

Beyond Orality: Digital Preservation & The African Ajami Library

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DIGITAL COMMONWEALTH APRIL 7, 2020



Boston University Libraries

Agenda

1. Introduction to the African Ajami Library (AAL)
2. Digital Collections Workflows for AAL
3. Use Case 1: Digitization Project in Senegal
4. Use Case 2: Digitization Project in Ethiopia
5. What's Next for AAL & Opportunities?

A photograph of Prof. Fallou Ngom, a Black man with glasses, wearing a light blue button-down shirt. He is sitting at his desk in an office, smiling at the camera. Behind him are wooden cabinets and a window. The window looks out onto a city street with a brick building labeled 'WYATT HILLERY' and some trees. On the windowsill, there are two mugs and a small wooden object. A sign with the word 'FRIGIDAIRE' is visible in the window. A printer is on the desk behind him. A semi-transparent dark red box with white text is overlaid on the bottom left of the image.

Prof. Fallou Ngom
Boston University

Director's Welcome



Fallou Ngom
Director, African Studies Center

It gives me a distinct pleasure to address the African Studies Center's community. I am honored by my appointment as Director of our distinguished African Studies Center. I am grateful to Dean Najam, Professor Longman, who led the center skillfully for the past eight years, and the faculty and staff who have sustained the center's tradition of excellence.

The center is pleased to welcome two new colleagues: Cosmas Ochieng and Mahesh Karra. Professor Ochieng's interests lie in the theory, policy and practice of development; global climate change and environmental policy; science, technology and innovation policy; and the political

economy of African development. Professor Karra's interests focus on development economics, health economics, quantitative methods, and applied demography. Please join me in welcoming our colleagues who bring new expertise to the center and the Pardee School of Global Studies.

ALSO IN ab

> Overview

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BU African Studies Center & Libraries Partnership

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African Ajami Library in OpenBU (since 2011)

hdl.handle.net/2144/1896

African Ajami Library

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Issue Date Authors Titles Subjects

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AAL is a collaborative initiative between Boston University and the West African Research Center (WARC) in part funded by the British Library's Endangered Archives Programme. The AAL Project is led by Dr. Fallou Ngom (Professor of Anthropology and Director of the African Studies Center at Boston University). AAL is envisioned as a digital "Library of Alexandria" of Islamized Africa, a continental open access public repository of aggregated Ajami materials. The first step in building AAL took place the summer of 2011. Dr. Ngom and Mr. Roger Brisson, Head of Metadata Services of Boston University traveled to Senegal to lead a workshop at WARC focused on digitization techniques of endangered Wolof Ajami manuscripts. Five people were trained in the workshop, including Mr. Ablaye Diakite (AAL-Team Member), Mr. Birane Gassama (AAL-Team member), Mr. Abdoulaye Niang (WARC Technical Director), Mr. Aliou Badara Sarr (WARC Assistant Librarian), and Mr. Ali Diop (an independent scholar).

Although written records are rarely regarded as part of sub-Saharan Africa's intellectual heritage, important bodies of Ajami literature have existed in Oromo, Somali, Tigrigna, Kiswahili, Amharic, and Malagasy in East Africa, and Bamanakan, Mandinka, Kanuri, Yoruba, Berber, Hausa, Wolof, and Fulfulde in West Africa for centuries. In South Africa, Muslim Malay slaves produced the first written record of Afrikaans in Ajami. The neglect is due to a number of factors, including the lack of an Ajami public depository, the limited number of individuals with the linguistic skills and cultural background required to analyze Ajami documents, and a lack of recognition of the cultural value of Ajami texts, as many Europeans and Arab scholars with the linguistic competence to study these materials have often deemed them of little scholarly interest. Most assume that sources of useful knowledge on Africa are either oral or written in European languages. Yet, Ajami traditions of Africa are centuries-old and are quite varied, consisting of satirical, polemical and protest poetry, as well as biographies, eulogies, genealogies, talismanic resources, therapeutic medical manuals, family journals, business transactions, historical records, speeches, texts on administrative and diplomatic matters (correspondence between Sultans and provincial rulers), Islamic jurisprudence, behavioral codes, grammar, and even visual arts. The primary goal of AAL is to ensure that these materials are no longer treated as insignificant vestiges, but rather as major sources of local African knowledge, without which a holistic and in-depth understanding of Islamized Africa will remain elusive.

