

**ORTHOGRAPHY OF THE BASSA LANGUAGE OF LIBERIA**  
**(BASSA WUDU-OH BANAN-WUDU IN LIBERIA KEH)**

**BY ABBA G. KARNGA**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

As April 5 is my birthday, I usually celebrate it by writing something important that might benefit several persons. This book is my 65<sup>th</sup> birthday's gift to my People, the Bassa Tribe of Liberia.

Since at not time up to the present, the Bassa Language has had its own recognized written literature in detail besides some portions of the Bible being translated from English to Bassa, a though came to mind to write this book for them.

Then emphasis of this book is placed on the ORTHOGRAPHY OF THE BASSA LANGUAGE. This means the way words are spelled, or how words should be spelled in the Bassa Language. For this reason, I shall do a transitional writing in order to accommodate both the English speaking Bassa, the Roman Phonetic speaking Bassa, and the Original Vah Speaking Bassa.

With this view in mind, I shall lay down some proper spelling rules to follow in writing the Bassa Language. I do not claim to be any authority in the Bassa Language, but somebody has to take the initiative to at least make the effort with intent to challenge others who might disagree with the rules and get themselves involved to perhaps, come out with some better Bassa orthographical system to improve the writing system of the Bassa people. Until then, these rules shall constitute the foundation and standards for the Bassa Language.

**RULES OF BASSA ORTHOGRAPHY**

There are many oral rules which had for many centuries governed the speaking of Bassa. Now at this time we need to make some research from interviewing the few remaining Elders so as to jot down some of the information before they are completely disappeared from memories.

As we continue to do the research gradually, this book is the first beginning on the research of Bassa orthography. With that understanding, we will start with the following 8 rules to go step by step until we are able to take in more later:

1. THE RULE OF BASSA SPELLING:  
Know the meaning of Orthography
2. The Rule Of Bassa Alphabet:  
Know the original Bassa Vah alphabet and the Roman phonetic Bassa alphabet.

3. TONAL MARKS OF THE BASSA LANGUAGE  
Know what the tonal marks or accents are and how to use them.
4. VOWELS ACCOMMODATIONS:  
Know how to accommodate the 7 vowels to the 23 consonants of the Bassa language.
5. ADAPTABLE ROLE OF THE LETTER "N", IN BASSA:  
Know the importance of "N" in writing Bassa.
6. THE NECESSITY OF DIGRAPHS IN BASSA ALPHABET:  
Know that a digraph is a group of two letters representing one sound and how important this knowledge is to the Bassa writers.
7. WORDS OF BASSA SYLLABLES:  
Know that in most cases, Bassa is a language of one syllable words, but why do we need to know the words of Bassa syllables.
8. STANDARDIZATION OF CERTAIN BASSA LETTERS:  
Know why some of the letters need to be replaced while others need to be modified or deleted.

## THE STEP BY STEP STUDY OF THE 8 RULES

### 1. THE RULE OF BASSA SPELLING

The rule of spelling is the same meaning of the word "ORTHOGRAPHY" with reference to its correctness. Orthography is further defined as the art of using the alphabet for forming words according to a method conventionally recognized as correct.

Two distinguished sons of the Bassa Tribe, Di-Wada and Thomas Flo Narvine Lewis, are considered and credited for "THE ORTHOGRAPHY" of the Bassa Language. Di-Wada invented the BASSA VAH in the early B.C. while Thomas Flo Narvine Lewis invented the BASSA ALPHABET in the early 1800's. Their methods were accepted by their fellow Bassa people and conventionally recognized both nationally and internationally as correct.

For this information, let me repeat myself from the "INTRODUCTION TO 300 BASSA PROVERBS OF LIBERIA" that, Di-Wada was led by the impact of this Bassa proverb to invent a code of communication for his tribe. The proverb says: "SE ĐEH DYUO MOHN ZUĐUEH", or "TO KNOW NOTHING IS TO BE FOOLISH."

