

Encoding of the Bassa Vah Script in the UCS  
Preliminary Proposal Submitted to the  
Script Encoding Initiative  
Charles Riley  
20 March 2009

The Vah script of the Bassa owes most of its development and current form to Thomas Flo Lewis, who worked with the typesetting of it beginning as early as 1907<sup>1</sup>, producing various texts in the script through at least the 1930's. Dr. Lewis, a Bassa from Liberia, studied in Syracuse for several years. There are traditions that trace the script's origin through contact between Lewis and Jenni Dirah, son of a slave who may have drawn on an older code of pictograms that in use among the Bassa, for which there is little supporting documentary evidence. The Vah script and any of its possible antecedents are independent from another effort to develop an alphabet for the Bassa language that dates to the 1830's in the work of the missionary William Crocker.

Dr. Lewis actively published while in Syracuse, and later in Dresden between 1915 and 1920. There is evidence of texts being produced in both places, although it is not known whether any of the texts from this period (1907-ca.1935) still exist. He returned for some time to Liberia in the 1910's and 1920's, and according to Dalby's record of an account of Abba G. Karnga, taught many students, including Barni Cheevahn, Jacob B. Logan, a Senator Morgan, and Representative Thomas H. Greeves. Graham Greene, on his travel through Liberia as recounted in his *Journey Without Maps*, reported having collected a fragment of a text in Bassa Vah script<sup>2</sup>.

Since 1959, the script has been promoted through the Bassa Vah Association and United Bassa Organizations in the Americas (UNIBOA), and by individuals including Karnga, Dr. Joseph M. N. Gbadyu, Dr. Syrulwa Somah, and Varnie N'jola Karmo, among others.

### Character repertoire

According to Dalby (1967), there are characters in Vah for 23 consonants: p, kp, m/6, f, t, n, dy/ny, d/l, r, s, c, k, w, xw, b, gb/gm, v, d, z, j, g, h, hw; seven vowels: i, a, u, e, ε, ɔ, o; and five tonal diacritics: high, low, mid, low-high glide ('drag'), and high-low glide ('double'). Dalby accounts for the consonantal character names, following a source from the Bassa Vah Association but retranscribing into phonetic characters, as: (n)ni, ka, se, fa, mi, ye, ga, di, kpa, ja, xwa, wa, zɔ, gbu, dɔ, ce, hwu, tɔ, ba, vu, hĩ, pa, (w)ra. Names for the vocalic characters were not listed in the source he consulted, but he does provide three names from analysis by Gail Stewart: ede for e, aga for a, and ogo for o. Karmo indicated to me through a telephone conversation that Dalby's rendering is not entirely accurate; Karmo's own consultations with elders indicate that most character names have an associated tone that Dalby did not include. The final version of names provided for encoding will have to be revisited with Bassa elders familiar with the script, but in the meantime Karmo notes that ka, fa, y[i]e, kpa[h], and pa carry high tones; mbe, wa, and [wadda = Dalby's (w)ra] carry mid tones; gbu, ce, [uwu = Dalby's hwu], vu, and [yein = Dalby's hĩ] carry low tones; jǒ, zǒ, and tǒ carry low-high tones<sup>3</sup>. Karmo's rendering of the names according to his sources runs as follows: enni, ká, se, fá, mbe, yie, gah, dii, kpah, jǒ, xwah, wa, zǒ, gbù, dɔ, cè, uwu, tǒ, ba, vù, yèin, pa, wadda. More consultation with Bassa speakers and elders will be needed to verify the phonetics and finalize decisions on the names as represented in the repertoire. The sort order for the consonantal characters is fixed, as in the above lists; vowels appear in sources sorting separately in various orders: i, a, u, e, ε, ɔ, o; or a, ɔ, o, u, e, ε, i.

## Casing

The introduction of a lower cased set of characters for the Vah script came recently, at Karmo's initiative during the 1990's while he was working with elders to develop a font for the script. The idea of casing met with the assent of the elders Karmo contacted, but has not however as yet been widely adopted. It is recommended to provide for their encoding, as some charts published online do consistently include the cased set of characters for reference.<sup>4</sup>

### Diacritic positioning

Combining diacritics are used to indicate tonality of each vowel. The positioning of the diacritics is made with respect to the interior of the largest partially or wholly enclosed space of each vocalic glyph; the diacritic should be toward the center without touching the edges.

### Punctuation and Digits

For the full stop, either the Latin period or a + symbol may be used. Western (Arabic) digits are used, there are no unique Bassa Vah digits to be encoded.<sup>5</sup> Use of the Western colon is also attested, from Karnga (1995). More information on punctuation is needed, and according to Karmo, Dr. Gbadyu is the individual most familiar with the history of the script's use of punctuation.

<sup>1</sup>"Son of African Chief to Take Degree", *The Post-Standard*, Syracuse NY, 6/5/1907.

<sup>2</sup><http://www.uniboa.org/bassalanguage.html> provides an account of the Dresden publishing, and Dalby (1967), pp. 32, notes that he had correspondence with Greene in 1964, but that by that time the fragment he had collected could not be found.

<sup>3</sup>The exact tonality of the character names will need further study and verification. Some in-depth analysis is available from Dalby (op. cit.), p. 38 fn. 1. Different interpretations of tonemics are offered by June Hobley, W. J. Pichl, the Bassa Vah Association, and Dalby.

<sup>4</sup>For example, see <http://www.uniboa.org/bassalanguage.html> and <http://www.omniglot.com/writing/bassa.htm>.

<sup>5</sup>See Karnga (1995) and Dalby (op. cit., p. 39) for examples and explanation.

## Bibliography

À zà ɓasóò céédè Wuquùn. (Monrovia: Liberia Ministry of Education, Bureau of Planning and Research, 1975).

Baumann, Thurnwald, and Westermann, *Völkerkunde von Afrika*. (Essen: s.n., 1940).

Dalby, David. "A survey of the indigenous scripts of Liberia and Sierra Leone". *African Language Studies*, 1967.

Greene, Graham. *Journey without maps*. (London: Heinemann, 1936).

Hobley, J. "A preliminary tonal analysis of the Bassa language", *Journal of West African Languages*, 1964.

Karmo, Varnie N'jola. Personal communication, December 2008.

Karnga, Abba G. Bassa orthography of the Bassa tribe of Liberia = Bassa banan wudu mohn Bassa nyohn nin Liberia keh je. (S.l.: s.n., 1995).

Pichl, W. J. "L'écriture bassa au Libéria," *Bulletin de l'IFAN*, XXVIII, série B, 1966.

Slager, Tim. "A brief summary of Liberian indigenous scripts". Paper presented at 2008 Liberian Studies Association Conference in Toledo, Ohio; text hosted at <http://cefliberia.org/extras/IndigenousScripts.pdf>.

Tuchscherer, Konrad. "Baptist heritage around the world : The Baptist and the Bassa syllabary: William Crocker's Liberia experiment in the 1830s" *American Baptist Quarterly*, Volume 22, fascicule no. 2, pp. 212-220.

<http://www.uniboa.org/bassalanguage.html>, accessed 3/20/2009.