Sub-communities within this community

[Mandinka Ajami and Arabic Manuscripts of Casamance Senegal](#) [296]

Collections in this community

[Dagbanli Ajami and Arabic Manuscripts of Northern Ghana](#) [0]

[Fulfulde & Kanuri Ajami Materials of Northeastern Nigeria](#) [0]

Search

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DEPOSIT MATERIALS

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DISCOVER

Author

[Unknown \(83\)](#)

Manuscript Locations

- Senegal (*Wolof and Mandinka*)
- Guinea (*Pular*)
- Ghana (**Dagbanli*)
- Nigeria (*Hausa, Fulfulde, Kanuri, Nupe*, Yoruba**)
- Madagascar (*Malagasy*)
- Ethiopia (*Amharic**)

* Coming soon

Detailed Map: bit.ly/2nrZCjz



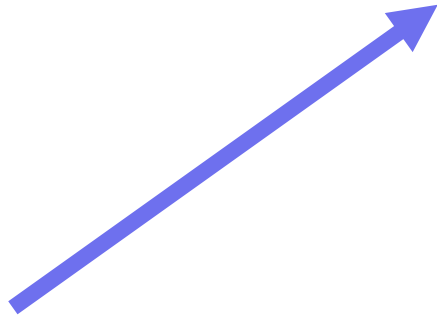
AAL Project Workflows (High-Level)

N.B. project team works with local experts to translate into culturally appropriate context and workflow

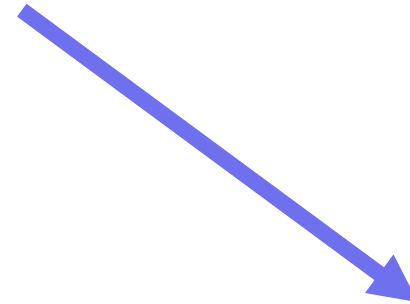
**1. Prep:
Digitization
Guidelines**



**2.
Fieldwork
Digitization**



**3. Google
Drive
for
Review**



**5. Upload
OpenBU**



**4. Post-
processing**

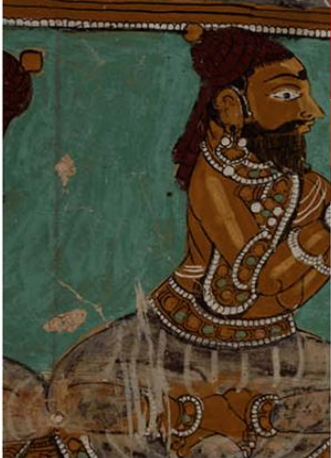
See Detailed Example:
<https://tinyurl.com/y2buevdw>

Use Case 1

Senegal



British Library/Arcadia Endangered Archives (2017)



Search our website
Our website Main Catalogue


Catalogues & Collections Discover & Learn What's On Visit Business Support Shop Join

Endangered Archives Programme

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Digital Preservation of Mandinka Ajami Materials of Casamance, Senegal (EAP1042)

Search all endangered archives



Visiting the Cisse community

Aims and objectives

For centuries, Ajami, the modified Arabic scripts used in writing African languages, have been deeply embedded in the history and culture of many Islamized societies of Africa. Ajami has played an important role in the spread of Islam in Africa and continues to be used by the speakers of more than ten major African languages for everything from poetry and historical writing to road signs and advertisements. Nevertheless, Ajami is little known outside the communities where it is used. Many of the oldest Ajami manuscripts are in danger, and few of those with a scholarly interest in these materials have access to them.

The Mandinka Ajami manuscripts to be digitized in this project are precious. Ajami texts in Mande languages (including Bamanankan, Eastern Maninka, Western Mandinka (or Mandinka), Jakhanke, Jula, and Susu) are among the least documented. Only a few Mandinka Ajami texts are available to scholars compared to the rich collections of Hausa, Fulfulde, and Wolof Ajami texts recently made available to scholars thanks to the support of the EAP. This project will enable scholars to have access to thousands of pages of Mandinka Ajami texts largely unknown to

Project details

DOI:
<https://doi.org/10.15130/EAP1042>

Grant holder(s):
Professor Fallou Ngom

Host Institution:
Boston University

Archival partners:
West African Research Center
Dakar

Award year:
2017

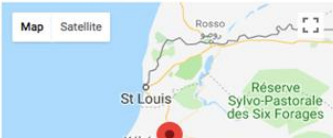
Project duration:
15 months

Location(s) of archival material:
Senegal

Award:
£44,100

Type:
Major

Legal:
Access for research purposes only.



Major: £44,100
15 months

Supported by



<http://eap.bl.uk/project/EAP1042>

Location: Casamance, Senegal



Maps of West Africa and Southern Senegal region where fieldwork was conducted.