Since Di-Wada wanted to know something so as to be wise, he designed a code of communication for his people. He chewed on some raw leaves and made some marks that represented a form of communication. He demonstrated those marks physically by body movements by the raising of arms, blinking of eyes, cupping of hands, nodding of heads etc. as he intended a particular message to communicate to his many friends, especially his women friends. Such a code of communication is what the Bassa people called, "THE BASSA VAH."

The success of those body movements has led to the development of the Bassa script. Later in the early 1800's, Dr. Thomas Flo Narvine Lewis appeared on the scene and invented an

alphabet of the Bassa Vah Script as a means of expressing the spoken Language of the Bassa people by the written symbols and called it the “NKSF” OF BASSA, meaning the “ABC” of the Bassa Language.

Although the ideographic code of the Bassa Language was not documented in Liberia until Dr. Thomas Flo Narvine Lewis left the country to study at the Syracuse University in New York, USA. It was while he was studying there that he based his invention of the alphabet on the pre-existing oral ideographic code of his Bassa people.

Dr. Lewis graduated from the Medical College of Syracuse University in 1910, to put to practice his medical and linguistic knowledge. Truly he became very popular, useful, and helpful to the Liberian common people, but he was not fully accepted by members of the elite minority government of Liberia in those days due to his native background and the high interest he placed on the well-being of his native people.

Note here that after this brief historical information of the Bassa orthography, I will drop the writing of the original Bassa Vah just to save some time. I might refer to it as I continue with the writing in English and in the Roman Phonetic Alphabet to translate the English into the Bassa Language for the remaining discussion of the 8 rules.

## 2. THE RULE OF BASSA ALPHABET

Now that the Bassa people had invented their own alphabet by which to express their spoken language, the old proverb that says “TO KNOW NOTHING IS TO BE FOOLISH” is being reversed to read: “TO KNOW SOMETHING IS TO BE WISE.”

The Bassa people are wise. They have their own written language. They know now that Bassa is a Language of Nasalization, of tonal marks, and a language of its own original script with a conventionally recognized alphabet as correct, for the fact that it has its set of letters arranged in a fixed order with two categories. Namely:

- (a) A set of Consonants with 23 letters and
- (b) A set of Vowels with 7 letters.

Each of the 7 vowels repeats itself with 5 different sounds to modulate and beautify the spoken words of the Bassa Language. A detail study of the tonal marks will follow later. But at this point, let me chart the 30 letters, the set of 23 consonants, and 7 vowels, here:

### THE CONSONANT CHART

#### THE 23 CONSONANTS IN ROMAN PHONETICS

(23 WIN ÍN DYI VÀH)

N K S F M Y G D KP  
J XW W Z GB D CH HW T  
B V H P R

᠑᠙᠃᠃᠃ ᠑᠙᠃᠃᠃᠃ 1᠓ 23

᠃ ᠒ ᠋ ᠋ ᠋ ᠋ ᠑ ᠋ ᠋ ᠋

᠑ ᠋ ᠋ ᠋ ᠋ ᠋ ᠋ ᠋ ᠋

᠋ ᠋ ᠋ ᠋ ᠋ ᠋ ᠋ ᠋

᠋ ᠋ ᠋ ᠋ ᠋ ᠋ ᠋

THE 7 VOWELS IN ROMAN PHONETICS

(7 BÙNÙÙN-BĪĪN VĀH)

A ᠋ ᠋ ᠋ ᠋ ᠋ ᠋ ᠋ ᠋

᠋᠋᠋᠋᠋᠋᠋᠋ ᠑᠙᠃᠃᠃ 1᠓

᠋ ᠋ ᠋ ᠋ ᠋ ᠋ ᠋ ᠋

Know the two sets of the alphabet very well. One who does not know the alphabet, cannot write its spelling. The Alphabet referred to here is the 30 characters including the set of 23 consonants and the set of 7 vowels.

