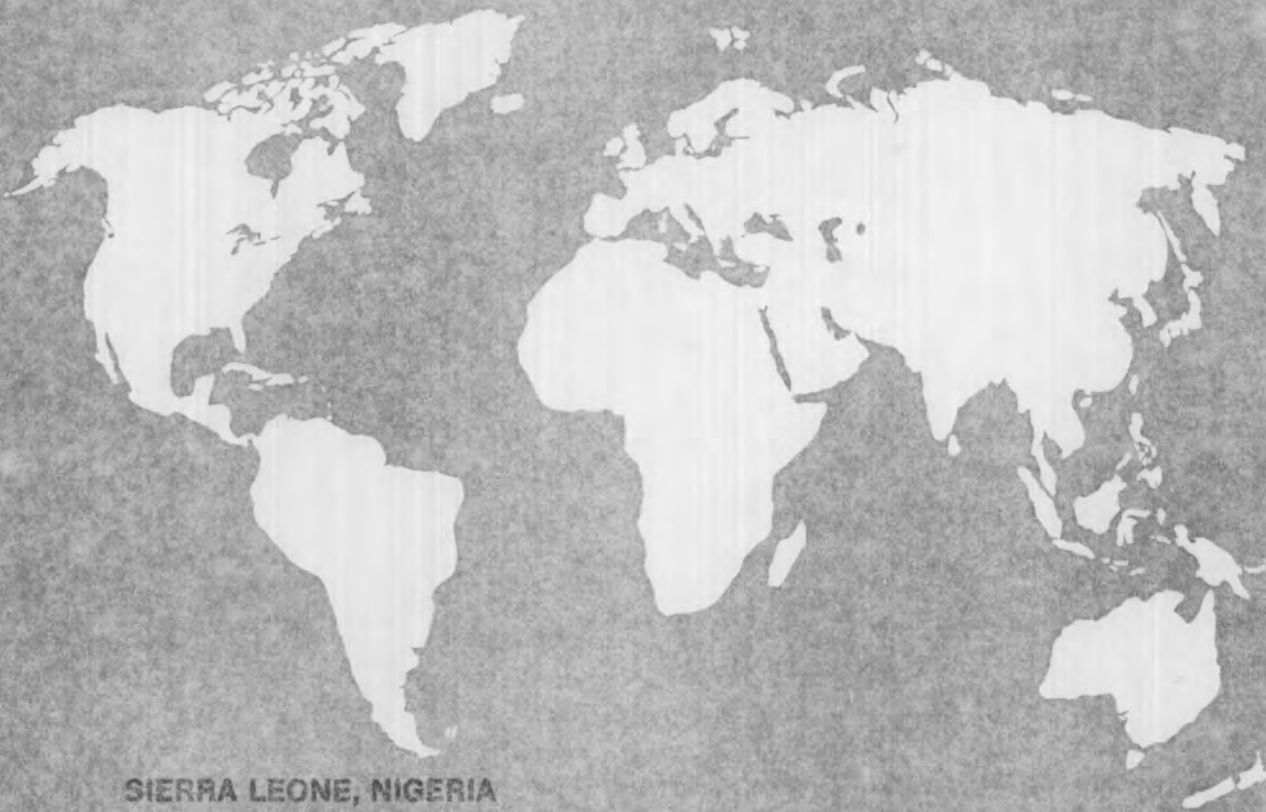




# Local Languages and Literacy in West Africa

by Barbara Harrell-Bond



## SIERRA LEONE, NIGERIA

The political significance of widespread illiteracy in contemporary Africa is a matter for urgent concern and action. There may be a reservoir of "hidden literacy" that can be tapped in countries which have the technical and economic resources to print newspapers in local languages.

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## LOCAL LANGUAGES AND LITERACY IN WEST AFRICA

by Barbara Harrell-Bond

November 1977

In the 1960s there was great enthusiasm for providing universal primary education in Africa and most of the newly independent West African states set 1980 as the target date for achieving this goal. Efforts to provide schools for all primary-age children met with enormous difficulties, and the target date was repeatedly pushed forward. In 1970 it was estimated that in Africa 70 percent of all adults over the age of 14 years were illiterate. The population of African and Arab states have the largest percentage of illiterates. Illiteracy correlates very closely with poverty, and although statistics are no doubt imprecise, at least 80 percent of the population of the least developed countries (that is, countries having a per capita product of less than \$100 per annum) are illiterate. Most of these countries are in Africa. Literacy is variously defined to mean some ability to read and write in the official or a local language. Although it is estimated that the proportion of illiterates within the world population is declining, in absolute terms, the number of illiterates is growing each year.

