

UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Experts' meeting on "The transcription and
harmonization of African languages"

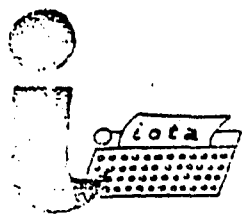
Niamey (Niger), 17-21 July 1978

Memorandum on the Transcription and Harmonization of African Languages

1. The 1978 UNESCO meeting on the transcription and harmonization of African Languages will provide the opportunity to review the practical results of earlier international discussions on this subject. Two major stages in these discussions were marked by the UNESCO meeting on the *Unification of Alphabets of National Languages*, held in Bamako in 1966, and the publication and application from 1928 of the IAI's memorandum on the *Practical Orthography of African Languages*.
2. A central aspect of these discussions has concerned the selection and standardization of characters necessary for languages whose inventory of phonemes cannot be readily catered for by the individual letters of the unmodified roman alphabet. In such cases, one is inevitably faced with the conflicting advantages and disadvantages of: (1) introducing *diacritics* to modify Roman letters (e.g. è, ò), and/or (2) using Roman *digraphs* (e.g. sh, qb), and/or (3) supplementing the alphabet with *non-Roman letters* (e.g. ɔ, ɲ), and/or (4) giving *unconventional phonemic values* to existing Roman letters (e.g. q). The partially unresolved discussion of this subject, in specific reference to the orthography of African languages, has continued for over a century, and is in danger of neutralising efforts to achieve greater harmony and consistency in the transcription of these languages.
3. The debate on the above points is by its nature circular, and valid objections can be and have been made to each of the above alternatives: (1) diacritics have the disadvantages that they are frequently omitted in writing, that they require an action of back-spacing on most typewriters, and that they often require special printers' type; (2) digraphs have the disadvantages that they break the convention of one symbol per phoneme, that they increase the length of individual words (especially where they occur in clusters), and that they may lead to confusion with natural sequences of the letters involved; (3) non-Roman letters have the disadvantages of appearing 'exotic' and of being absent from most typewriters and printing machines; (4) unconventional phonemic values have the disadvantage of confusing readers moving from one language to another.

4. In practice, choices among the above alternatives have frequently been made for local, pragmatic reasons. Hence French accents have been generally preferred in distinguishing qualities of vowel in languages spoken in 'francophone' countries, whereas subscript diacritics or special letters have been preferred in 'anglophone' countries. Likewise j and c(h) have been readily adopted to represent palatal plosives or affricates in 'anglophone' countries, whereas 'francophone' countries - because of the different values of j and c(h) in French - have tended to prefer ty and dy.
5. Whatever resolutions or recommendations may be made in the future, it is unlikely that a uniform orthography will ever be adopted for the transcription of African languages in general. It is perhaps not too serious if a language in East Africa employs different orthographic conventions from a language in West Africa, but it is a matter for concern if languages within one country employ different conventions, or - even worse - if the same language is written according to different principles in neighbouring countries. The Bamako meeting had the important objective of harmonizing the orthography of individual languages across national frontiers, but the adoption of several 'national' orthographies for languages spoken within individual countries has to some extent worked against the application of the Bamako recommendations (see A.N. Tucker, 'Orthographic Systems and Conventions', *Current Trends in Linguistics*, Vol. 7, 1971, p. 642).
6. Even if the disadvantages of certain alternatives can be overcome, for example by the provision of special characters on typewriters and printing presses, it is still immensely difficult to amend the orthographies of languages with a well established written tradition.
7. It is important to recognise that alternative methods of supplementing the alphabets of African languages are likely to continue to co-exist, both in the treatment of the same phoneme in different languages, and in the treatment of different phonemes in the same languages. Given this fact, it would seem valuable to establish a recognised set of alternative transcriptions for the most common phonemes occurring in major African languages. Such an international system would provide, as far as possible, one to one equivalents between (a) letters of the Roman alphabet (unmodified, with diacritics, or in the form of diagraphs), (b) special letters (as used in IAI's 'Africa' script) and (c) letters of the Arabic alphabet.
8. *The draft proposals in Appendix I cover suggested standardised equivalents (Roman, 'Africa' script and Arabic) within an International Orthography for the Transcription of African Languages and nomenclature (IOTA). The International African Institute presents these proposals to the 1976 UNESCO meeting on the Transcription and Harmonization of African Languages with a request for comments and criticisms. The Institute would be grateful for the advice of the experts gathered in Niamey as to whether this is, in their opinion, a line of research to be developed further.*
9. If adopted, after suitable expansion and revision, the proposed equivalents within IOTA would be available for the following purposes: (i) alternative transcriptions, where necessary for practical reasons, within the same language (there is no reason why ê and é, 'h' and h̄, or sh and ʃ, should not be regarded as orthographic/typographic variants of the same letter in an international African alphabet, just as q and g exist as variants in the conventional Roman alphabet, or as ö and oe exist as variants in the German alphabet); (ii) the standard transcription of African names, including ethnic names and place names, and of citations from African languages, including bibliographical references (i.e. involving the Romanised transliteration of special letters and of the Arabic alphabet).