EAP 1042 Digitization Team and Partners

Partners: West African Research Center (overseas office of WARA at BU) Abdoulaye Niang (Administrative and Finance Director), Amadou Dieng (IT and Logistics Manager), and Aliou Badara Sarr (Assistant Librarian)

Fieldwork Team (All from Senegal):

- Ablaye Diakité (Local Project Manager)
- Ibrahima Yaffa (General Field Facilitator (highly respected Mandinka elder))
- Ibrahima Ngom (Photographer)

BU Team:

- Fallou Ngom (Director of African Studies Center and Project PI)
- Eleni Castro (Technical Lead)



EAP 1042 Project Timeline ~24 months

Oct-Dec 2017: Plan, buy & test equipment in Boston

Jan 2018: 3-day digitization workshop @ WARC in Dakar

Jan 2018-19: Fieldwork in Ziguinchor, Kolda and Sédhiou regions. (~18,000 pages)
→ Team send files to Google Drive for review/feedback

Spring 2019*: Post-processing and curation at BU

Summer 2019: Send hard drives to British Library + WARC

Sept 2019: Upload to AAL on OpenBU

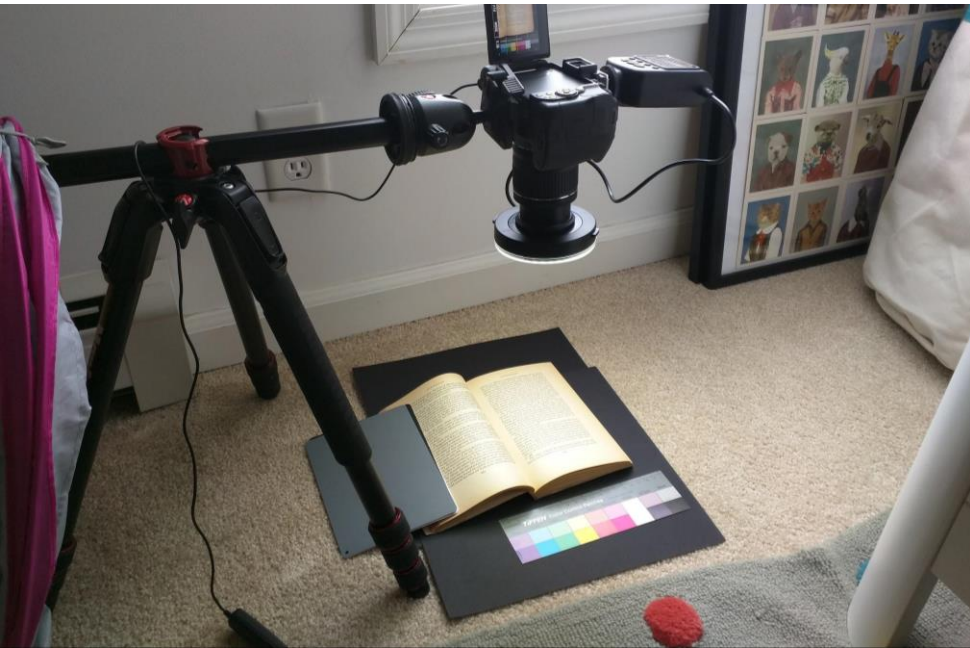
*No cost extension to complete post-processing



Phase 1. Purchase & Test Equipment in Boston

Note: All equipment is staying at WARC in Dakar after fieldwork is completed for more work of this nature.

See list of equipment & tech used.





Phase 2. Digitization Training in Dakar (3 days)

Phase 3. Fieldwork (Digitization & Interviews)

Manuscript owners/authors:

1. Select the manuscripts
2. Provide metadata via interview
3. Grant us license to put online
4. Financially compensated per page.