In most educational programs in West Africa the emphasis has been on encouraging literacy in the official language, a West European language. Missionaries, from the beginning of their contact with West Africa, encouraged the translation of religious texts into local languages and these and other texts have been used as primers in missionary education. The work of specialists in linguistics has encouraged a broader interest in the use of indigenous languages for education, and a body of literature and newspapers has emerged which has great appeal, especially in rural communities.<sup>1</sup>

The political significance of widespread illiteracy in contemporary Africa and the problems of linguistic diversity even among the literate are matters for urgent concern and action. The Nigerian draft

constitution has recognized the importance of an informed populace, and has charged the mass media "to uphold the responsibility and accountability of the government to the people" (Cap. 2, Sec. 16). Although the federal government has a policy of providing universal primary education which will eventually increase the numbers in the population who are literate to varying degrees in English, Hausa, Tiv, Ibo, Yoruba, and other local languages, it has no policy with regard to the publication of newspapers in any but the official language, English. There have been sporadic attempts to print newspapers in various local languages, but most of these efforts have been short-lived.

Considering that Nigeria, at least, has the technical and economic resources to produce newspapers in local languages, it is necessary to look elsewhere for explanations for the failure of this government and of governments of other West African countries to respond to this need. As one journalist put it, "Happily one of the conclusions of the FESTAC Colloquium is that Africans should, more and more, make use of their languages in teaching and communications...millions of Nigerians do not read the costly Nigerian dailies, nor do they benefit from the English language programs of the radio and television stations."<sup>2</sup> The situation is similar to that in Sierra Leone, from which most of the data for this Report are derived.

From the onset of colonialism, part of its cultural imperialism included the attitude toward literacy which was to define it strictly with reference to European languages. Colonists in the nineteenth century did not appreciate that West Africa had a very long history of Arabic literature which dealt with religious, historical, and economic matters. Scholars of the twentieth century have focused upon the development of this literature and specialized centers

for the study of Arabic documents have been established in such places as Mali, Senegal, Nigeria, and Ghana. Outside these circles of specialists, however, considerable ignorance remains regarding the spread of Islamic religion and education throughout West Africa, a process which had begun long before European penetration.

