

# THE WOLOFAL GRAPHY: A LITERARY AND SPELLING RECIPE IN A CONTEXT OF DOMINATION

**El Hadji Mansour MBOUP**

**Université Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar (Sénégal)**

**E-mail: [elhadjimansour.mboup@ucad.edu.sn](mailto:elhadjimansour.mboup@ucad.edu.sn)**

## **Résumé**

Un des aspects de l’Islam et de l’islamisation en Afrique au Sud du Sahara a été la création d’orthographe, avec le foisonnement des écrits littéraires et religieux. Au Nigeria, le même genre d’orthographe usant les caractères arabes et d’autres signes diacritiques est appelée Ajami, tandis qu’au Sénégal, on l’appelle Wolofal. Nous nous proposons, dans cet article, de nous appesantir sur l’arrière-plan historique de cette orthographe historique que nous qualifions de recette dans un contexte de domination. Un autre point est une critique du Wolofal, en tant qu’œuvre humaine et, enfin une présentation du Wolofal comme une révolution.

**Mots-clés :** islamisation, orthographe, création, linguistique

## **Abstract**

One of the impacts of Islam and islamicization in Africa, South of the Sahara has been the creation of orthographies with a proliferation of literary and religious writings. In Nigeria, that orthography is called Ajami whereas in Senegal it is referred to as Wolofal. In the following lines, we will first focus on the historical background of the latter historical orthography which we see as a recipe in a context of domination. The second focal point is a criticism of Wolofal as a human creation and, thirdly, we will look at Wolofal as a literary revolution.

**Keywords :** islamicization, orthography, creation

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modndiaye@gmail.com

## INTRODUCTION

One of the impacts of Islam and islamicization in Africa, South of the Sahara has been the creation of orthographies with a proliferation of literary and religious writings. In Nigeria, that orthography is called Ajami whereas in Senegal it is referred to as Wolofal. In the following lines, we will first focus on the historical background of the latter revolutionary graphy which we see as a recipe in a context of domination. The second focal point is a criticism of Wolofal as a human creation and, thirdly, we will look at Wolofal as a literary revolution.

### I. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Wolofal orthography is to be traced back as early as the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century with Khali Madiakhate Kalla who was the figurehead of Wolof poetry in Senegal.

The term “Wolofal” means “to render Wolof”, “to turn into Wolof”, in other words. It is a writing system invented on the basis of Arabic and corresponds to the Ajami spelling in Nigeria. It was a brainchild in a highly islamicized society and helped convey a large amount of literary, religious and political ideas in a context dominated by colonization and oppression. The disciples of the itinerant universities of that era and time, through a coded graphy, attacked oppression and spread Islam via different Sunni Brotherhoods like the Qadriya, the Tijaniya and the Mouridiya.

Apart from its technical aspect, Wolofal played a great cultural role in an immensely orality-based society wherein writings seldom existed and the guardians of the traditions and costumes had been for a long time the Griots. In fact, this rising literature was a deterrent to cultural nullification and illiteracy.

Wolofal stood mid-way between Arabisation and Frenchisation and advocated national identity. The poets of that epoch of blooming literature said that they were to write for those who had never been schooled before. That was the reason why, Serigne Moussa Ka, one of

the lieutenants of Sheikh Ahmadou Bamba who is the founder of the Mourid Brotherhood stated the following:

*... Wolof yi li gaayi jangul  
Nde man na maa woy ci arab lu dëngul*

This passage means:

*...(I write in ) Wolof because the guys are illiterate  
But I can sing in an Arabic language that is accurate*

Since Wolofal arose in a context of conflict and strife between colonial power and religious propaganda and cultural identity, the Senegalese scholars were using it to lay the foundations of a new society wherein the desperate would have a place. Thus, there was an absolute rejection of the French language which was a symbol of submission and domination. Following the footsteps of Madiakhate Kalla, Serigne Moussa Ka and his contemporaries of the Tijani brotherhood like Serigne Hady Touré focussed, in their writings (poetry in most part), on Islamicization and the quest for a new identity and paradise lost pursuant to the new colonial oppression.

Therefore, the 19<sup>th</sup> century was marked by scholars like Mbaye Diakhaté, Massamba Diarra Mbaye and Modou Lamine Diop. The second generation saw the advent of Moussa Ka, Hady Toure, Med Sow Wedjam among others, during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The modern generation has seen the arrival of Ablaye Dieye and Aliou Thioune among the most popular.