Images: Ibrahima Ngom

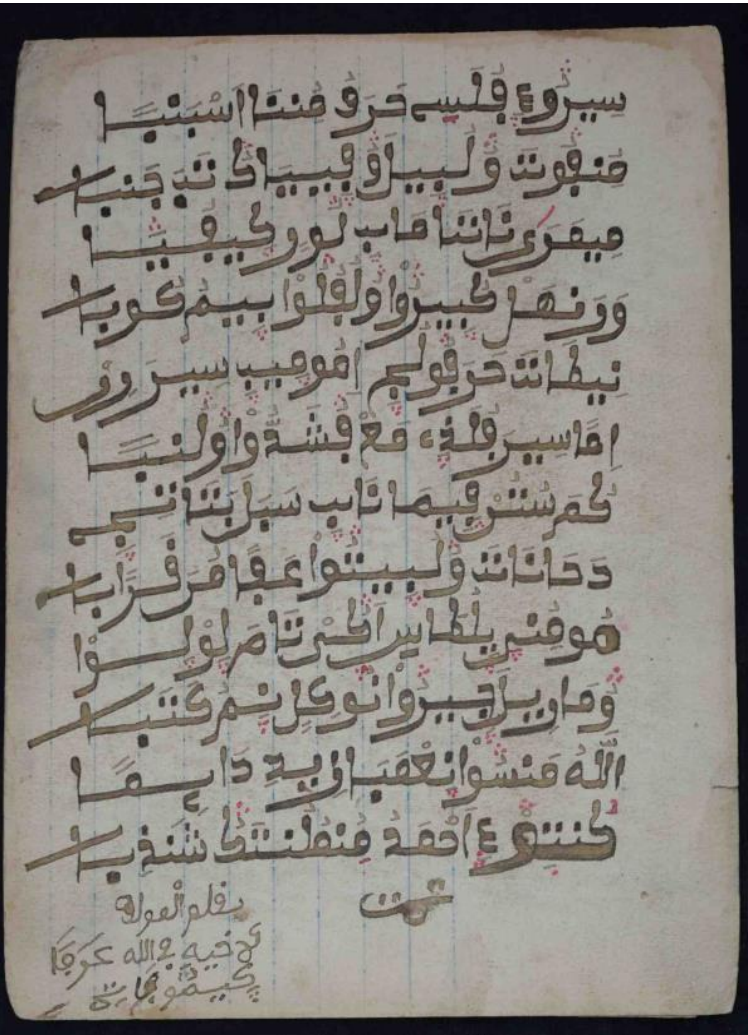
Phase 4. Post-Processing and Archive

- Converted Raw to Tiff (+18,000 pages, 220 manuscripts, 58 collections)
- Reviewed and converted spreadsheet metadata to Dublin Core
- Made PDFs as access copy (JPEG issue for larger manuscripts)
- 3 complete digital* copies distributed internationally:
 1. Sent master to local host country (WARC, Senegal)
 2. Sent to British Library EAP (w/ checksums)
 3. Stays at Boston University for deposit into OpenBU

*Manuscript owners/authors keep the paper copies & copyright

What Kinds of Manuscripts?