3. TONAL MARKS OF THE BASSA LANGUAGE

This topic is a good review of the phonetic alphabet. The “Funk and Wagnalls New Encyclopedia, published in 1971, volume 19, defined Phonetics as a “branch of linguistics concerned with the production, physical nature, and perception of speech.” It divided the speech sounds into four main fields of study. They are: (a) Experimental Phonetics, (b) Articulatory Phonetics, (c) Phonemics, and (d) Acoustical Phonetics. In short, Phonetics is the study of speech sounds.

The Bassa Language being one syllable words, the study of its phonetic system of spelling is relevant. The truth is that this study is one in which each sound is represented by only one written symbol and each written symbol represents only one sound.

In view of the foregoing, our focus shall be placed on the articulatory phonetics for this discussion since we will talk much about speech sounds.

The Bassa Language has three different sets of sound used by the Bassa people to express their spoken language in writing. Those three sets of sounds include:

- (a) A set of loose coded sounds in the mouth. These sounds are presented in 23 symbols called the consonants, or Win-in Dyi-Vah 23, in Bassa.
- (b) A set of deep sounds in the vocal cord. These sounds are presented in 7 symbols called the vowels, or Bunuun Biin Vah 7, in Bassa.

(c) A set of accents in the spoken Language of Bassa. These accents are presented in 5 sets of tonal marks, or Wudu Vah Du 5, in Bassa.

This study revealed that the number of vowels in Bassa is smaller than the number of the 5 sets of the tonal marks. Thus, each of the 5 sets of the tonal marks repeats itself at 5 different times in each of the 7 vowels with a different articulation. In other words, there are 7 times 5 accents or tonal marks, or 35 accents to the 7 vowels.

If, for example, each accent on a vowel were taken to be a new vowel, we will altogether have 42 vowels and 23 consonants of the Bassa Alphabet, and thus have 65 letters for our alphabet. But if the Bassa readers would be able to recognize each word in a sentence and be able to pronounce it as according to the context, we will have no need to keep the 35 accents on the 7 vowels. That is worth recommending to the Bassa linguists and the Bassa readers.

Until we get to the stage to delete the 35 tonal marks, no word of the Bassa Language can be articulated or pronounced well without the proper use of the Bassa tones or accents.

These 5 accents are natural when one is speaking the Language. To write the Language, one must know the name of each tone and how to associate it with each vowel. To this end let me present the following chart to indicate the ideogram and the value of each tonal mark. This chart shall accommodate both English/Bassa, Roman Phonetic/Bassa:

A CHART FOR TONAL MARKS

<b>ENGLISH</b>	<b>BASSA</b>	<b>ENGLISH</b>	<b>BASSA</b>
<b>Ideogram</b>	<b>Fòhn Nòhn Hwòdò</b>	<b>Value</b>	<b>Wudu Kpa-deh</b>
PERIOD (.)	TÁN-BÈHN (.)	LAY STRESS ON THE WORD	NEHNIN WUÐU DYI
COMMA (,)	TÁN-BÈHN FÁ-WOHN (,)	RELAX THE VOICE	ÐOÈH WUÐU BOÚM
COLON (:)	TÁN-BÈHN SÓHN (:)	RAISE FROM LOW TO MID	KPA WUÐU DYÍ
HYPHEN (-)	TÁN-BÈHN WOH-ÐOH-OH (-)	SLANT THE VOICE	GBÌÀAN WUÐU DYI

<b>ENGLISH</b>	<b>BASSA</b>	<b>ENGLISH</b>	<b>BASSA</b>
<b>Ideogram</b>	<b>Fòhn Nòhn Hwòdò</b>	<b>Value</b>	<b>Wudu Kpa-deh</b>
PERIOD WITHIN COMMA (.,)	TÁN-BÈHN GBEHNÌN MÚ (.,)	DOUBLE THE TONE IN HIGH AND LOW	GBEHNÌN WUĐU MÚ

#### 4.VOWELS ACCOMMODATION FOR THE TONAL MARKS

The vowel is defined by the “Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary 1990,” as “a sound made by the human voice in which your vocal cords vibrate, your mouth is open, and your tongue does not touch your teeth or the roof of your mouth.” The vowel is called “Bunuun-Biin Vah” in the Bassa Language. That means, a deep code of the vocal cords.