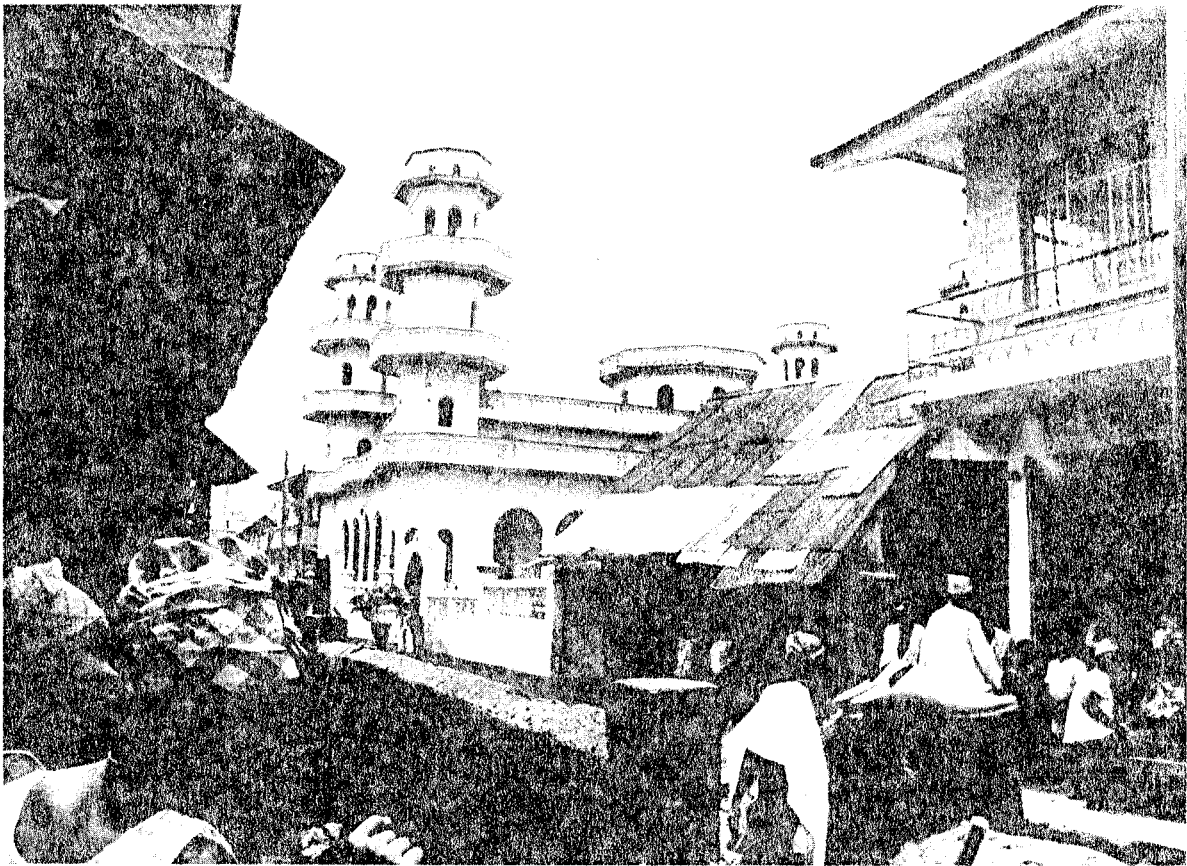
There is evidence that a series of Muslim-dominated states had been established before the early eighteenth century and the spread of Islam was facilitated by the activities of thousands of teachers and missionaries who established centers of religious learning. In 1872 Dr. E.W. Blyden, a Sierra Leonean settler, visited such a school for advanced study in the north of the country which he describes as

...a sort of University town—the Oxford of this region—where are collected over five hundred young men studying Arabic and Koranic literature.

...The President of this institution is Fode Tarawally, celebrated throughout the country for his learning. He was educated at Tuba, a town in the Fulah country of great literary repute. Fode Tarawally is of the Soosoo tribe. His father before him, all of his brothers, and all of his sons have been distinguished for their learning. ...<sup>3</sup>

The expansion of trade routes throughout West Africa was facilitated by literacy in Arabic which resulted from the founding of such educational institutions. Influential families invited teachers into their territories to establish mosques and schools.

Both the religious functions of Islam and Muslim education were important in the process of "strangers" becoming established among the indigenous peoples. Islamic rituals and the Arabic language itself were often perceived by local rulers and commoners as having spiritual powers which



Islam is the religion of the vast majority of the population in many parts of West Africa and training in the Arabic alphabet and phonetic system is part of the educational experience of every young Muslim.

could be transformed into practical advantage and they sought the assistance of the *marabūt*...or holy man who could assure strength, protection, good harvests, and success. In order to improve their relations with Muslim notables, local rulers often sent their sons to study the Quran and the rudiments of Arabic with Muslim teachers.<sup>4</sup>

Recognition of the practical use of the Arabic language was forced upon the colonialists by the fact that correspondence between them and African rulers was written in Arabic from at least the beginning of the nineteenth century. In 1809, for example, there were three letters in Arabic addressed to the Governor of Sierra Leone,<sup>5</sup> and correspondence in Arabic had increased so significantly by the 1870s it was considered necessary to create an Arabic translation service for the government of Sierra Leone.<sup>6</sup>

Because the religion of Islam had become so widespread in West Africa by this time and the language of the Koran (Arabic) was considered to be a sacred script, the teaching of Arabic script in order to recite the Koran was extended to the commoners and was no longer confined to the families of the ruling elite. Arabic was not only used for the more conventional religious reasons, but was also widely employed in the making of religious charms. In addition to an Arabic religious literature, the language was utilized for family and regional histories and for documentation of political and trade matters. Correspondence between African rulers included the writing of passports or letters of greeting or introduction which permitted travelers—often a trade or diplomatic delegation—to travel from one territory to another.