1. Multilingual Texts



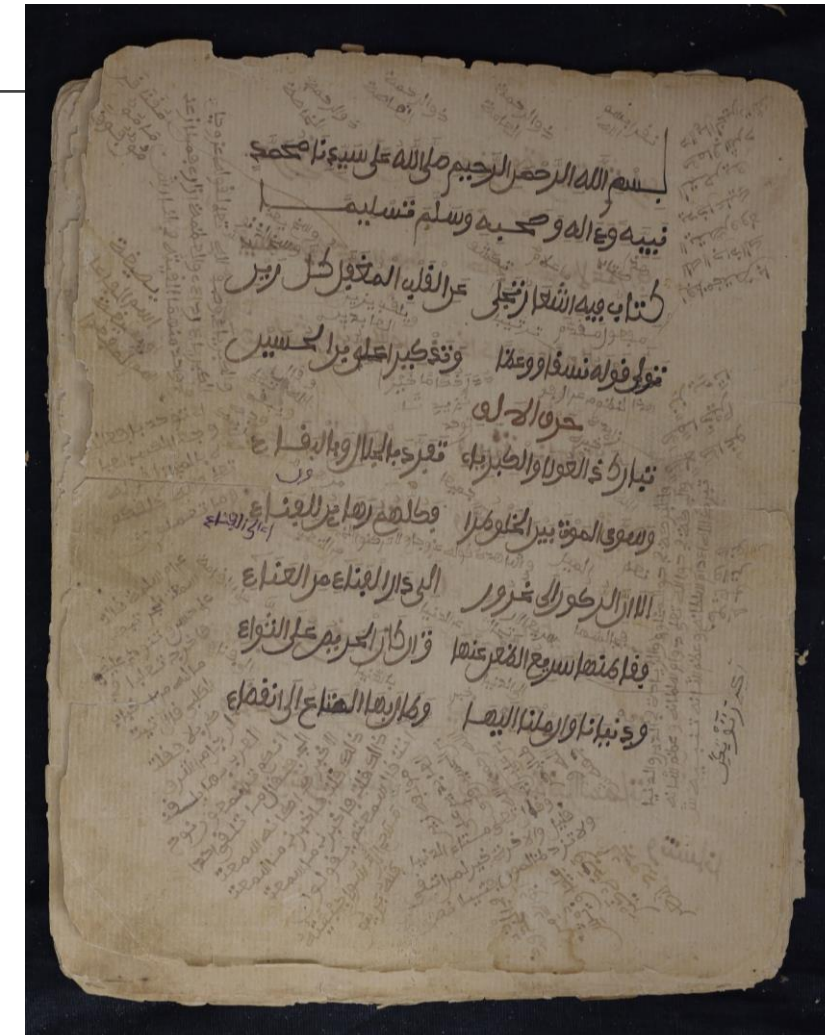
<https://hdl.handle.net/2144/37347>

2. Illustrations



<https://hdl.handle.net/2144/37405>

3. Living Documents



<https://hdl.handle.net/2144/37699>



Technical Challenges & Lessons Learned

- Manuscript Photography in Non-Studio Conditions (portability is key!)
 - Macro Light Ring
 - Best practices (Hill Museum/EAP)
- Camera overheated after 1 hour of work
- Internet bandwidth in rural areas
 - delayed upload or wireless broadband router (\$)
 - Extra backup (hard drive and SD card)
- Troubleshooting issues remotely (WhatsApp)
- Manuscripts > 300 pages for repository



Use Case 2 Ethiopia



Ethiopia mission – Context & Background



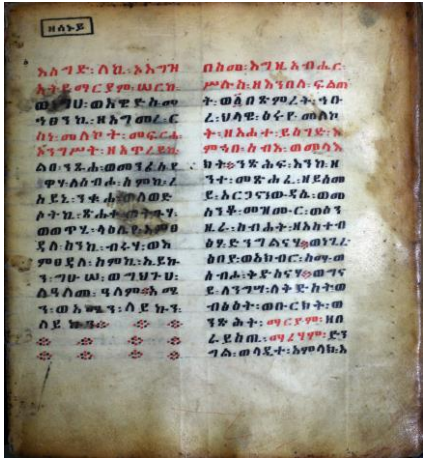
- Latest & very recent mission. Scale is relatively small & done in relatively short-time. Scouting mission which turns to digitization mission.
- It all started with casual conversation with Prof. Ngom
- Initial attempt to link with partners in Ethiopia
- Plan for scouting mission & accidental meeting with local resource person
- From scouting to digitization mission. Decision to involve ASL staff.
- Ethiopians partners on board upon arrival

Location: Bahir Dar , Ethiopia

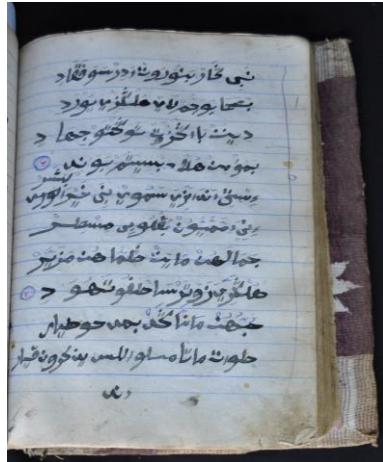


Maps of East Africa and the region of Ethiopia where fieldwork was conducted.

Lessons from the mission.



Walter Havighurst Special
Collections Library
at Miami University, Oxford, Ohio



Amharic written in Arabic characters



Amharic written in Ethiopic script

The mission has proven:

- Beyond doubt that Ethiopia's Ajami tradition is rich & the country present complexity to the discipline.
- ASL capable of providing language/project as well as the technical know-how.
- Importance of involving Ajami researchers