From « *Baay Xaali* » (Cadi Madiakhate Kalla) the pioneer, Wolofal spread through four different waves or movements, according to Madické WADE. We can diagram them as follows :\*

**The Pioneer (Late XVIII<sup>th</sup> century) : Xaali Majaxate Kala**



**The Ancients (XIX<sup>th</sup> century)**



*Mbay Jaxate*

*Moor Kayre*

*Maasàmba Jaara Mbay*

*Moodu Laamin Joob*

**The Second Generation (Late XIXth century, Early XXth century)***Seex Mbàkke Faal**Muusaa Ka**Med Sow Wejjam**Aady Ture****The Modern****Alliwu Cuun**Ablaay Jeey***A. The rationale for Wolofal**

Wolofal was deeply rooted in the struggle against imperialism from the revival of national identity (though ambiguous). It was a very sophisticated artcraft that helped the Sufis of the colonial era to have refuge in religion and fight in an encoded new linguistics tool, and efficiently fight against colonial domination. In that sense, the writings by the pioneers of that neo-orthography urged people into revolt and cultural uprising. The best-known of the mis Serigne Moussa KA of the Murid Brotherhood school.

Revolt and cultural quest of identity were at the center of the newly-created medium of literary and religious expression. A close look at Moussa KA's writing and style show that a need for justice was also one pregnant issue tackled by Wolofal.

All we can say is that Wolofal did not appear ex-nihilo. It was deeply influenced by Arab metrics and Islamic religious philosophy. The latter was seen as 'the last resort', in the sense that colonial domination crippled local African culture(s). That is all the more considerable since whosoever casts a glance at the Wolofal Alphabet will realize nothing but an adaptation of the Arabic graphic letters. That was the reason why we undertake a contrastive analysis between the two spelling systems.

## **B. Contrasting Wolofal and Arabic at the level of Phonetics**

Wolof, contrary to Arabic counts twenty simple consonants. At this level, we are going to first present the Wolof sounds with illustrations and then the Arabic ones before finally showing the reasons why Wolofal was a very sophisticated scholarly invention.

Professor Souleymane presents Wolof by beginning with the ‘‘alphabet and the phonetic value of the letters’’ (« l’alphabet et la valeur phonétique des lettres » (2012 : 45). First, he makes a difference between the the short and long simple vowels which are respectively five in number. Then he adds four derivated vowels among which only one does not present a long form, i.e. ([à] as in the word [làkk] (‘‘ language’’ or ‘‘speak a foreign language’’), (op ; cit., pp. 5-6).

Following that, Faye (2012 : 6-14) gives a presentation of the Wolof consonants. We have twenty simple consonants and fourteen strong or geminated consonants. We have also four pre-nasal consonants and finally five consonantal sequences (nasal + consonant).

In sum, Faye’s presentation (2012 : pp 4-14) reveals us that Wolof has nineteen vowels and forty-three consonants. Here is a brief and complete classification :

### - **Five short vowels**

- [ a ] → am → to have, to possess, to obtain
- [ e ] → xet → smell (noun)
- [ i ] → fit → courage
- [ o ] → gor → noble, a free being, to cut down (a tree)
- [ u ] → wut → to fetch

### - **Five long vowels**

- [aa] → baat → neck, voice
- [ee] → xeet → race, kind
- [ii] → biir → belly, inside, to be pregnant
- [oo] → boot → support, bear (on the back)
- [uu] → buur → king

- **Four derivated short vowels**

- [à] → sàkk → to create (God), take (a bit ) of something
- [é] → xér → generous, fanatic
- [ë] → bët → eye
- [ó] → jóg → to stand up

- **Three derivated long vowels**

- [ée] → wéet →to be alone, desert ( place)
- [ëe] → bëer → butter
- [óo] → góor → man

**Note : It is to be noted that the only vowel without length is the derivated vowel [à] :**

E.G : tàkk → burn, take fire

- **Twenty simple consonants**

- [b] → bees →new
- [c] → caat → the youngest son or daughter
- [d] → daas → to sharpen (an arm)
- [f] → fit → courage, bravery
- [g] → gan →host (who is invited)
- [h] → this consonant help avoid the hiatus or the encounter of two vowels

E.G : Ci hàll bi → n the forest, in the bush

- [k] → kaddu → voice, resonance of a voice
- [l] → leer → clear, the light
- [m] → maam → grand-parent
- [n] → nataal → photo, portrayal

