William Labov (1994) described historical linguistics as “making the best use of bad data”, referring to written artefacts with their scarcity of background information and their texts skewed to the registers of the educated. Overcoming the ‘bad data’ stigma, the branch of historical sociolinguistics dealing with Middle English has developed research methods based on the premise that “written language should be studied in its own right, not as a representation of speech” (Stenroos 2108). Unlike Middle English, the linguistic data provided by the manuscripts written in Arabic script in various languages of West Africa (Ajami) is still largely unexplored. The Ajami data is represented by several distinct types of texts, such as narratives and poetry entirely in Ajami, commentaries on Arabic texts, and the “code switching” writing in medicinal and talismanic manuscripts. Each of these types presents multiple challenges to linguistic analysis of written languages, calling for the development of specific approaches. I will first give an overview of such approaches and then discuss the influence of the written Old Kanembu upon a poetic register discovered in a Kanembu manuscript from Mao, Chad.