### Arabic and the Writing of Local Languages

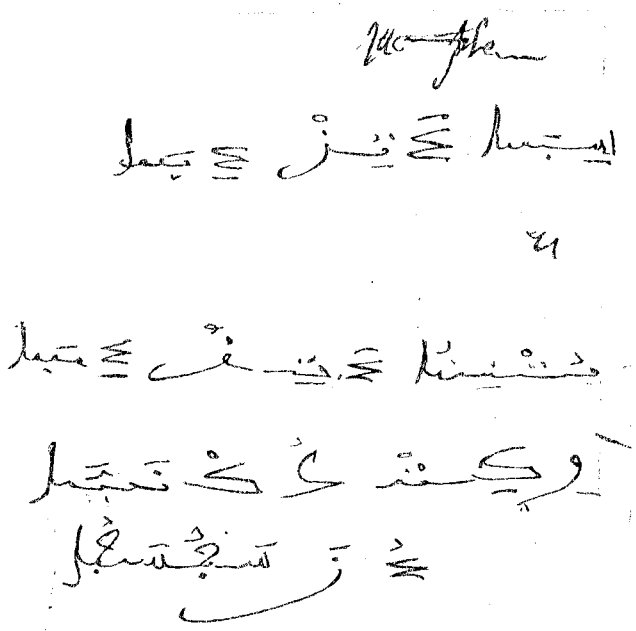
In the 1870s T.G. Lawson, Government Interpreter for Sierra Leone, and Mohammed Sanusi, Government Arabic Letter Writer, complained that some of the communications they were receiving were not written in "proper Arabic." Scholars who have used the Arabic Letter Books in their research have also discovered that many letters were written in a variety of African languages, *using Arabic script*. Africans had, in fact, been using Arabic script to write their languages for some time. One early instance of this occurred in Sierra Leone when an African ruler, Alimami Dala Modu Dumbuya,

was charged by Muslim leaders to report to them about English law. He sent them a report "written in the Mandingo Tongue with Arabic letters."<sup>7</sup>

Evidence of a considerable degree of literacy in various African languages written in Arabic script has been observed by scholars working in Sierra Leone and Guinea as well as in other parts of West Africa. In 1968 one historian wanted to send a letter to thank some of his Muslim informants living in the countryside. His cook/steward, who claimed to be literate in Arabic, offered to write the letter. The historian asked a colleague who read Arabic to check over the contents of the letter and to make sure it was written in proper Arabic. The letter, however, had not been written in Arabic, but in Temne, one of the local languages, *using Arabic script*. Unfortunately, for this reason the letter was not sent, although it was later discovered that it would have been perfectly understandable to its recipients. In 1969 another scholar was on a tour of northern Sierra Leone to collect Islamic source material. He was given a document written in Arabic script which was in the Susu language. This document is a summary of a political history of the Sankoh family of northwest Sierra Leone and Guinea.

In the course of conducting research on family law in Sierra Leone in 1971, I discovered an "illiterate" headman had been keeping detailed court records in Arabic. He had a large number of bound journals which had been filled over many years of hearing disputes. As the records had been kept in great detail and included records of burials, marriages, and births, they promised to be a rich source of information of customary legal practices. I invited a scholar of classical Arabic to accompany me to the court in order to ascertain just how much work would be involved in translating at least a small sample of the cases. He found that he was unable to read the cases and exclaimed that they were *not written in Arabic*. My cook, who had happened to come along on this visit to the court and who was "illiterate," explained that he could read many of the cases and that they were written in Krio, Temne, and Mende. It seemed likely if one's "illiterate" cook could read Krio and Temne written in Arabic script and if the "illiterate" headman was able to keep records in three languages, perhaps other people assumed to be illiterate had the same skill. The cook, together with the gentleman I employed as night watchman (who was able to read and write

Temne in Arabic script), made a sign for the door which read, "Beware of the Dog." Nearly every tradesperson who came to the door read the sign and smiled at the unexpected recognition of their literacy.