- [ñ] → ñaar → two
- [ŋ] → ŋaam → jaw
- [p] → pal → election, coronation
- [q] → xonq → red
- [r] → root → fetch (water or any liquid)
- [s] → sol → fill in
- [t] → tari → recite, tear (paper or clothes)
- [w] → waaru → astonished, convinced
- [x] → xool → to look(at)
- [y] → yónni → to send (somebody)

- **Fourteen strong or geminated consonants**

- [bb] → tubbi → to deny one's own religion
- [cc] → wàcc → to get down, go after work
- [dd] → weddi → deny
- [jj] → xojj → to stay eyes wide-open
- [kk] → nokki → to breath, to inhale, to expire
- [ll] → fooli → destitute, topple
- [mm] → sàmm → shepherd, to graze
- [nn] → sonnal → to harrass
- [ññ] → wàññi → diminish, decrease, dwindle
- [ŋŋ] → waŋŋentu → to rear up
- [pp] → soppi → change
- [tt] → mbettee → surprise

- [ww] → xàwwi → reveal, expose, denounce
- [yy] → bàyyi → to leave, to stop doing something

- **Four pre-nasal consonants**

- [mb] → mbay → agriculture
- [nd] → ndaw → little, small, short
- [nj] → njaay → sale, commerce, goods
- [ng] → sàng → cover

- **Five consonantal sequences (nasal + consonant)**

- [mp] → simpi → take out, lift from off the ground
- [nt] → tontu → reply
- [nc] → sanc → to establish
- [nq] → fank → forecast, exorcicize, avoid

To close this study, let us remind that Wolof has four consonants which do accept gemination. They are : [f], [s], [r] et [q]. Moreover, three consonants help avoid the hiatus or the encounter of two vowels : they are h, y et w. Meanwhile, the latter sophistication is a bit old-fashioned and is completely out of date, even though it is still noticed among old people or in old Wolof. Here are some illustrations :

- Alaaji yibra jóob → El Hadji Ibra Diop
- Alaaji wuseynu sow → El Hadji Ousseynou Sow
- Ca hat um gàddaay ga → In 1, Hegira

The above-mentioned examples show that :

- [ w ] precedes the vowel [u] preceded by a vowel
- [ j ] precedes the vowel [ i ] preceded by a vowel
- [ h ] precedes the vowel [a] preceded by a vowel

A study of the Arabic consonants is now necessary for the sake of comparison. Something undeniable is that the Arab alphabets counts twenty-eight letters. Knowing that, it is our duty to show the resemblances between Wolofal and Arabic. Let us remind that the latter is the basis of the former.

Arabic, we have already mentioned it, accounts twenty-eight letters . But it is important to make clear that all those letters are consonants, if we discover that the vowels are just seven and are presented under a kind of diacritics place upon or under the consonant in question.

The Vowels or vocalizers are made up of three short ones and their three long counterparts, plus a last vowel which means absence of vocalization or neuter vowel. They are :

<b>[u :] spelt in Arabic</b>	اؤ
<b>[i :]</b>	اي
.	
<b>[a :] or [an]</b>	ا

The other three vocalizers are very difficult to represent. But we have to explicit that they are the short versions of the above. The seventh is just like an ‘o’ suspended on the concerned letter. Another interesting sound to know is the mark of gemination which is an inverted ‘3’ on the concerned letter. It is exactly like that : ّ

We are going to focus here on the consonants the Wolofs and the adepts of Wolofal borrowed to Arabic. The phonemes which have no equivalences in Wolof are the following :

[ ج ] or /dz/ or « djim » which is articulated as /dj/as in Jàmm (peace)

e.g : jaaluut is rendered as Jaaloot (Goliath)

[ ز ] or /z/ is wolofized into /s/

e.g : Ziare (to pay a holy visit to someone or a place)

[ ص ] /s/ ou « saad » is also wolofized into [s].

e.g : *sabr- sabri* = Patience

. [ ظ ] or /ž/ which is the voiced « saad » is pronounced [s] by Wolofs.

e.g : *Žalimuun* is exactly articulated in ‘‘*saalimuuna*’’ (The lost)

[ ذ ] or /ð/ which is a dental sound is also pronounced [s].

e.g : *ðahab* is rendered ‘‘*sëxëb*’’ [gold]

[ ش ] or /ʃ/ which is a fricative is, in Wolof, articulated [ s ]

e.g : *Chuhaib* is pronounced ‘‘Sooyibu’’ in Wolof

./ ʈ / which is a dental fricative is also pronounced [ s ].