Ge'ez written in Ethiopic
script

Boston Team

Muhammed Jawed, Boston Contact

Fallou Ngom, Director BU African Studies Center

Eric Schmidt and Natasha Patel, BU ASC

Eleni Castro, BU Digital Scholarship Services, Post Processing

Beminet Desalegn, BU Student Intern, Metadata Creation

Beth Restricker, Head, African Studies Library

Dr. K. Matthew Dames, BU University Librarian

Fieldwork Team

Gabe Adugna, BU Librarian, Interviewer and Project Facilitator

Rachel Dwyer, BU Librarian, Photography

Ahmed Tayib, Local Coordinator

Collaborators in Ethiopia

Dr. Endris Mohammed, Professor, Addis Ababa University Linguistics Department

Hussein Kassim Mohammedsani, PhD candidate in Linguistics - AAU



A Timeline: Rachel's involvement

Late October: Asked to be involved in this project

November 1: Meeting with Muhammed Jawed and Fallou Ngom

November 12: Meet with Eleni Castro regarding equipment and workflow

November 18: Identify local coordinator and potential itineraries

December 2: Budget(s) and itineraries created

December 11: Travel booked

December 12: Equipment ordered

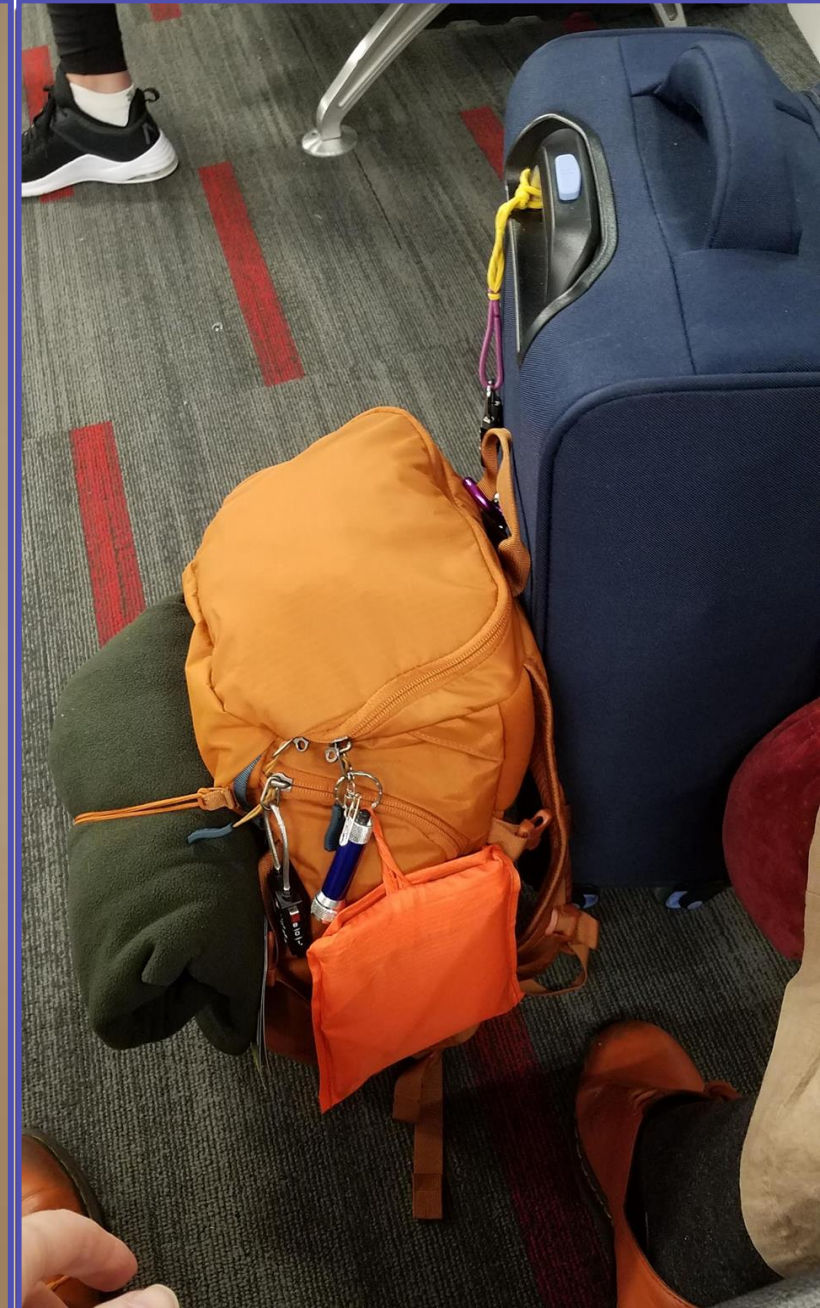
December 31: Rachel flies to Ethiopia

January 3-9: Photographing manuscripts

January 11-15: Meetings with scholars and academic departments in Addis Ababa

Equipment

Emphasis on being
lightweight and portable



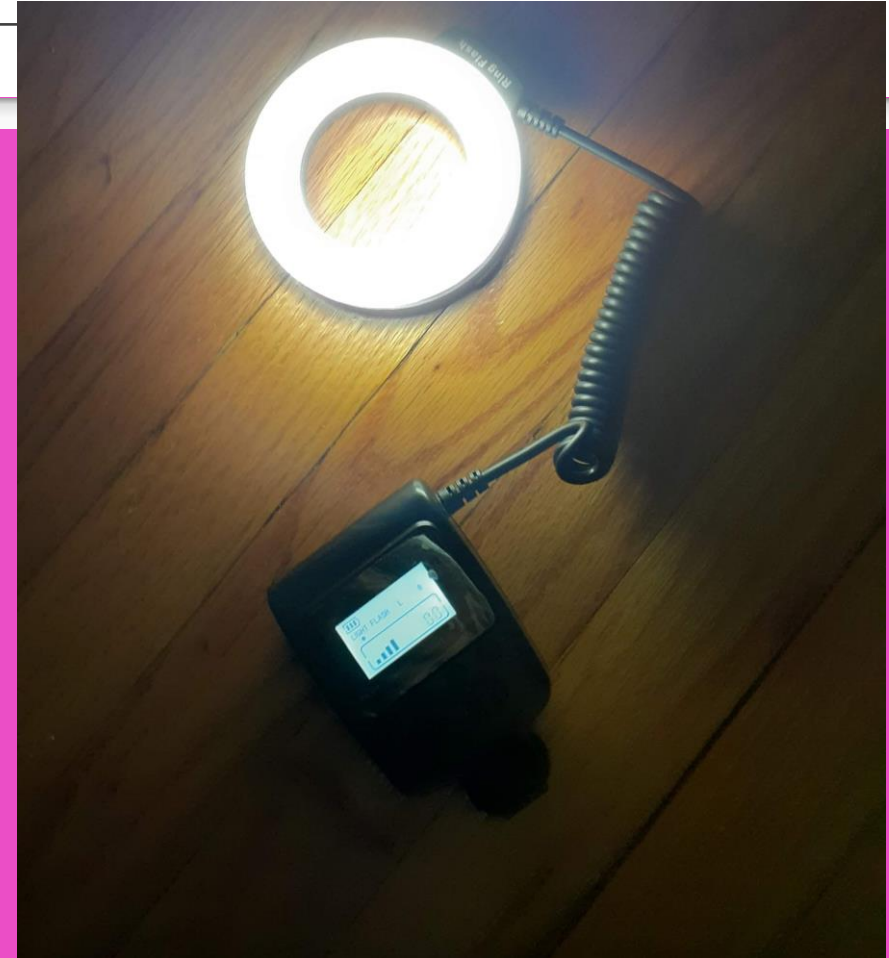
Equipment



Camera



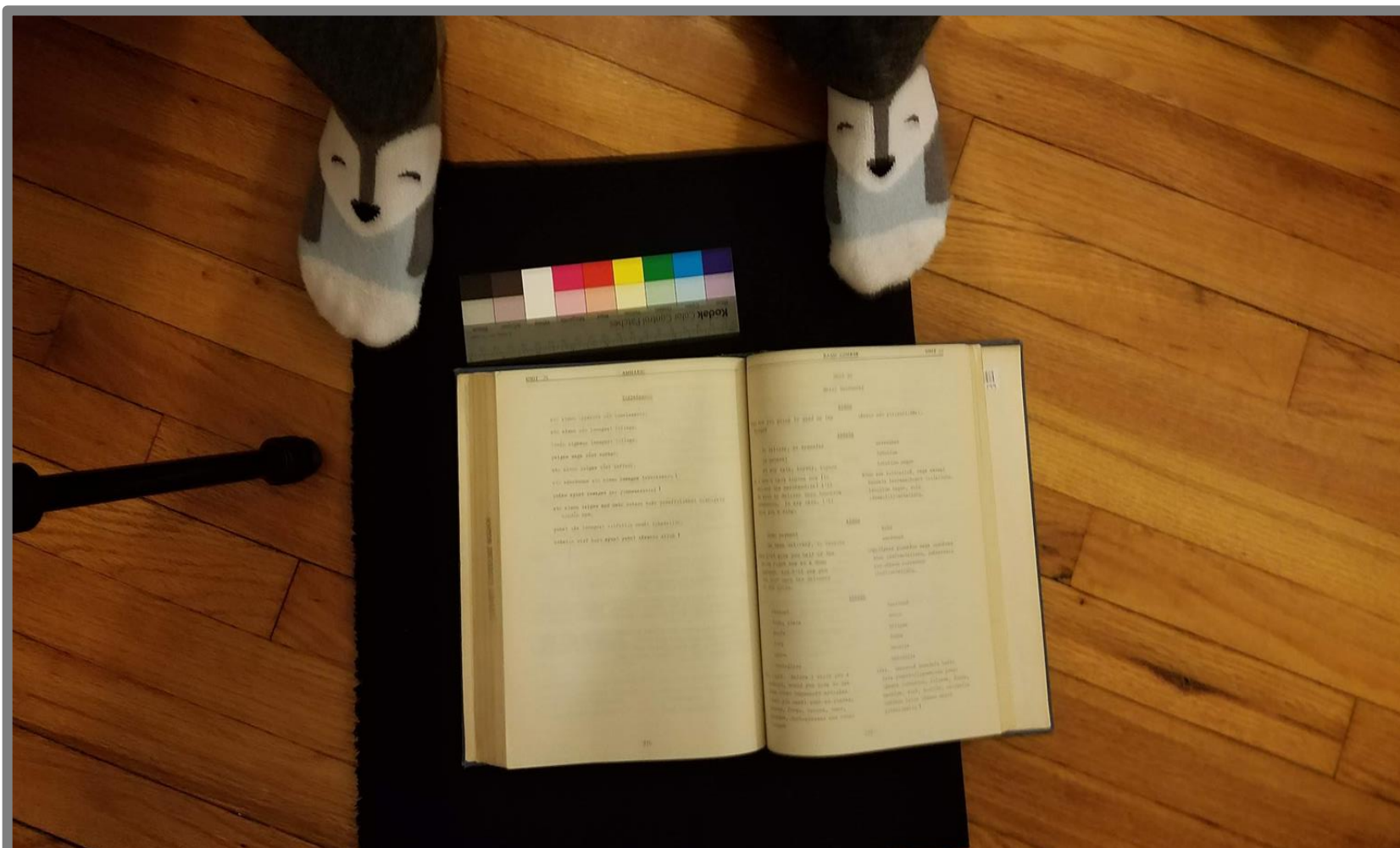
Lens



Light



Practice Session