"Beware of the Dog."

The success of this experiment prompted me to discuss this hidden literacy with a Sierra Leonean linguist who was a Muslim. Although he was familiar with the phenomenon both from his own experience and from his research on language, he had never considered its potential for the question of extending literacy. We began making more inquiries and discovered that many cooks, stewards, and other household servants kept recipes, shopping lists, and financial accounts in their own languages, writing in Arabic script. A driver for the Ministry of the Interior kept such records of his trips. Letters written in various local languages were used as evidence in the Freetown tribal headman courts. Hausa traders kept in contact with their suppliers in Nigeria and other parts of West Africa by writing letters in Hausa. This evidence revealed the existence of widespread hidden literacy in local languages which were written in Arabic, not Roman, script.

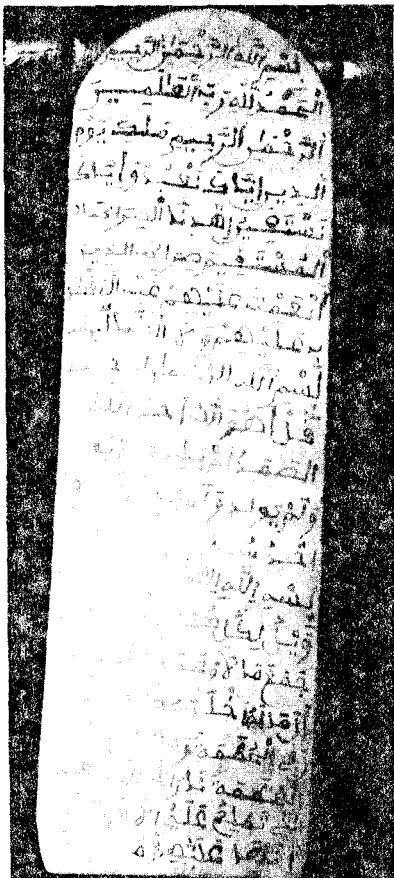
We decided to attempt to convince the government to recognize the potential of this phenomenon. We wrote a short paper explaining it and suggesting

various ways in which it could be employed to educate and inform the vast majority of the population which had hitherto been officially regarded as illiterate. The Hon. S.I. Koroma, the then Prime Minister of Sierra Leone, invited me to his office to explain what it was we had in mind. As I attempted to convince him about the value of using this hidden literacy, he remained unconvinced of its existence. In order to dramatize its significance, I asked the Prime Minister if his messenger were a Muslim and if he were illiterate. When the answers were affirmative, we asked him to summon his messenger. I asked the messenger if he would write a sentence for me in Krio, the *lingua franca* of Sierra Leone. At first he looked very surprised, but then he took the pen and wrote a sentence in Arabic script. The Prime Minister, who was himself a Muslim, could read it!

### The Schools of the *Karamoko*

Before sunrise in many villages in the interior of Sierra Leone children are gathered in the yard of a *karamoko*, the local religious teacher, to learn the Arabic alphabet and to recite the Koran. Each pupil has a *walka*, a flat board, upon which he writes with washable ink. Those who have spent any time in West Africa will be aware of this type of religious education because it is so widespread, but the fact that this linguistic knowledge is not limited to religious purposes is not, apparently, recognized.<sup>8</sup> In fact, in many attempts to convince educators about the importance of this hidden literacy, the suggestion was brushed aside with remarks on how useless was such education in that people only learned to recite the Koran by rote, they didn't learn any Arabic.

Another colleague and I pursued the question with several Muslims asking them how they had come to learn to read and write their own language using Arabic script. Some reported that often there had been people in the villages who had taught children how to transcribe their languages using Arabic script, while others had made the discovery that the phonetic system of Arabic could be applied to the language which they spoke in the process of carrying out their individual business or other occupational activities. Since many children have learned the Arabic alphabet and phonetic system as part of their religious training, it should not be surprising that some of them have adapted it to transcribing their own language. As some of the



In the many religious schools in villages of West Africa, each child is given a *warka*, a flat board, upon which to write lessons.

examples have indicated, many of the so-called illiterate Muslims are actually literate in more than one language.