e.g : *Uʈman* is wolofized *Usmaan* or *Osmaan* (*Othman*)

[ ه ], [ غ ], [ ق ], [ خ ], pronounced respectively as /h/, /gh/, /q/ and [x] are pronounced as a unique phoneme represented in Modern Wolof by [x].

e.g : - *AlQur'aan alxuraan* (The Holy Quran)

-*ghayr* is also rendered (Good Deed)

[ض] or /Ḍ/ is articulated [d].

e.g : *Shaxru RamaḌaan* est wolofisé en *sa'ru ramadaan* (The Month of Ramadan).

A comparison between Wolof and Arabic has led to what we call the rule of approximation, i.e. the Wolof replace the Arabic sounds by the closest in pronunciation that exist in their language, that is they Wolofise Arabic and create tremendous admixtures in writing and in speaking. In the same vein, writer will replace some inexistent Arabic sound by the closest in spelling to which they add diacritic signs. That is why some drastic and intelligent graphic innovation have been, so far, put under play to be as much original as possible. Let us have a look at them.

### C. Towards the birth of a new spelling recipe

As said earlier, Wolofal is rooted in revolt and cultural revival during the colonial era in Senegal. In the following lines, we are going to have a close look at what make it a new spelling recipe. Indeed, it is through the exploration of the graphic innovation that we can be able to name such an invention areligious literary revolution. In fact, based on the scholarly merit of the advocates of Wolofal, we can use the term 'literary recipe', but through a purely critical angle, we will see the Wolofal orthography as a completion and a reduction through graphic innovations of the Arabic letters. Studying those innovation based upon the rule of approximation or approximatism, we can say that the most remarkable ones are :

- ب for /p/ or /mb/
- ج for /c/, /nj/ and /ñ/
- ك for /ŋ/ ; /g/ and /ng/
- ف for /q/ or /x/
- غ for /x/and /q/
- خ for /q/ and /x/
- ه for /a/
- ع for /a/
- ح for /a/
- ط for / t /
- ت for / t /
- ش for /s/
- ص for /s/
- د for /nd/

## II. CRITICISM OF A NEO-ORTHOGRAPHY

After this short historical background, and a contrastive phonetic study, we deem it important to summarize the elements of historicity and technicality which mostly characterize the Wolofal orthography. Meanwhile, it is pregnant, and even necessary, to raise these questions:

- 1°) What was Wolofal, as an orthography, made up of?
- 2°) What are the rules and irregularities of that orthography?

## 2.1. The consonants

Wolofal is an **adoption** and an **adaptation** of the Arabic spelling system to write in the Wolof language, viz to produce Wolof words and literature. It was created following the Arabic alphabet. But the problem is that a contrastive analysis between Arabic and Wolof reveals that some sounds of Arabic do not exist in Wolof and vice-versa.

So, the **rule of approximation** was applied by the early specialists of Wolofal. Here are some illustrations:

- *the Wolof sound /g/ was transcribed by the Arabic /k/ with diacritical signs;*
- *the wolof /nj/ was transcribed by the Arabic /j/ with diacritical signs;*
- *the wolof sound /c/ was also transcribed by the Arabic /j/ with diacritical signs;*

The diacritical signs were placed above the Arabic sounds and formed a triangle of points. But today, we can see some sensitising or advertising documents designed for the rural world or the old folks or even the French illiterate that the diacritical sounds are place underneath the Arabic sound. This fact presents most of the time a distinctive character.

In fact, when the diacritical sign is placed upon the /j/ it is seldom read /nj/ and when it is under the /j/ it may be read /c/.

## 2.2 The vocalizations

Another obstacle to the mastery of Wolofal is related to the spelling of the Wolof vowels. Arabic reckons twenty-eight consonants to which must be added a vocalization system. We have the vocalisations in /a/, /i/, /u/ that are short vocalizations. Their corresponding long vocalizations are /a:/, /i:/, /u:/. Besides we have a third category of vocalizations which are /an/, /in/ and /un/. On top of that, there is the zero vocalization or neutral vocalization if we can say so that never occurs in initial position.

A glance at the Wolof vowel system tells a bit about its being closer to those of the Indo-European languages such as French or English. Indeed, as some Wolof consonants like /ñ/(as in the last syllable of the French “montagne”, /c/ that is close to the first consonant of the English “chair”, /ng/ as in the last consonant of “lingua”) do not exist in Arabic, the resort to the nearest Arabic sounds with diacritic signs was a major innovation, imagination and invention of the Wolof scholars.

