

Arabic Script as Active Agent in Senegalese Visual Culture

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As a Ph.D. candidate in art history, my specific area of interest is Islamic visual expression in Senegal and the centrality of Arabic script in this expression of faith. During summer 2010, I spent two months in Dakar where I met with a number of artist-calligraphers. These artists are addressing the importance of developing local traditions of Arabic calligraphy to replace the often low-quality of products that are widely available from China, Dubai, and elsewhere in the eastern Islamic world.

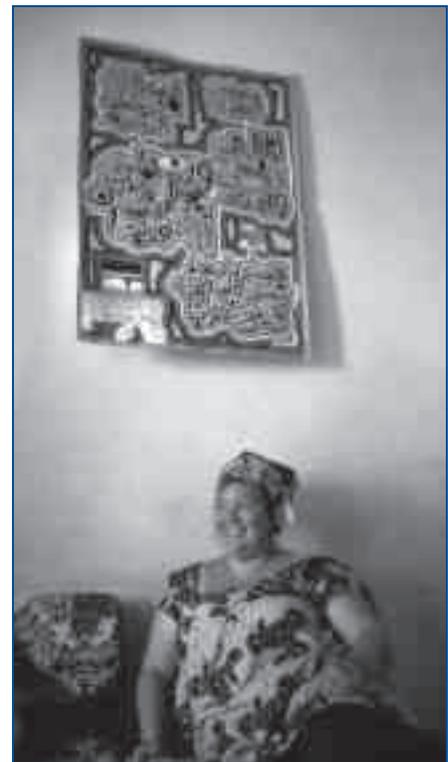
Throughout my coursework and two visits to Dakar, I have found that the role of Arabic writing in everyday life is prominent, despite – or perhaps because of – the fact that it is not the spoken language of the region. Dakar is a culturally and linguistically complex metropolis in which the Arabic script that diffused throughout the region via trans-Saharan trade is taking on a life of its own within the visual landscape, at once modern and steeped in history and time-honored demonstrations of faith. Though Dakar was never a part of the historic trans-Saharan trade networks, today it serves as a modern cultural and commercial hub, drawing populations from throughout Muslim West Africa, the Maghrib, and beyond.

In Senegal, the most ubiquitous

presence of Arabic writing is also ironically the most invisible, and comes in the form of *gris-gris*, or protective amulets that most people wear around their waists, necks, and/or upper arms underneath their clothes. Another way that Arabic serves a talismanic function in Senegalese culture is within the spectacle of traditional wrestling, or *lamb ji*. Here, rather than being invisible, wrestlers' accumulations of many types of *gris-gris*, including amulets, huge jugs of *safara* (writing water), and white tunics inscribed with Arabic writing and *khawatim* (magic squares) are all central to the spectacle within the arena and the intimidation tactics among the athletes.

Finally, many of the same spiritually protective functions of Arabic script, particularly Qur'an and religious poetry passages, are retained in the calligraphic fine art work of many of the artists I have begun to work with in Dakar, including Yelimane Fall, Abdoul Aziz Fall (called Dabakh), Hady Kane, Samba Ly, Moustapha Seck, and Pape Ibrahima Ndoye. This short visit, partially funded by the Center for African Studies, allowed me to conduct initial interviews with artists and document some of their works. To further prepare for field research in Senegal, I have studied both Arabic and Wolof, supported by FLAS fellowships in summer 2008 and academic years 2008-2009, 2009-2010, and 2010-2011. Furthermore, I took additional Arabic courses at the Arabic Language Institute of Fez, in Fez, Morocco in summer 2009. The next stage of my project will be to conduct long-term research in Senegal, focusing on Dakar, to document the variety of artists working with Arabic calligraphy in Senegal, reception of their works in the public sphere, and aspects of personal and collective religious expression contained

and projected through their works beyond the literal words depicted on surfaces. In other words, the question is not only "What do the words say?" but also, "What does how the words look say?"



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