Location: Bahir Dar



Rahnile Hotel, Bahir Dar

Location: Hamusit



بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم
 مسكنا بكتبا و تيسا چد د نكو
 لهما دمه تسيان لهادا نو
 دمه خون د ن شوانست لاسناد
 بني لاي يور د يا الله رحمة
 بالكم يا صحابا بوند بسيت
 بتكلموم روحيت و د ا
 بق بله تا وني بني مبرات
 مهدي سئونپال قلموني ورك
 نابلونني ودانت انكده و د ا
 كندني مونني يلم يحميني نو و
 دك انور و هلا حيات قو طرو
 و دفت انور و يقير انكادا





Technical Challenges & Lessons Learned

- Practice your photography at home until you can do it in your sleep!
- If you experience technical problems, go through a methodical troubleshooting checklist.
- In fieldwork, you can't plan for everything. Changes and set-backs happen. Don't let it throw you!
- Don't underestimate the effects of travel: jetlag, communication and language barriers.
- Every project is an opportunity to make connections for future projects and collaborations.

Future Opportunities for the African Ajami Library

- Annotation & Translation:
 - NEH Collaborative Research Grant (current [RZ-260906-18](#))
 - Extend functionality in repository for scholars (via tools like IIF?)
- Transcription: Extending Unicode support
- Domain-specific metadata for African Ajami Studies
- Continue connecting East & West Africa
- We would love more partners + collaborators

Additional Readings and Resources

