interestingly, the Fur intellectuals still refer to the “Dali” law as to one of the cornerstones of the Fur society nowadays (Dobronravín 2019).

The invisibility of the Fur Ajami seems to have continued in postcolonial Sudan. In 1968, Björn Jernudd mentioned the same “script secrecy” in a new context: “I noticed the use of written For (Arabic script) among some young men. From them I learned that it is common among school students to write letters and secret messages, and sometimes take personal notes in For” (Jernudd 1968: 180).

By the early twenty first century, references to Felkin and Jernudd were still the base of our scanty knowledge on the Fur Ajami. In 2001, Andrew James McGregor wrote: “Fur is traditionally an unwritten language, but Felkin mentions medical texts in Fur using Arabic characters (though he says he did not see them himself), and Jernudd has noted a practice among certain Fur of rendering Fur phonetically through the Arabic script when it is desired to keep communications secret from Arabic speakers” (McGregor 2001: 86).

Neither McGregor, nor myself (until a few months ago, when I started writing this article) knew about one more case of the Fur language in the Arabic script, a manuscript collected by Wilhelm Max Müller (1862-1919), a renowned American Egyptologist. In 1904, 1906 and 1910 he worked in Egypt. During his stay in Cairo, Müller made acquaintance with local Africans and collected texts in the Fur language.

There is an anonymous description of his work, indicating that some or most of the material he worked on was sent to him from Sudan:

“[...] His first manuscript was stolen, along with his valise. The paper contained interesting historical data. In 1910, by the aid of the Sudan Bureau of the Egyptian Ministry, Dr. Muller was enabled to gather considerable material, which he worked on for three years in America. Among many difficulties the broken Arabic of the Sudanese puzzled the best scholars of America and Europe; but in 1914 he finished the manuscript while on his vacation in Europe and sent the package to Vienna a few days before the breaking out of the war.

Its fate, whether its publication would be indefinitely postponed or cancelled, was the cause of great anxiety to Dr. Muller and his friends, but, to his great joy, he was recently advised that the Academy of Vienna, during the past winter, authorized the printing of the book, in three volumes. The first proof sheets of the grammar, which will be printed this year, have reached Philadelphia.

The printing of the texts will be done in 1916. There are amusing stories of bears in the mountains of Darfur and the practice of sorcery in the Sudan, and much more of interest to others besides philologists. The dictionary will be published in 1917” (A Glimpse into the Workshop of a Linguist... 1915).

On 26 March 1913, between 9:35 a.m. and noon, at the second session of the annual meeting of the American Oriental Society at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, “Professor Max Müller made a few remarks, presenting a specimen of the Kunjāra language of Dār Fūr in Arabic script” (Proceedings of the American Oriental Society... 1913: vii). Unfortunately, we know more about this meeting, which was held on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday of Easter Week, 25-27 March 1913, than about the manuscript in question.

W. Max Müller never published a facsimile or a description of the work. According to the proceedings of the Royal Academy of Sciences in Vienna (1917: ix), four manuscripts on the Fur (Kunjara) language sent by the American Egyptologist were presented to the members of the Academy on 14 October 1914. These manuscripts included the Fur texts, a Fur-German and German-Fur dictionary and a grammar of the language. It is not clear whether the manuscripts included the specimen of the Fur Ajami in Philadelphia. In 1919 Max Müller drowned; the publication of his work was abandoned due to the vagaries of war and revolution in Europe.

After the death of W. Max Müller, his manuscripts attracted the attention of Ernst Zyhlarz (1890–1964), an Austrian Africanist who was interested in the Fur language. In 1942 Zyhlarz published a selection from the Fur texts collected and prepared for publication by Müller (Zyhlarz 1942). The texts were only published in Roman transcription, apparently produced by Müller as a result of his work with one or more Darfurian informants in Cairo. Among other details, Müller tried to mark the tones of Fur, a feature which could hardly be found in a Sudanese Ajami manuscript. Zyhlarz did not give a detailed description of the collection, and it is not clear whether he saw the Ajami manuscript seen by Müller. Anyway, it seems that Zyhlarz could not continue his research on the Fur language after the Second World War. Secretly converted to Judaism, married to a Russian/Jewish woman from Siberia, this scholar was nevertheless a member of the National Socialist party and was purged by the British military administration from Hamburg University, where he taught until 1945 (Post-Zyhlarz 2010).