There are 7 symbols or letters written that are used to represent the Bassa vowel sounds in writing, but are used naturally in speaking. Those symbols were made to provide an accommodation for the 5 sets of the tonal marks in speaking and in writing. One who does not know how to associate the vowels with that of the tonal marks can neither speak nor write good Bassa.

The letters A, OH, O, U, E, EH, and I are the 7 vowels of the Bassa Language. Each of the 7 vowels is named by a high tone. That is,

“A” is pronounced as A in whAt.

“OH” is pronounced as O in the word Ought.

“O” is pronounced as O in the word cOke.

“U” is pronounced as U in the word tUtor.

“E” is pronounced as E, in the word tAke.

“EH” is pronounced as E in the word tEst.

“I” is pronounced as E in the word Eat.

Each of the 7 vowels repeats the 5 tonal marks in High, Low, Mid, Slanting, and Double Tones as according to the modulation of each vowel sound. The following Vowel Accommodation Chart is worth presenting here to help:

## VOWEL ACCOMMODATION FOR TONAL MARKS

(Vowel sound variation from High)

Á À A Ă Â  
ÓH ÒH OH ŎH ÔH  
Ó Ò O Ŏ Ô  
Û Ù U Ũ Û  
É È E Ě Ê  
ÉH ÈH EH ĚH ÊH  
Í Ì I Ě Î

## CHART OF ALPHABET IN TRANSITION

At this point, let me summarize the two sets of the alphabets studied so far by the following transitional chart. This chart contains the Roman Phonetic Alphabet, a possible sound of each letter, a note of a digraph not found in English, and the original alphabet of the Bassa Vah. Here now is the Chart:

<b>LETTER</b>	<b>SOUND</b>	<b>NOTE</b>	<b>BASSA VAH</b>
N	EHNIN		Ɔ
K	KA		Ɔ
S	SAY		Ɔ
F	FAR		Ɔ
M	ME		Ɔ
Y	YEA		Ɔ
G	GAR		Ɔ
D	DI	HARD "d"	Ɔ
KP	KPA	NOT IN ENGLISH	Ɔ
J	JOR		Ɔ
XW	XWA		Ɔ
W	WA		Ɔ

<b>LETTER</b>	<b>SOUND</b>	<b>NOTE</b>	<b>BASSA VAH</b>
Z	ZOR		Ɔ
GB	GBU	NOT IN ENGLISH	ɔ̄
“D”	DOR	SOFT “d”	ɣ
CH	CHE	NOT IN ENGLISH	ʒ
HW	HWU	NOT IN ENGLISH	ʋ
T	TOR		ɔ̃
B	BAH		ɹ
V	VU		ɹ̄
H	HEIN		ɛ̄
P	PAH		ɸ
R	WADA		ɹ̃

### VOWEL CHART

<b>LETTER</b>	<b>SOUND</b>	<b>NOTE</b>	<b>BASSA VAH</b>
A	AS IN FAR		ɸ̄
OH	AS IN COR	NOT IN ENGLISH	ɸ̃
O	AS IN WOE		ɔ̄
U	AS IN COO		ɔ̃
E	AS IN NAY		ɛ̄
EH	AS IN MET	NOT IN ENGLISH	ɛ̃
I	AS IN ME		ɪ̄

See the Vowel Accommodation Chart to know how each vowel is arranged to accommodate the 5 tonal marks from high, low, mid, slanting and double tones.

### 5. ADAPTABLE ROLE OF THE LETTER “N”

The letter “N” is the first letter of the Bassa Alphabet. It is very important and useful in writing the Bassa Language.