Fallou Ngom. (2016). Muslims beyond the Arab world : The odyssey of 'Ajami and the Murīdiyya (Religion, culture, and history series). New York: Oxford University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190279868.003.0001>

Fallou Ngom. (2016). "Chapter 11. Murid Ajami sources of knowledge: the myth and the reality." Maja Kominko (ed.), From Dust to Digital: Ten Years of the Endangered Archives Programme. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2015, <http://dx.doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0052.11>

Torborg, Wayne. (2016). "Hill Museum & Manuscript Library: Available Light Photography Tips". Online:
<http://www.vhmml.us/Resource/Downloads/Available%20Light%20Photography%20Tips.pdf>

Jody Butterworth, Andrew Pearson, Patrick Sutherland and Adam Farquhar (eds.), Remote Capture: Digitising Documentary Heritage in Challenging Locations. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2018.
<https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0138>

Fallou Ngom & Eleni Castro (2019) "Beyond African orality: Digital preservation of Mandinka 'Ajami archives of Casamance." History Compass., Vol. 17. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12584>

Hasan Muhammad Kawo. (2015) Islamic Manuscript Collections in Ethiopia. In: *Islamic Africa*, Vol. 6, no. 2, <https://doi.org/10.1163/21540993-00602012>.

Giorgio Bant. {2018}. Ajami traditions in the Horn of Africa and the concept of isograph. Powerpoint slides deposited in Academia.edu.

Questions? & Thanks!



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