

# ORTHOGRAPHIES OF NIGERIAN LANGUAGES

## MANUAL I

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Edited by

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## PREFACE

The National language Centre has decided to organize the collation of orthographies and sponsor this Manual comprising both general and specialized information on the orthography of each of the following languages: Efik, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. These are the four Nigerian languages currently examined at the Ordinary Level of the General Certificate of Education. Two of them (i.e. Hausa and Yoruba) are also examined at the Advanced Level.

The state of publications in these and other Nigerian languages and the decision of the Federal Government that the education of each Nigerian child should be started in the language of his immediate community have made it necessary to devote greater attention to Nigerian Languages.

This manual will be the first in a series of manuals designed to provide information on the orthographies of Nigerian languages. It is hoped that the series will be found useful by a broad spectrum of people, including teachers, writers, and publishers.

Ayọ Bangboṣe  
Editor

# YORUBA ORTHOGRAPHY

Ayọ Bamgboṣe

## 1. BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ORTHOGRAPHY

The first recorded collection of Yoruba words was the sample of numerals collected by Bowdich in 1817 and published in **Mission from Cape Coast to Ashantee** in 1819. Other earlier collections included those by Hannah Kilham in 1828, Clapperton in 1829, and the first volumes on Yoruba, written by John Raban, and comprising vocabularies and sample sentences, which appeared in 1830, 1831 and 1832.

Even in these early collections, the problem of how to write the language consistently was encountered, and some solutions offered. For example, Mrs. Kilham enunciated two basic principles:

- (i) using only such letters as are heard in the word and no superfluous ones
- (ii) using the Roman alphabet but with one letter representing only one sound, and no sound represented by more than one letter.

One major name associated with the early history of Yoruba and its writing system is Samuel Crowther. His **Vocabulary Of the Yoruba Language** 1843 contained the following single letters: *a, b, d, e, f, g, h, i, j, k, l, m, n, o, p, q, r, s, t, u, w, y*, and diagraphs; *gb, kp, ng, ts, sh* and *bh*. Although most of these letters are familiar when compared with what exists in the current orthography, the actual representation of words differs a great deal from what we know today.

For example, the sentence

**Nwọng le she nhung kpukporh ti enia dudu ko le she**  
is Crowther's version of

**Nwọn le ẹ ohun púpọ tí ènìyàn dúdú kò lè ẹ**

‘They can do a lot of things that the black man cannot do’.

Crowther was influenced not only by his predecessor Raban but also by the writing system approved by the Church Missionary Society (C.M.S.) for African Languages. Known as Venn's Rules, this system was accepted by Crowther, and together with Gollmer's preference for the use of diacritics, it influenced Crowther's 1852 Orthography whose alphabet is identical with the current Yoruba alphabet.

The next major development in the history of Yoruba orthography was the Yoruba Orthography Conference which took Place on 28 and 29 January 1875 at the C.M.S. Mission House in Lagos. The conference which was called to resolve ten outstanding problems including the use of diacritics, diagraphs, double consonants and certain problems of word division came to specific conclusions which continued to guide the writing of the language until comparatively recently.

In 1965, some outstanding problems of Yoruba orthography were highlighted in the booklet **Yoruba Orthography** written by Ayo Bamgbose. In January 1966, the Western Nigeria Ministry of Education set up a Committee to recommend an orthography which "will be standard for the whole region". The Ministry was worried about "the confusion existing which has slowed down the production of Yoruba Literature and made more difficult the writing of the language". The Committee considered several problems on the spelling of vowels, consonants, tones and on word division and recommended the retention of some spellings and a change in several others. The recommendations of the committee are published in **Report of the Yoruba Orthography Committee, 1969**. Following reactions to the Committee's recommendations, the Ministry set up an enlarged Committee in March 1969 which re-affirmed all but one of the recommendations of the original committee in its own report published as **Report of the Enlarged Committee on Yoruba Orthography 1972**.