The letter “N” is a privileged character of the Bassa Alphabet, and being very flexible, it has several positions and plays a key role in the writing of Bassa. Below are listed a very few of those key positions of the letter “N”:

(a) A CONSONANT:

the letter “N” is always used as a symbol to represent a consonant when it precedes a vowel in a word. For example, the word “NI” means water in Bassa. It begins with the letter “N” as a consonant, followed by the vowel “I”.

(b) A NASAL SOUND:

The letter “N” is always used as a symbol to represent a nasal sound when it precedes a vowel in a word. For example, the word “Sannan” means a secret in Bassa. It has three “Ns”. The first “N” is a nasal sound preceded by a vowel “a”. The second “N” is a consonant followed by the second vowel “a”. The third “N” is a nasal sound preceded by the same second vowel “a”.

(c) A DIGRAPHIC NASAL VOWEL:

The digraph “NY” is a special case in the Roman phonetic alphabet, but not in the original Bassa Vah alphabet. The position of the “NY” is hard to define than to qualify it as a digraphic nasal vowel. For example, the word “Nyun” means do in Bassa. It has two “Ns”. The first “N” is a digraph “N” followed by the vowel “U”. But the “N”, although followed by the vowel “U”. But the “N”, although followed by the consonant “Y” and not the vowel “U”, it is not qualified to stand for a consonant. The second “N” is a nasal sound preceded by the vowel “U”.

(d) DIVIDER OF MORE THAN ONE SYLLABLE WORD:

The letter “N” is used to divide a more than one syllable word to help Bassa writers for a good pronunciation of words. For example, the word “kunun” (medicine) is a two syllable word pronounced as “kun-un.” The stress is on the last syllable “un.”

People who do not know the “N’s” rule, doubled the “U” and created a symbol for their own nasal sound and write “kuun” with their new nasal sound on the first “U”. Or else, they might mispronounce the word “kun-un”, and spell it “ku-nun”, taking the first “N” to be a consonant rather than a nasal sound.

(e) A VOWEL SOUND:

The letter “N” is used as a vowel sound in rare cases. To spell number 5 is one example. It is spelled “hnuum.” In this case, “hn” is not a digraph but a nasal

vowel sound. Thus, the “N” preceded the “h”, is a vowel, and the “N” is qualified for a nasal sound.

NOTE: The “h” sound and the “n” sound blended and produced a mixed monotonous sound of a trigraphic vowel of “HNU” letter with a low tone of the vowel “U”. Such a sound could be called nothing else than to call it a nasal sound vowel because of the letter “N” sound among the trigraph.

## 6. THE NECESSITY OF DIGRAPH FORMATION:

A digraph is a group of two letter representing one sound. For example, Gb, Kp, Hw and Xw are all digraphs with one sound each.

The original Bassa Vah Alphabet has no need for digraphs, but the Roman Phonetic Alphabet of 26 letters used for the Bassa Language, needed additional 4 letter to agree with the 30 letters of the Bassa alphabet.

The foreign Missionary linguists who formulated the Roman Phonetic Alphabet for the Bassa Language in the early 1900’s did very well for the preservation of the Bassa Language. They augmented the 26 letters of the Roman alphabet with 4 digraphs to equal the 30 letters of the Bassa Vah alphabet. Such digraphs include: Gb, Hw, Kp and Xw to represent the sounds like Gbu, Hwu, Kpa, and Xwa. These sounds are not found in English, but in Bassa. We first of all must be grateful to those Missionaries who had helped to preserve our Language.

In the formation of the Roman Alphabet, they maintained the order of the original Bassa Vah Alphabet and the sounds of its consonants, vowels and tonal marks. Along with our appreciation however, we need to make the following observations for improvement:

(a) Digraphic Spelling Rule: By careful observation, the letter “R” is silent in the the Roman Phonetic Alphabet for a reason. That reason perhaps could be that the formulation of the 4 digraphs as letters of the alphabet, rooted out the existence of all other digraphs, and any other group of two consonant letters join to precede a vowel so as to make a word in the Bassa Language. Therefore any spelling of the Bassa word that begins with “TR” or “DR”, for example, cannot stand.

