A Brief Summary of Liberian Indigenous Scripts

"The normal way for a society to acquire its own script is by evolving, adapting, or adopting an existing writing system. Once in a while, though, some visionary, aware simply of the existence of writing among nearby peoples (often missionaries), sets out to devise his own system that will set his people apart from all others." So says Peter Daniels in his book *The World's Writing Systems* (Daniels 1996, 579). No place in the world has been home to more such visionaries than Liberia. In addition to the well-known Vai script and to me the more familiar Bassa script, the Kpelle and the Loma also had their own scripts. The Mende, mostly located in Sierra Leone, have yet another, and the Gola yet one more (Dalby 1970, 6) (though little is known about this script, and I do not include it in this summary). This means that for the relatively small country of Liberia, there are no fewer than six original scripts. No other country in Africa can boast the same. Perhaps no place in the world has a similar phenomenon.

Scripts typically have been borrowed. The Greek alphabet developed from Phoenician (Swiggers 1996), as did the so-called Roman script and other early Italian alphabets. Versions of the Roman script changed considerably, both through gradual evolution as well as for specific purposes of accommodating the sounds of each language. The Roman script continued to develop through the centuries and is now used throughout the world for languages of all types (Tuttle 1996). Hebrew and Arabic scripts appear to share a common ancestor with Phoenician (O'Connor 1996). Farther east, the scripts of southern and central Asia developed from the Brahmi script (Salomon 1996). The Chinese writing system was borrowed by Japan and Korea.

By contrast each of the scripts of Liberia is unique. What accounts for their development? This very question is examined at length in two articles by David Dalby in

the Journal African Language Studies. The first article (Dalby, A Survey of the Indigenous Scripts of Liberian and Sierra Leone 1967) provides an overview of the history of the Vai, Mende, Loma, and Kpelle syllabaries and the Bassa alphabet. The second article (Dalby, The Historical Problem of the Indigenous Scripts of West Africa and Surinam 1968), delves into the influences that may have led to the development of these above five scripts as well as others from West Africa. If you are interested in knowing more than just a brief summary of the Liberian scripts, get copies of these articles[1].

Vai

- Characters: Up to 212 (Dalby 1970); 203 (Singler 1996); 202 (Lotze 2008)
- Created: 1832 or 1833 by Mɔmɔlu Duwalu Bukɛlɛ, of Jondu, Liberia
- Orientation: Left to right
- Type: Syllabary

The Vai script is by far the earliest and most documented of the Liberian scripts. It was inspired by a dream in which a "white man" spoke to Bukɛlɛ and spoke of a book (Tuchscherer and Hair 2002, 444). He could have been referring to a European, but just as likely he was referring to a spirit (Dalby 1967, 7) or to an Americo-Liberian colonist (Tuchscherer and Hair 2002, 452).

The Vai script may also have been inspired by the Cherokee syllabary. There is some evidence that Bukɛlɛ had contact with Europeans and perhaps with missionaries (Tuchscherer and Hair 2002, 457-458). At the time, missionary organizations including at least one in Liberia were so impressed by the rapid spread of Cherokee literacy that they concluded syllabic scripts, in which each character represents one syllable, were superior to alphabets and they encouraged use of syllabaries among native peoples where practical.

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[1] A briefer treatment of the articles is also available in a book edited by Dalby, *Language and History in Africa* (Dalby 1970)

The Vai are primarily Muslim, so familiarity with Arabic writing is also a probability. Another likely influence was from a Cherokee man, Austin Curtis, who immigrated to Liberia in 1823 and later married the daughter of a Vai chief (Tuchscherer and Hair 2002, 480). Since the Vai characters shows no resemblance to the Cherokee, it seems unlikely that Curtis was directly involved in developing the Vai script. But it is likely that he was aware of the Cherokee script. If he had contact with Bukɛlɛ, he certainly could have explained the basics of how a syllabic script worked. The first recorded example of the script, recorded by Frederick Forbes in 1849, was on the side of a house and has been translated as "This is the house of Curtis" (Tuchscherer and Hair 2002, 483).