In the absence of any definite action on these reports, many writers and teachers, particularly secondary school teachers, started to apply the recommendations of the committee in their writing of Yoruba. In particular, the National Association of

Teachers of Yoruba Language brought out a mimeographed manual in 1972 which its members started to use as a guide in the teaching and examining of Yoruba. Meanwhile, the Committee of Vice-Chancellors had in 1971 set up a Joint Working Party whose terms of reference were to "examine the existing orthographies of the main Nigerian languages so as to achieve a practical and functional reform which has a high probability of being welcomed and accepted by

school teachers of the language and by authors using the languages". Separate working parties were set up for Efik, Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba. The Yoruba Working Party accepted most of the recommendations of the Orthography Committees but it also modified a few of them, particularly those based on convention.

The Federal Ministry of Education officially received the two Yoruba Orthography Committee Reports in April 1973, and the Report of the Joint Working party on Yoruba in May 1973. It proceeded to refer the recommendations to the Joint Consultative Committee on Education, with a note that, with one exception, all the recommendations were identical. The Joint Consultative Committee on Education therefore approved in June 1974 that the recommendations of the Joint Working Party on Yoruba be adopted by all Ministries of Education and the West African Examinations Council (in respect of examinations in the language).

## 2. CURRENT ALPHABET

The current Yoruba alphabet comprises 25 letters viz:

a, b, d, e, ẹ, f, g, gb, h, i, j, k, l, m, n, o, ọ, p, r, s, ʃ, t, u, w, y

These letters represent the following sounds:

### (a) Consonants

	Bila- bial	Labio- dental	Alveo- lar	Palato- alveo	Palatal	Velar	Labial velar	Glottal
Plosive	b		t,d			k, g	kp,gb	
Affricate				ɕ				
Nasal	m		n					
Tap			f					
Fricative	f		s	ʃ				h
- central							w	
-lateral			l		j			

Each letter of the alphabet represents the corresponding sound indicated with the same symbol, except in the case of the following:

j represents ɔ̃  
 p represents kp  
 ʃ represents ʃ  
 y represents J

## (b) Vowels

### (i) Oral

i		u
e		o
ɛ		ɔ
	a	

### (ii) Nasalized

ĩ	ũ
ẽ	õ

The vowels ɛ and ɔ are represented by the dotted letters ɛ̣ and ɔ̣ respectively, while nasalized vowels are represented by adding an orthographic 'n' after a letter indicating an oral vowel i.e. ũ is spelt un and ã is spelt in. The vowel õ is spelt on after b, m, f, kp, gb, and w, and an after other consonants. Some speakers of Yoruba have ã sound where the vowel is spelt an.

### 3. REPRESENTATION OF CERTAIN SOUNDS AND TONES

#### (i) Nasalized Vowels

The convention for representing nasalized vowels has been described above. It is necessary to point out, however, that in addition to the use of 'n' to indicate nasality, a vowel occurring after a nasal or as a third person singular object is indicated without an 'n' e.g.

mu	( <b>not</b> mun)	'drink'
mọ	( <b>not</b> mọn)	'build'
fún u	( <b>not</b> fún un)	'give him'
mọ ọ	( <b>not</b> mọn ọn)	'know him'

For the position after a nasal (i.e. after m or n), nasalization is automatic and it is quite adequate not to add an orthographic 'n' to the word to indicate it. In the case of the pronoun object, however, ambiguities could arise if the nasalization is not indicated e.g.

Ó mọ ọ (3rd person singular object)  
'He knows him

Ó mọ ọ (2nd person singular object)  
'He knows you

In order to avoid such ambiguities, it has been proposed that nasality should be indicated in the 3rd person singular pronoun object as in the case of other nasalized vowels i.e.

Ó mọ ọn  
'He knows him'

Ó fún un  
'He gave him,



Although this proposal has been sanctioned by all the committees that have looked into Yoruba orthography and incorporated into the recommendations approved by the Joint Consultative Committee on Education, several writers still continue to represent the 3rd person singular pronoun object without an orthographic ‘**n**’.