In the same vein, the approximation and accommodation rules led to the rendering of the Wolof vowels which do not exist in Arabic by the nearest ones in their articulations. That is the reason why the following correspondences could and are also noticed:

- the Wolof /e/ is transcribed by the Arabic /i/;
- the Wolof /o/ is transcribed by the Arabic /u/;
- the Wolof /o:/ is transcribed by the Arabic /u:/;
- the Wolof /ee/ is transcribed /i:/ or /a:/;
- the Wolof /ë/ is transcribed /a/.

All these efforts were necessary by the creation of the Wolofal spelling because those Wolof vowels do not have vocalic counterparts in Arabic. In clearer terms, “necessity was the mother of invention”.

### III. A LITERARY REVOLUTION

Wolofal, in its salad days, presented literary works fraught with borrowings taken from classical Arabic. At the epoch of Islamicization with the *Seriñ Fàkk-taal* (**Mbuup 1981**), viz the Marabouts teaching the Quran around a night firelight (“fàkk” means “to clear” and “taal” means “to light” or “fire”), the Arabic borrowings dominated Wolof literature with the production of Wolof-translated books and stories.

Those marabouts took over after the Almoravides (Al Murabis) and Berbers who had spread Islam through the trans-Saharan trade and propaganda. At the arrival of the French colonialists, and with the opening of schools, the Wolof literature began to borrow words from French.

As far as the first category of borrowings is concerned, the nature of loan-words was a mixture of abstract and transcendental Quranic concepts and an addition of greetings, Bedouin equipments or days of the week. This first category of borrowings has brought about the fossilization of many words in Wolof, and the advent of calques and “servitudes”. The latter refer to borrowings which are seen as normal words in the target language and keep the same meaning as that in the source language. The concept “servitude” is used by **Vinay et al. 1977**. Here are some examples:

- “baabun” in Wolof refers to the English “baboon”

- “malayika” in Wolof refers to the Arabic “malaa’ika” (angels).

The second category of borrowings appeared with colonial administration. Therefore, the words used were related to the technical inventions, the administrative vocabulary such as:

- “pirisong” for “prison” (jail);
- “duwañ” for “douane” (customs office);
- “mareñ” for “marin” (sailor);
- “kapiteen” for “capitaine” (captain).

This list is far from being comprehensive for, there are some borrowings which denote the disrespect of the colonial administrators *vis-à-vis* the Indigenous. Terms like “Merde!” (Shit!) were sometimes quoted in the records of the Senegalese Wolof poets and historians. What can be noted from the creation, blooming and continuum of Wolofal is that it was a graphy invented by Negro-Africans who, facing the destruction of their political, social, economic and cultural entities, were in a real dilemma as all lost generations.

In actual fact, the dilemma resided in the fact that they were in front of two “Masters” (the Yaaram or the Arab and the Nasaraan or the White Man) and did not want to bow down or obey to none of them.

Subsequently, they operated a synthesis of those two cultures and chose Islam as it appeared closer to the Wolof cosmos and inside world. That choice was justified by the fact that there are appalling similarities between Islam and the Wolofs’ religious beliefs and traditions.

Today, we notice (in line with the quasi-rejection of the Nasaran’s culture by the Wolofs) many Arabic items in the vocabulary of the Wolofs whether they are in rural or urban areas. This is due to religion but does not mean that French, Portuguese, English words are not present in this Senegambian language. Because any economic and political space is at the same time an area of cultural and linguistic influences.

Meanwhile, borrowings have positive and negative aspects since they can respectively broaden or dwindle the original vocabulary of a given language. Another phenomenon which actuates in interculturalism is that borrowings are sometime more unilateral (negativity) that bilateral (positivity).

## CONCLUSION

One conclusion that could be drawn from this study is that the Wolofs of Senegal who are Muslims in their majority are more dependent, linguistically speaking, on the language of the Quran than classical Arabic is. The Arabic words are used for suasion, swearing and educational debates. Some people know that and use those words gain confidence, to deceive or even to convince. The reason for that is that Arabic is seen in the Wolof social milieu as a divine language. Despite all its peculiarities, Wolofal stands as a real revolution in the Senegalese society, and, should be seen as a denial of the “tabula rasa” theory.

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