**Implications of Hidden Literacy in West Africa**

In Sierra Leone it is estimated that only 10 percent of the population is literate. The definition of literacy there is confined to the English language, and up to the present, state education has been conducted in this, the official language. The failure to recognize the astonishing amount of hidden literacy among West African people now regarded as illiterate has a number of ramifications which impede the incorporation of the majority into the political process. First, many people are unnecessarily deprived of written information which could be made available to them. Second, people who are disparagingly labeled illiterate suffer a loss of esteem which is psychologically debilitating. The resulting lack of self-confidence may produce an inability to assess new ideas and engender feelings of antagonism and often outright rejection of new proposals which are put forward by governments or

other agencies. Such psychological factors may be exacerbated by the knowledge that the label "illiterate" has been unjustly applied, as the individual knows full well that he is able to read and write. On the other hand, official acknowledgement of the fact that many thousands of people can read their own language could promote a stronger sense of achievement and self-esteem.

The widespread knowledge of the Arabic alphabet and phonetic system has profound implications for the overall field of education in West Africa. Many children, before attending state primary schools, have already learned Arabic script and phonetics, yet this is not taken into account. Children are taught the official language or their local language written in Roman script with no associational references or analogies to the phonetic system they have already learned. It is a well-recognized principle that learning is best accomplished through a process of linking the known with the unknown. The process of teaching the official language written in Roman script without acknowledging the mastery of another language system is analogous to the teaching of Russian to an English speaker without reference to or acknowledgement of his mastery of the English language and phonetic system. The situation for most West African children who have learned Arabic is even more complicated when it is realized that they also speak one or more of the local languages, a condition which is frequently ignored in the educational process where the official language is a West European one.

On the other hand, if language teachers were familiar with the Arabic alphabet and phonetic system, their ability to teach the official language would be greatly enhanced. Such knowledge would require only a few weeks of specialized study. One of my colleagues who understood Arabic and worked as a volunteer teacher in an English literacy program in Freetown reported that her best student was a Muslim who had learned Arabic as part of his religious education. He made exceptionally rapid progress because, during the process of his learning English, the teacher was able to help him by transcribing the sounds in English using Arabic symbols. She was also able to help him to make direct translations of vocabulary.

Governments could use this hidden literacy to promote adult education and to facilitate development projects; failure results in the loss of opportunity to communicate vast amounts of information

to peasant communities and to the urban poor. There are many development projects which require the transmission of technical instructions, and this information could be inexpensively and more effectively imparted to rural communities by means of communications written in local languages. A German aid program, for example, sent a representative to Sierra Leone to make a film instructing farmers in new methods of cultivating swamp rice. The film took more than three years to produce and was very expensive. It is now being shown on a one-time basis in various parts of the country, so that the farmer who might employ these methods has but one opportunity to see the film. Everyone can appreciate that it is difficult to recall technical or detailed instructions after seeing them explained and illustrated only once. This same information could have been distributed, with greater economy and education effect, in an illustrated, mimeographed leaflet *using local languages written in Arabic script* which the farmer could have retained for later reference.

There are, in addition, important political implications for the official recognition and implementation of this hidden literacy. Substituting Arabic for emphasis on the use of Western languages or local languages written in Roman script could increase communication between the government and a much wider section of the public.<sup>9</sup> Providing the citizens with greater knowledge of government policies would increase the degree of governmental accountability to its citizenry. The use of Arabic script to communicate with a wider community could also enhance African self-consciousness and facilitate a break with the colonial past.

The failure of the colonists to recognize this hidden literacy is a mistake which has been repeated by the elites of West Africa. Members of the elite object to both the development of a literature in indigenous languages and to the use of Arabic script to write them, for many of them are still wedded to the cultural imperialism of their French or British colonial mentors. The predominant ideological and cultural influence during the colonial period was Western and Christian. Western education and religion became the new standards for assessing prestige and status, and, to a very great extent, superseded the traditional system. Acquisition of educational qualifications, adoption of monogamous marriage and of the European mode of life

with its emphasis upon individualism and consumption, became the hallmarks of being "civilized." The colonial period lasted long enough to convince the new elite of the superiority of the white man's ways. Although majority rule in independent West Africa has reduced the political power of the Western-educated elite, it has not eliminated their role in setting the standards for status and prestige. As a result, there is an enormous gulf between the elite and the majority of the population which is expressed in such incidents as reported in Ghana but which could have happened anywhere in West Africa. In a recent rural ceremony the program included an exhibition of UNESCO-sponsored newspapers, inauguration of Readers Clubs, and speech-making.