The Vai syllabary is still very much in use. In 2003, the New Testament was published in the traditional Vai script, after some debate about whether to use a Roman script. It is also still very much in use for personal communication. Friends of mine, Ken and Jeri Lotze , who lived in Sinje in the 1980's, received letters after they left. One, dated 1995, from a Vai friend begins, "Dear Mr. and Mrs. Lotze" but the rest of the four-page letter is in elegant hand-written Vai syllabic script.

Mende:
- Characters: Up to 195 (Dalby 1970)
- Created: 1921 by Kisimi Kamara, of Potoru, Sierra Leone)
- Orientation: Right to left
- Type: Syllabary

Mende is the only Liberian script to be written right to left. Kisimi Kamara, a tailor, devised the script while in seclusion for more than a month (and perhaps as much as two and a half months). Kamara was inspired by a dream, it is said, though the specifics of the dream are not known and one scholar, S. Milburn, notes that "Kamara would admit to no inspiration from any outside source" (Dalby 1967, 20). Kamara had

visited the neighboring Vai, and it is nearly certain that he was aware of the Vai script.

Loma:
- Characters: at least 185 (Dalby 1970)
- Created: 1930's by Widɔ Zóbo of Boneketa, Liberia
- Orientation: Left to right
- Type: Syllabary

Widɔ had worked at Firestone prior to creating the Loma script. So he was aware of writing and was probably aware of the Vai script, which had been in use for nearly a century. The Loma script, like many others, had its beginnings in a dream, but the vision begins with an argument between Widɔ and God. Widɔ complains that God hasn't allowed the Loma to have their own writing system. God replies that the Loma would become proud and forsake their traditional customs and beliefs. When Widɔ promises that they will not change and will respect their initiation rites, God consents—provided they never teach it to a woman. Then God tells Widɔ how to make ink from a vine. Widɔ made the ink and devised the Loma script (Dalby 1967, 26).

The Loma script was used for correspondence and record keeping. Anyone who learned the script had to promise to teach it to anyone else who wanted to learn it. It has now fallen out of use.

Kpelle:
- Characters: at least 88 (Dalby 1970)
- Created: 1930's by Chief Gbili of Sanoyea, Liberia
- Orientation: Left to right
- Type: Syllabary

The Kpelle script may have had its beginnings in a seven-year illness of a paramount chief, Gbili. When Gbili recovered he showed up with his script. He gave up his position as chief and spent his time promoting his script. Gbili told W.E. Welmers

that an angel showed him the script in a dream (Dalby 1967, 29).

The Kpelle script has only 88 characters. This is less than half the number of the other syllabaries. According to Dalby, the script is superior to Vai and Mende "in making better use of mutational characters in the written system (and thereby achieving a considerable economy in the number of characters employed)" (Dalby 1967, 30). One might think that with 88 characters, Kpelle would have been easier to learn than the other scripts. Like Cherokee, with only 85 characters, it might have spread like wildfire. But this is unfortunately not the case. It was fairly popular in the area where Chief Gbili lived, and is believed to have spread to Kpelle areas of Guinea, but its use was short-lived and it was mastered by only a very small minority of the Kpelle people.

Bassa:
- Characters: 30 (Karnga 1995)
- Created: 1920's (Dalby 1970) or prior to 1910 (Karnga 1995) by Dr. Thomas Flo Narvin Lewis of Hodoahzon, Liberia
- Orientation: Left to right
- Type: Alphabet

In the 1830's, William Crocker, a missionary to the Bassa from the Baptist General Convention, attempted to develop a syllabic script (Tuchscherer and Hair 2002, 460). His mission had worked with the Cherokee and it was assumed from the success of Cherokee that syllabic scripts were superior to alphabets (Tuchscherer and Hair 2002, 485-486). Gradually this assumption was challenged, and ease of printing became a major consideration. After a few months, Crocker switched to a Roman alphabet. Several books of the Bible were then translated into Bassa using this script.