There are two major things amiss in the keeping of this digraphic spelling rule: The first is that it destroyed the old spelling rule of Bassa that once said: Write what you hear, and write exactly as you hear it. That Bassa way of spelling words by the old rule, is one of the easiest and the best ways to spell words among many languages of the world. For example, the word “hill” is “TRO” for Bassa, in

the original spelling of Bassa. Now it is spelled *Todo*". Since the pronunciation is different from the writing, that old rule is no longer good, or else we may not justify the rule that, in the Bassa Language, a group of two consonant letters cannot precede a vowel. The "TR" falls in that group, and the word "TRO" is not good.

The second is that the pronunciations and spellings of many words are changed from being natural Bassa. The changes of the following words are some examples of the damage already done to the Bassa Language:

Naturally, we used to say "DRÓ for the word "raffia" in Bassa. But now we must write it as "Dodo". We used to say "Drè" for "taking a bath", now we write "Dèdè". For the word "tremble", we used to say "Trehkuin". But now we say, "Teh-ḍeh-kuin". To spell the word "light", meaning "Che" in Bassa, we take "c" for our "ch" sound and write "ce" for "che." For the sound "Oh" in Bassa, we are taught to use backward "c" for it. For the sound "Eh" in Bassa, we have used the vowel "E" to represent two different sounds. One is used for the sound "A" in "Nay", and the other is used for the sound "E" in the word "met", when that should have been "Eh."

(b) Modification of the Digraphic Rule: We need to modify this digraphic spelling rule that all digraphs are not standardized letters of the Bassa Alphabet, and that it is proper and natural for a group of two consonant letter to precede a vowel to make a Bassa word.

## 7. WORDS OF BASSA SYLLABLES:

The syllable word referred to in the Bassa Language is a one vowel sound with a consonant or consonants. The Bassa in fact, is that, in most cases, a one word syllable language. As it has been said before, the letter "N" being flexible, is used in many cases of spelling, to syllabize a more than one syllable word so as to facilitate the proper articulation of the word.

When the word that has more than one syllable appears, it could be a borrowed word, or that more than one Bassa word might have joined to form one word of several syllables. Such a word is hyphenated and pronounced by the "N" spelling rule that the symbol "N" is always used to represent a consonant when it precedes a vowel, and that it is always used to represent a nasal sound when it precedes a vowel. Knowing such a spelling rule helps to indicate that the word is either borrowed, or that several words have joined to form one long word, and the best way to know how to pronounce such a word is by the one vowel sound of

each syllable followed by a hyphen between each syllable. The following examples are helpful:

The word “Tehnehnehpeheh” means a white chalk in English. Each syllable is a word by itself with a different meaning pronounced like: “Tehn-neh-ehn-peh-eh.” Naturally, it is spelled like: “Trehn-ehn-peh-eh.” Another example is the word “Sinmiin”, which means Yam in English. It is syllabized like: “Sin-mi-in.” Another one is “Kannanyiniin”, meaning July. Each syllable in this long word represents something, but the word itself is the name of the month July and it is syllabized like: “Kan-na-nyi-ni-in. You do not need to syllabize a word if you know the spelling rule very well and follow it very carefully.

#### 8. STANDARDIZATION OF CERTAIN BASSA LETTERS:

There are some letters in the Roman Phonetic Alphabet that do not correspond with that of the original Bassa Vah alphabet. To cause such letters to have the same qualities with the rest of the letters of the original Bassa Alphabet being used as a role model of the Roman Phonetic Alphabet, is what I meant by the standardization of certain Bassa letters. Those letters are listed here with:

(a) The backward “C: This symbol is used to represent the vowel sound of “OH”. I have had no reason why the digraph “OH”, which have the real sound of the vowel was not used. And now so be it recommended to replace the backward “C”.