Since 1990s, and especially with the unfolding of the conflict in Darfur, there have been two parallel processes among the non-Arab Darfurians. Local activists and rebels increasingly saw themselves as Africans, as opposed to “Arabs”, even if the African origins of these neighbors were fairly visible. In the course of this Africanization, some Darfurians changed their names from Islamic (Arabic) to African ones, including some words in Fur or other local languages. Among the Zaghawa, this tendency reached its peak with the attempts to spread the use of their own alphabet. A milder initiative was what has been described as “aversion towards Arabic” (Dhahawi, Mugaddam 2015).

In the sphere of written communication, this aversion among the Fur did not lead to a completely new script, but to a number of initiatives aiming at the development of Romanization. The Fur writing nowadays, mostly in the Darfurian diaspora abroad, is based on the Roman script. Since 1997, more than thirty books have been published in the new orthography, which consists of 26 letters (with additional tonal marks). Written Fur in this script has been taught online and in a few schools. I have never seen any Fur speaker who would be eager to use this script in Sudan, and it seems that the sphere of its use remains restricted to a few opposition activists.

As for the Arabic script adaptation to the Fur language, it has been discussed in a few universities, such as the International African University in Khartoum (‘Abd al-Mawlā 2015). There have also been a few publications on the Fur language in Arabic, where the Fur Ajami has been discussed, e.g., by Idris Ahmad Yusuf (2016). This work was not intended for linguists, nor did it pay much attention to the phonology of the language. This can be illustrated by the set of independent personal pronouns in Fur. The Darfuri author gives them as *kā* (1 sg.), *jīy* (2 sg., with a *sukūn* symbol of a zero vowel over the final Arabic letter *yā*), *yī* (3 sg.), *kīy* (1 pl., also with a *sukūn*), *bīy* (2 pl., with a *sukūn*), *yīnq* (3 sg., with a final combination of *nūn* and *qāf*, i.e., *yīṅ*) (Ahmad 2016: 42). In modern Roman-script orthography these pronouns are written in a more phonological way, namely: *ká*, *jí*, *yé*, *kí*, *bí*, *yieṅ/yeen* (Soba 2014). It is not unlikely that Idris Ahmad Yusuf tried to follow some conventions used by the Fur in the Qur’anic schools.

It is worth mentioning, that during the ongoing revolution no written Fur texts in either Roman or Arabic script seem to have been visible in Darfur, unlike many new slogans in Sudanese Arabic. The Fur Ajami has remained invisible, even though it is possible that some manuscripts could still be found, most probably in European collections.

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ЯЗЫК И ГРАМОТНОСТЬ В ДАРФУРЕ: В ПОИСКАХ ФУРСКОГО АДЖАМИ

АННОТАЦИЯ. Для Дарфура (Судан) характерно значительное языковое разнообразие (нило-сахарские, нигер-конго и афразийские языки). Однако многие языки и диалекты в пяти штатах этого суданского региона находятся под угрозой исчезновения или уже вымерли. В устной коммуникации доминирует суданский арабский диалект. На письме в Судане официально используется только литературный арабский язык, хотя уже несколько столетий существует «невидимая» письменная традиция на суданском диалекте. Рассматриваются известные к настоящему времени случаи использования в арабской графике (аджами) языка фур. Отмечается, что аджами на языке фур в Дарфуре, по-видимому, не получило широкого распространения, в отличие от различных вариантов аджами в Борно, несмотря на исторические связи между двумя регионами. Фурское аджами оставалось «невидимым» в условиях господства литературного арабского языка в сфере письменной коммуникации. Также рассматриваются современные попытки адаптации к языку фур (в Судане и в дарфурской диаспоре за рубежом) арабской и латинской графики.

КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА: язык фур, суданский арабский диалект, арабская письменность, «невидимая» письменная традиция

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