In the early 20th century, a young Bassa man, Thomas Flo Narvin Lewis, came to the U.S. and attended Syracuse University. On his return to Liberia, he began teaching

the Bassa Vah[2] script. Dalby, however, debates this. He estimates that the script was invented and introduced by Lewis in the 1920's. Dr. Lewis's return to Liberia, according to Karnga, was in 1910 three years after his graduation. I have seen a copy of a newspaper clipping from Syracuse about Dr. Lewis's graduation, so that, at least, can be verified. But it is not known whether he returned from the U.S. with the script or developed it subsequently.

The existence of the script in some form or another prior to its introduction by Dr. Lewis is even more controversial. One web site claims, without substantiation, that "Had Hanibal visited Liberia in 500 B.C., particularly Kpowin (Tradetown) and Bassa Cove, he would have witnessed the Bassa script in use" (Yinda 2007). A somewhat more reasonable claim from a more reputable source, *Historical Dictionary of Liberia, 2nd Edition*, 2001, is that Dr. Lewis learned the script from Bassa people on a trip to Brazil and the West Indies. In a review of the book, Tuchscherer calls this claim "bizarre" (K. T. Tuchscherer 2003). More widespread is the account, recorded by Dalby from Dr. Abba G. Karnga (Dalby 1967, 33-35), that Di Waḍa first codified a means of communicating graphically, was sold into slavery for teaching it to his lover who happened to be a chief's wife, and in the U.S. taught it to his son, who in turn taught it to Dr. Lewis. Scholars are not quite sure what to make of these stories. The truth may never be known. By nearly all accounts, Dr. Flo Narvin Lewis is highly regarded for introducing the script[3].

The script, I have been told, was taught in some of the traditional society schools. In the 1980's I saw notes written in the Bassa Vah script in the margins of an older man's

2Dalby suggests the name Vah may be related to the name "Vai." I remember having a similar notion, but when I asked about it, (Daniels 1996) Dr. Karnga immediately rejected this relationship. On another occasion, another Bassa man had an identical reaction.
3One scholar claims the Vah script was invented by European missionaries (see Dalby, 1967, footnote 1 on page 36.)

Bassa New Testament, which is translated using a Roman script. Dr. Karnga was taught by one of his uncles, who was a student of Dr. Lewis's (Dalby 1967, 35). He in turn has taught the script to high-school students at Liberia Christian High School in Buchanan. Some of his students remain familiar with the script.

The Bassa script is the only Liberian indigenous script to account for tones. Dalby implies that June Hobley, a trained linguist who was responsible for the translation of the New Testament, more accurately accounted for the phonetic structure of Bassa than did the Vah script (Dalby 1967, 37-38). However, Jana Berktau, a Ph.D. and linguistic consultant to the Ministry of Education in the 1970's and co-author of a Bassa primer[4] (Berktau and Morgan 1975), analyzed the Bassa Vah script and found it superior in some ways to Hobley's analysis, particularly in how it handles the five tones (one of which was not used in the New Testament). (I regret that I have not been able yet to re-acquire a copy of Berktau's unpublished paper.)

Conclusion:

There remain many questions about the indigenous scripts of Liberia. Why were they invented? How were they inspired? What, if any, is their relationship to the traditional societies? Why are so many of them syllabaries instead of alphabets? And for the Bassa script, which is an alphabet, why was it used instead of a Roman script that was very familiar to its inventor?

Only the Vai script has survived intact. Only recently has it become possible to easily replicate these remarkable scripts, and if the Vai script had been completed only a few years earlier, it too would have been published in a Roman script. It is unlikely that

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[4]The cover of the primer has a picture of two children holding a slate with the Bassa Vah alphabet.

any but the Vai script will be widely used in years to come. But the scripts remain a tribute to the ingenuity of Liberians. As Dalby states in the conclusion of his first article, "The conception and elaboration of these scripts, and the practical use to which they have been put, remain one of the cultural achievements of Africa" (Dalby 1967, p. 51) With the advent of computer fonts, it is now possible to replicate these writing systems relatively easily. Thanks to Jason Glavy (Glavy 2003), each of the fonts that I have summarized is available free of charge. I hope they will be used, if only for special occasions and to inspire pride for Liberia's heritage.

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