

Printing the Koran in Bambara Translation: A Work in Progress

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While evidence of resort to Arabic script (*‘ajami*) for writing down Bambara (and Manding varieties in general) is admittedly more limited than is the case with other West African languages, this panel convenor’s works have shown how widespread, deeply rooted and developed is the use of Manding for oral explanations of the Koran, as well as of canonized Arabic texts, in traditional Islamic education in Mali. Such oral explanations, however, are conceived of more as an ongoing exegetical effort of approximation to the multi-layered meanings of a divine word that is, by definition, inimitable, than as a univocal and straightforward translation. In the last two decades, audiotape recorded versions of such oral translations have started to circulate, thus raising the issue of the fixation of a single, unchanging rendering of the Revelation. In the same period, written translations of excerpts from the Koran have started being published in printed booklets, together with other Islamic publications in Bambara, including several translations from medieval and modern religious texts in Arabic. Almost all these publications are the work of one single author/translator, a Wahhabi-oriented rural scholar whose name is al-Hajj Modibo Diarra, and all of them follow the official orthography of Bambara, adopting Latin script.

Although printing is likely to contribute even more than audio-recording to the fixation of a univocal understanding of the Holy Book, at a closer look all these printed translations appear as a work in progress, in at least two senses. Firstly, as late as early 2010, the translation of the entire text of the Koran had not been achieved yet. Secondly, the same surahs and verses have been re-translated several times, in different booklets, with slightly different renderings: significantly enough, the author/translator himself, during a fieldwork interview, told me of his inexhaustible quest for the most appropriate terms or phrases in order to render individual passages of God’s revelation. Without losing sight of the main doctrinal and epistemological issues at stake, this paper will explore some instances of this ongoing effort of translational and exegetical approximation, by comparing different renderings of the same Koranic passages, thus presenting some of the outcomes of a research which is also in progress.