10. Africa has been in a position to benefit from experience gained elsewhere in the world, in respect of the modification and extension of the Roman script and the recognition of difficulties arising from a lack of harmonization in this field. On the other hand, the vast number of languages in Africa, and their dissection in so many cases by ex-colonial frontiers, has inevitably impeded efforts to standardise and harmonise African orthographies, so that there are still many orthographic anomalies to be solved, both within individual languages and between neighbouring languages. For practical reasons, therefore, the Bamako meeting limited its agenda to six major languages in West Africa, and it would appear sensible to limit in a similar way the discussion of orthographic conventions throughout the continent as a whole.
11. One way in which this limitation may be achieved is to arrange the major languages of Africa in the approximate order of their estimated number of first and second language speakers. An attempt to do this is presented in Appendix II, where the major languages of Africa are arranged in three categories: (i) those estimated at over 20 million speakers, (ii) those estimated at over 10 (and less than 20) million speakers, and (iii) those estimated at over 1 (and less than 10) million speakers. The three categories together involve a total of around 50 languages for the continent as a whole, and it is therefore proposed to concentrate initially on the application of the proposed equivalents in Appendix I to languages in Africa spoken by an estimated 10 million speakers or more. Excluding English and French, these languages appear to total 13, including (in alphabetical order): AMHARIC, ARABIC, FULA, HAUSA, IGBO, LINGALA, MANDING, NOUNI, OROMO, RWANDA-RUNDI, SWAHILI, TSWANA-SOTHO, YORUBA.
12. The varying phonetic and phonemic inventories of individual languages make it of course impossible to provide any absolute phonetic or phonemic values for each line of equivalents in the IOTA proposals. It is suggested, therefore, that the above thirteen major languages - representing every region of Africa - be used to provide the initial framework of reference for IOTA.
13. Consonants. The digraph gb, for example, would be noted as having the general value of voiced labio-velar plosive, but with the exceptional value of voiced bilabial plosive in Igbo. Similarly, p would be noted as having the exceptional value of unvoiced labio-velar plosive in Yoruba. The consonants with subscript dots, as shown on the chart, would represent *either* emphatic consonants in Arabic or retroflex plosives elsewhere (d, t = ḍ, ṭ) leaving g (as in Yoruba) and z as possible orthographic alternatives to non-Arabic sh, zh = ʃ, ʒ. In the case of digraphs, it would be necessary to avoid confusion with any natural sequences of the letters involved, in any specific language, by insertion of a hyphen within the natural sequence.
14. Vowels. The vowel symbols ê = ɛ̂, etc, would need to be noted as having alternative subscript diacritics, as in Yoruba ɛ̣, etc, although this would need to be harmonized with the transcription of major languages needing to distinguish any vowel qualities not catered for by the present proposals. It is suggested that the grave accent (or subscript dot) distinguishing an open vowel - corresponding to a special letter - be preferred wherever possible to the use of an acute accent to distinguish a close vowel. Special note would need to be made of major languages which, for reasons of relative frequency, have adopted marked letters for close vowels and unmarked letters for open vowels. Double letters would be recommended in IOTA for the transcription of phonemic long vowels.
15. The above paragraphs provide examples of the way in which the IOTA chart would need to be amplified, as might be necessary also to allow for regional variations in Arabic (e.g. the use of ج with the value g in Egypt and Sudan) and for the establishment of standard transliterations from the Ethiopic script (as currently used for Amharic, Oromo and other Ethiopian languages).