(b) The regular “C”: This symbol is used to represent the “CH” sound. Why keep the “C” which has no sound of “ch” to call it “ch” when the “ch” itself is available. I therefore recommend the “ch” to represent the “ch” sound in place of the “regular C”.

(c) The Letter “E”: This symbol is used to represent the sound of “EH”. Why use the same “E” to represent two different sounds within the same alphabet when the proper sound can be represented by “EH”. Let the “Eh” be used to represent the true sound, is my recommendation than the regular “E”.

(d) The Letter “B”: This symbol is used to represent the sound of both regular “b” and irregular “b” in the alphabet. In the original Bassa Vah alphabet, the letter “M” is used to represent the sound of the irregular or soft “b”. The letter “M” is not a nasal sound letter until it is followed by a vowel which is also followed by the letter “N” for a nasal sound. For example, the word “Mun”, means “go”. The letter “M” is a consonant followed by the vowel “U”, and the vowel “U” is also followed by the nasal sound “N”. With this understanding, the sound of the soft or the irregular “b”.

(e) Letter “D”: The letter “D” is used to represent the sounds of both regular “d” and irregular “d”. In the original Bassa Vah alphabet, the irregular or soft “d” is used to represent the sound of the letter “L” while the hard or regular “d” represents the usual “d”. For example, the word “food” is “d̄iḍeh” in Bassa. The two “Ds” in the word “d̄iḍeh” represent the sound of the soft or irregular “d”. Another example is the word “month” which is “dehnehn” in Bassa. The “d” in this word represents the hard or regular “d”. In this view, I also like to recommend the digraph “DL” to represent the sound of the soft “d” or the letter “L”.

(f) The Digraph “GM”: This symbol is used to represent no part of the original Bassa Vah Alphabet nor the Alphabet of the Roman Phonetic Alphabet. The digraph “GM” is used to spell the word “law”, or “Gma” in Bassa. The word “law” is spelled Gban in Bassa. It is a nasal sound word. The letter “M” does not represent a nasal sound anywhere in Bassa. The Bassa Language is not a closed lips language in which the digraph “GM” would have a room, but to create confusion. Let me therefore recommend that we desist from using the digraph “Gm” in the Bassa Language.

(g) The Digraph “DY”: This is another symbol whose position is not defined in either the original Bassa Vah Alphabet nor in the Roman Phonetic Alphabet. It is proper hence to recommend the use of letter “Y” for “dy” to represent the sound of the “yu”, “yi”, “ye”, “ya” etc.

(h) The Digraph “NY”: The digraph “NY” also has no defined position in the two sets of the Bassa Alphabet, but it has a special role in writing the Bassa. It can be described as a special digraphic vowel. For example, the word “Nyun” is “do”, in English. The “Ny” in the word is needed but not as a consonant for the fact that the “N” preceded the consonant and not the vowel “u” which is followed by the second “N”.

### CAPITAL LETTER

A capital letter is a letter of the alphabet in its relatively large form. The Bassa writers accept the already established rule that the capital letter is used at the beginning of a sentence; that we begin it with the name of a person, and important place, and/or an important thing. For example, Vohmaa is a name of a woman. The letter “V” is a capital letter. Gbehzohn is the name of a city. The letter “G” is a capital letter. St John’s River is the name of an important river. Every letter that begins with each word is a capital letter.

The WISDOM OF BASSA:

Wisdom of the Bassa people is embedded in the proverbs of their Elders. These proverbs reflect the weight and dignity of the Bassa Language. The following 25 proverbs out of the many Bassa proverbs are selected for our example:

1. À MÒHN KÒÀ-ĐÒÈH JÌÌ.

(We are fingers of one palm.)

ገ ልጌን በግገ ሳግፎ ጉቻቻ.

2. À TÀ GBEÈH PÚÙ. À NÍN GBÒHN-ÒHN ĐÙÛ.

(Let's just eat the dog. But dare not to look in the ears.)

ገ ልገ ለጭፍ ገጭጭ. ገ ጌቻ ለጌቻ ሳጭጭ.

