

*The Fur (For, Fūranq bilī, Poor'īṅ belé) variety of Ajami: an invisible tradition*

The Fur language of Darfur is one of the major Nilo-Saharan languages of today's Sudan. The only official language of Sudan is Arabic, dominating all written communication except few cases where English may be used. In oral communication, the Sudanese Arabic dialect is dominating, sometimes reaching the written sphere where it is not official, for example in poetry and Internet communication. The use of Sudanese Arabic in writing is not a new phenomenon, but nowadays it seems more common than in the 19th or 20th centuries.

In a sharp contrast to Arabic in whatever form, other languages of Sudan remain non-official, and they are often seen as *lahjāt*, that is, 'dialects' (in Arabic). This definition is totally erroneous, but still common in Sudan. The use of non-Arabic languages is only recognized when it refers to the pre-Islamic history of the country (Ancient Egyptian, Meroitic, Old Nubian). The Sudanese media regularly stress that Sudan was the birthplace of the very idea of alphabet, with the reference to the Meroitic script.

The Fur writing nowadays, mostly in the Darfuri diaspora abroad, is based on Roman script. Since 1997, more than 30 books have been published in the new orthography, consisting of 26 Roman letters. Written Fur in this script has been taught online and in a few schools. As for the Arabic script adaptation to the Fur language, it was discussed in a few universities, such as the International African University in Khartoum. There have also been a few publications on the Fur language in Arabic, where the Fur Ajami has been discussed, e.g., in Aḥmad, Idrīs Yūsuf 2016. *Lughat al-Fūr (Fūranq bilī) wa-al-'alāqah ma'a ba'd al-lughāt al-insānīyah*. [al-Khartūm]: [I. Y. Aḥmad Muḥammad].

Until now, there have been two strategies in the development of the Fur Ajami. One is to remain as close to Arabic as possible, with no additional letters or vowel-signs. Another strategy was more speaking-oriented, with new symbols introduced for both consonants and vowels.

Within the first approach, the non-Arabic letters do not appear, but in a few cases, digraphs are used, apparently following the English rendering of the Fur names. These digraphs are *nūn-qāf* for "ng" /ŋ/ (نق) and *nūn-yā'* for ny /j/ (ني).

In a more "phonological" strategy, new letters are introduced for the Fur consonants. In this case, the /ŋ/ and /j/ are still rendered with the digraphs, but the /ŋj/ is represented with the digraph which includes a newly-introduced letter with three dots (نچ). The /p/ is rendered with an additional Arabic letter (پ) which is also common in the Persianate world and then introduced in the ISESCO "Qur'anic orthography". The rich inventory of Fur vowels is reflected in the rendering of /o/ with a circumflex over the *wāw* (و) and /e/ with a circumflex over the *yā'*. The Fur tones are not represented by any symbols in the Arabic script, which is comparable to the approach to suprasegmental features in most Ajami varieties.

The modern proposals for the Arabic-script writing in the Fur language seem to overlook any earlier written tradition in Darfur. Meanwhile, the Fur Ajami is not a new phenomenon. There were a few manuscripts in Fur in the Darfur Sultanate, even though written Arabic was the

major means of communication. Much more common was the rendering of Fur personal and place-names in the Arabic documents.

As early as 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, Robert W., Notes on the For tribe of Central Africa, Proceedings of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, 13, 1886, pp. 220 and 264).

Felkin's remarks on the use of the Fur language apparently contradict the description 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, R. S. and Abu Salim, M. I. 1983. Land in Dār Fūr. Charters and related documents from the Dār Fūr Sultanate, Fontes Historiae Africanae, Arabica III, Cambridge University Press, p. 22).

This contradiction may be explained by the difference in style of the court documents, which were systematically studied by Sean O'Fahey, and the books mentioned by Felkin one century earlier.

As for the Fur law book, known as *Kītāb Dālī* or *Qānūn Dālī*, A. J. Arkell saw it as a part of the Borno influence in Darfur:

The Law in Bomu seems to have been the same as that administered in Darfur before our occupation [...]. We have seen that Dali, the traditional founder of the Keira dynasty, as part of his organization of the kingdom of Darfur is said to have first introduced a code of law which was known as the Book of Dali (*Kitab Dali*). Nachtigal endeavoured without success to secure a copy [...]. I also endeavoured without success to find an authentic copy in Darfur of the Kitab Dali. I did obtain from the Birgid a document which was thought by the natives to be the Kitab Dali, and which was in the form of a revelation to the learned Abdalsamad ibn 'Abdalla ibn Muhammad in the time of the sultan Khalifa Mansur; and also part of a much longer document from Western Darfur, which appeared to be little more than a garbled version of the well known Maliki commentary the *Mukhtasar al Khalil*. The Birgid document is exactly what present Darfur tradition states that the Kitab Dali was an attempt to compromise between the *Sharia* and the custom of the land, between the *Sharia* and the *qanun*, as is stated in the introduction (Arkell, A.J.

1952. "The History of Darfur, 1200-1700: The Influence of Bornu," Sudan Notes and Records, 33, 145).

As *Kitāb Dālī* has never been found, nothing can be said about its language and other features of the manuscript(s). As argued in "Arabic Literature of Africa",

In the time of the sultanate, the body of customary or sultanic law known as the *qānūn* or *kitāb dālī* is said to have been reduced to writing in the nineteenth century. But if it ever did exist in written form, it appears to be no longer extant (Arabic Literature of Africa, 1, 1994, The Writings of Eastern Sudanic Africa to c. 1900, Brill, p. 50).

Interestingly, the Fur intellectuals still refer to the "Dali" law as to one of the cornerstones of the Fur society nowadays.

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, Björn 1968 Linguistic Integration and National Development: A Case Study of the Jebel Marra Area, Sudan, in: J. A. Fishman, C. A. Ferguson, J. Das Gupta (eds.), Language Problems of Developing Nations, p.180, fn.4).

By the early 21st century, the 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, A.J. 2001. Darfur (Sudan) in the age of stone architecture c. AD 1000-1750: problems in historical reconstruction, Archaeopress, p. 86).

In 2000, in a book on the Darfur Sultanate, a special appendix was, according to its abstract, devoted to the writing of the Fur language in Arabic script ('Uthmān, al-Amīn Maḥmūd Muḥammad, 2000. Salṭanat al-Fūr al-Islāmiyya 1400 M-1916 M: dirāsah taḥlīliyya. [Khartoum]: al-Amīn Maḥmūd Muhammad 'Uthmān). Unfortunately, this book was not accessible to me.

Taking into account the history of Arabic written tradition in this part of Sudan, which is still based on the Warsh reading of the Qur'an, as well as the Borno influence in the area, it is quite possible that there were (and maybe still exist) manuscripts with Fur or other non-Arabic glosses in Darfur. Whether such manuscripts had any relation with the enigmatic *Kitāb Dālī*, is an open question.

## References

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