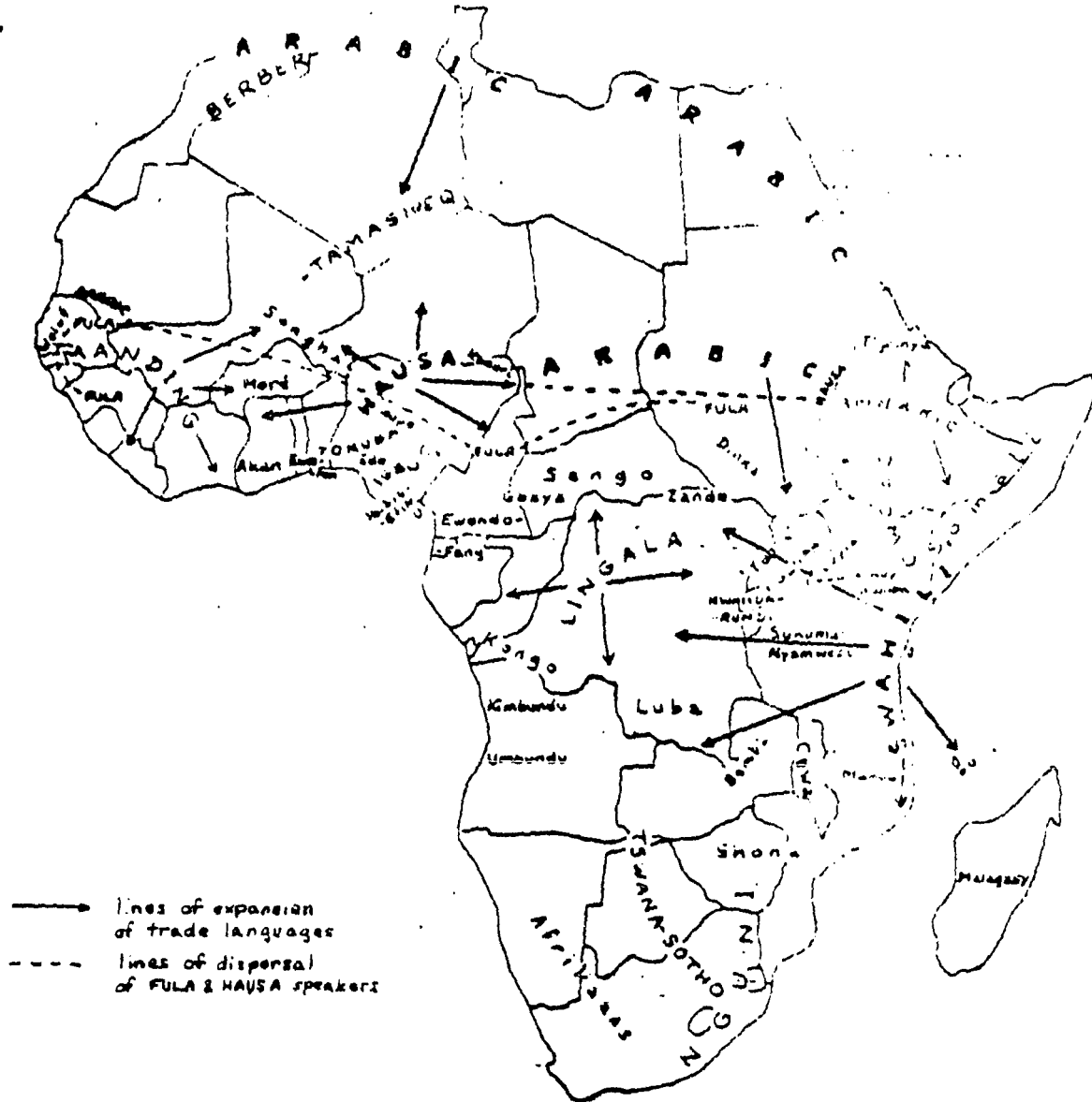


APPENDIX I

INTERNATIONAL ORTHOGRAPHY FOR THE TRANSCRIPTION OF AFRICAN LANGUAGES AND NOMENCLATURE

BASIC LETTERS	DIACRITICS	DIGRAPHS	SPECIAL LETTERS	ARABIC EQUIVALENTS	BASIC LETTERS	DIACRITICS	DIGRAPHS	SPECIAL LETTERS	ARABIC EQUIVALENTS
b				ب			vh	و	
p							fh	f	
d				ر			dh		ز
t				ت			th		ث
g							sh	ش	س
k				ك			zh	ز	
q				ق			qh	ق	غ
	'b'		β		r				ر
	'd'		δ		l				ل
	'k'		κ				hl	ه	
	'y'		γ				zl	ز	
m				م	w				و
n				ن	y				ي
		ng	ŋ		(Clicks)	w		◊	
		gb				c		/	
		xo				ɬ		≠	
	d		¹ d	¹ ض		a		!	
	t		² t	² ط		x		//	
	s			ص	(Glottal Stop)	ʔ			ء
	z			ظ	(Nasalisation)	̃			
v					i				
f				ف	e				
s				س		ɛ		ɛ	
z				ز	a				
c						ɔ		ɔ	
j				ج		o		o	
x				خ		u			
c (raised)				چ					
h				ه		e		e	
	h			ح					

APPENDIX II



—→ lines of expansion of trade languages
 - - - lines of dispersal of FULA & HAUSA speakers

MAJOR LANGUAGES IN AFRICA

Speakers estimated at over 1 million: e.g. Bemba
 over 10 million: e.g. AMHARIC
 over 20 million: e.g. SWAHILI

Major languages within the Northern Area of Wider Affinity ('Hamito-Semitic'):

ARABIC, AMHARIC, BERBER-TAMASHEQ, HAUSA, OROMO (=GALLA), Somali, Tigrinya.

Major languages within the Southern Area of Wider Affinity ('Niger-Congo'):

Akan (=Twi-Fante), Edo, Ewe-Fon, FULA (=FULANI), Gbaya, Ibibio-Efik, IGBO, Moré (=Mossi), Nupe, Sango, Tiv, Wolof, YORUBA, Zande: (incl. the following BANTU languages:) Bemba, Cewa (=Nyanja), Ewondo-Fang, Ganda, Kamba, Kimbundu, Kongo, LINGALA, Luba, Luyia, Makua, NGUNI (incl. Zulu-Xhosa-Swati-Ndebele), RUANDA-RUNDI, Shona, SWAHILI, Sukuma-Nyamwezi, 'Tara' (=Kiga-Nkore-Tooro-Nyoro), TSWANA-SOTHO, Umbundu.