3. BÉHÈH KÀN-MÀÀN KEH SE DYÍ VÒ.

(The heat of pepper is not determined by its numerical value.)

ሄሄ በገጌሄ ገፍ ሄሄ ሆ ሆ.

4. DYÈĐÈÈH NYÓHN NÍN HWÈÈH KPÁ BŪN.

(The monkey's scent is indelible in its bone.)

ሆሳሆፍ ሆጌ ጌቻ ሄሆ ላገ ጌሆ.

5. NYOHN DYUÒ CHUEH, OH NYOHN KÈÈH NYUN DYÈĐÈ.

(Play monkey with someone who knows trees.)

ሆጌ ሆጭ ጌሆፍ ሆ ሆ ገፍፍ ሆጌ ሆሳሆ.

6. NYOHN KÒHN ĐEHEH DÈÈH GOUN.

(One who owns his own thing, honor it the most.)

ሆጌ ገጌ ሳፍፍ ሆፍፍ ሆጭጌ.

7. NYOHN MIÒHN DYUÒ HWÌÈ NÍN SÈIN NYOHN DYÈĐÈÍN XWÁĐÁÚN.

(One cannot be lost in his own familiar road.)

ሆጌ ሳጌጌ ሆጭ ሆፍ ጌቻ ሄሆ ሆጌ ሆሳሆ ጌቻ ሆገሳገጭጌ.







<b>ON HAND (KAUN-DEH)</b>	<b>NEW CHANGE (ZINAN GBO DIE)</b>	<b>NOTE WELL (GBOHN JE WA)</b>
6. b = ɓ	b = mb	The soft “b” is “M” sound. The “mb” brings out the sound well.
7. d = ɗ	d = ld	The soft “d” is l sound. The “ld” brings out the sound well.
8. Church = Cɔci	Church = Chochi	Why avoided the use of “ch” sound and improvised “c” for it?
9. l = ɓ	l = ùn	“M” is consonant and not vowel. Why replaced “Un” with “M”?
10. Water, My and Mine, All = Ni	Water, My and Mine, All = Nin	These words are nasal sound words. When “N” follows a vowel, it is a consonant. When it follows a vowel, it is a nasal sound word, or else the word is not a nasal word.
11. Law = Gma	Law = Gban	“Gm” has no relation with Bassa Language. The Bassa is nasal, vowel, and consonant, and is not a closed lips Bassa.

## AFTERNOTES:

This version of Dr. Karnga's booklet is typed on a Linux Ubuntu computer, which facilitates easy keyboard conversions for English, Bassa, and Bassa Vah scripts. If you have a spare computer (or can partition a computer) and can install the a Linux OS on it, I can provide the files you need to type Bassa and Bassa Vah. Contact Tim Slager through the CEFLiberia.org website.

Dr. Karnga also wrote a Bassa version of this booklet, written in the modified Roman alphabet that he recommends here. Perhaps someday I will also be able to provide a copy of that version. He also wrote a Bassa Vah version of the introduction.

In copying this booklet, I kept my edits to a minimum. I corrected obvious misspellings and typos and revised punctuation for more consistency. But I did not try to change what is said or how it was said. I apologize for my own typos, misspellings, and inconsistencies. I welcome corrections.

I find this description of Bassa orthography interesting and insightful because:

- It presents a native speaker's view of the phonemic structure of Bassa.
- It is practical from the point of view of someone who has a standard typewriter and wants to be able to use that typewriter for writing Bassa. This is now less of a problem with computers and word processors.
- The letter waḍa (Ḷ) is nowhere to be found in the Bassa Vah version of the proverbs or in the Vah introduction, which is not reproduced here. I think this character is supposed to function as the R that Dr. Karnga argues for in point 5 above, but it is apparently not commonly used.

This remarkable gift from 25 years ago should make Bassa writers proud of their heritage of writing.

Tim Slager  
Grand Rapids, MI  
1 April 2020