The speakers were not, as one may think, white diplomats whom our rural folks love to invite to their functions. They were all Ghanaians. Yet two officials who understood the local language Ewe, spoke in English, each nearly for an hour, leaving only ten minutes for their speeches to be summarised (not translated into Ewe),... After the function local leaders had to approach the editor of the community newspaper to ask him what the officials were saying at all. ["We suspect they were saying nice things about us."] <sup>10</sup>

Examples can be multiplied. In Sierra Leone Creole elites often deny they speak any other language than English, despite the fact that all informal conversation is conducted in Krio, the *lingua franca*. Upon his return from studying in the United States, one young man refused to speak his own native language, Temne, with one of his assistants, insisting that the assistant conduct all conversations with him in English. When my youngest son was in primary school in Freetown he was auditioned for a part in an educational broadcast. He did not get the part because, as it was apologetically explained to me, "David doesn't have a perfect British accent." In some of the prestigious secondary schools students are forbidden to speak Krio or any other local language on the campus. The hypocrisy of such a rule is illustrated by the fact that often when a teacher is confronted with the problem of explaining some obscure concept, Krio is the language used to interpret it. This attitude toward Krio has a long history. One writer in 1911 advocated that people



who had studied up to the third standard should "be made amenable to Law if convicted of Patois speaking."<sup>11</sup> It has been argued that it is a first priority for people in Africa to learn an international language. Some also put forward the objection that the promotion of local languages will inhibit the growth of national consciousness. The practical situation is, however, that the great majority of people are not learning an international language.

There are, admittedly, certain technical problems in the adaptation of the Arabic script. Many specialists argue that the Arabic script and phonetic system is more difficult to adapt to particular languages than is the Roman script, and this may be true. The argument is not, however, for the adaptation of all African languages to his system, but the suggestion is made that those African languages which have already been written in this script and

which are available for greater potential use should be exploited by West African governments. Many of the technical linguistic problems can be solved by standardization of the script. In Sierra Leone, for example, it was proposed to hold a conference of all the local *karamoko* in order to reach agreement on the transcription of certain sounds in the local languages. Another effect of such a conference would have been, it was hoped, to have encouraged the *karamoko* to recognize the secular as well as religious worth of their teaching. When one considers the immediate psychological, political, and economic benefits, plus the large number of professional teachers, the traditional *karamoko*, who are already available as language instructors and could be incorporated into the government educational system, the advantages to exploiting this hidden literacy in West Africa seem to far outweigh the difficulties.



## NOTES

1. See for example, "Local Languages and Adult Education," *West Africa*, July 25, 1977: 1522, and Bambose, Ayo (ed.) *Mother Tongue Education: The West African Experience*, Hodder and Stoughton and the UNESCO, 1976.
2. "Politics and the Nigerian Media," *West Africa*, February 28, 1977: 409.
3. CMS: C A1/) 47, Blyden to Venn, January 19, 1872, as quoted by Skinner, D.E., "Mande Settlement and the Development of Islamic Institutions in Sierra Leone." *International Journal of African Historical Studies* (forthcoming).
4. Skinner, D.E., "Islam and Education in the Colony and Hinterland of Sierra Leone (1750-1914)," *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, Vol. X, No. 3, 1976: 499-502.
5. Public Record Office (London), CO 268/8, 1810.
6. Skinner, D.E., "the Arabic Letter Books as a Source for Sierra Leone History," *Africana Research Bulletin*, Vol. III, No. 4, 1973.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Isidro De Las Cagisgas, "Una Carta Aljamiada Granadina," *Aribica*, Vol. 1, 1954: 272-5.
9. *West Africa*, February 28, 1866: 409.
10. *West Africa*, July 25, 1977: 1522.
11. Spitzer, I. *The Creoles of Sierra Leone: Responses to Colonialism, 1870-1945*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1974: 139.