Representation of nasality with an ‘**n**’ poses a problem in the case of lengthened vowels. For example, is the middle ‘**n**’ in the following words to be interpreted as a consonant or simply as an orthographic ‘**n**’?

òfọ̀nọ̀n      'type of rat,  rogue'  
gana**n**      'exactly'

The solution proposed to this problem is to use the hyphen after the ‘**n**’ as follows:

òfọ̀n-ọ̀n      'type of rat,  rogue'  
ga**n**-a**n**      'exactly'

## **(ii) The Syllabic Nasal**

The syllabic nasal is spelt in three different ways:

m before b as in      ó **m** bọ      'He is coming'

(a) **n** before other consonants as in

ó **n**ke      'He is crying'  
ó **n**tọ      'He is urinating'

(c) **ng** before vowels e.g.

ng ò lọ  
'I didn't go'

In spite of all attempts to ensure that only the spelling ‘**n**’ is used consistently in all cases, the three spellings have remained, although the J.C.C. – approved orthography recommends the use of **n** as an alternative to **ng** in (c) above.

### (iii) Tones

**Three** tones are indicated in Yoruba orthography: **High** (marked with an acute accent e.g. **bá** 'meet') **Mid** (unmarked e.g. **ba** 'weave') and **Low** (marked with a grave accent e.g. **bà** 'impinge upon').

For a long time a **tilde** was used to indicate a combination of tones e.g. **õrun** for both 'sun' and 'smell' where the tones on 'o' are mid plus low and low plus high respectively. Since there are potentially nine possible combinations of tones, the tilde is completely ineffective as it could stand for any one of the combinations. It is now generally agreed that each combination should be represented by two or more tone marks with a consequent doubling or tripling of the vowel symbols e.g. **òòrùn** 'sun', **òórùn** 'smell' and **gbóòórùn** 'notice a smell'.

Although the mid tone is unmarked, this convention is only appropriate where all the other tones are marked. In much of Yoruba prose writing, authors only mark tones on difficult words or words which are likely to be confused with other words. In such cases, a syllable that does not have any tone mark on it could be pronounced with one of the three tones. In order to avoid this type of confusion, the recommendation has been accepted that the mid tone should be marked with a **macron** where an author decides to adopt the convention of marking tone only on a few selected words. For example, in the sentence, *ó wá òkò titi* 'she looked for a husband for a long time', the word for 'husband' has two mid tones both of which are marked with a macron.

When the syllabic nasal occurs after a vowel, there is a possibility of its being confused with an orthographic 'n' indicating nasalization e.g. is the 'n' in *kònkò* 'type of frog' to be interpreted as a syllabic nasal or as marking the nasalization of the preceeding vowel? In order to avoid such confusion, it has been recommended and agreed that the syllabic nasal should be tone-marked. Thus, *kònkò* will be written **kòṅkò**.

#### 4. MAJOR PROBLEMS IN THE ORTHOGRAPHY

There are three major problems in the current Yoruba orthography. They are: conventional spellings, the assimilated low tone, and word division.

##### (i) Conventional Spellings

Yoruba, like many other languages, has a number of inconsistent or archaic spellings that cannot be justified on any rational grounds but which writers have been accustomed to and which some will argue, have been hallowed by constant use over the years. Examples of such spellings are:

- (a) **àìyà** ‘chest’, **ẹìyẹ** ‘bird’, **aiyé** ‘world’ (instead of **àyà**, **ẹyẹ**, **ayé**)
- (b) **ọkònrin** ‘man’ (instead of **ọkunrin**)
- (c) **obìrin** ‘woman’ (instead of **obìnrin**)
- (d) **nwọn** ‘they’ **ẹnyin** ‘you-plural’ (instead of **wọn**, **ẹyin**)
- (e) **ẹnià** ‘person’ (instead of **ẹniyàn**)

Faced with the illogicality of these spellings, the two Yoruba Orthography Committees (1969, 1972) took the view that convention should override logic and that the spellings should be allowed to stand. This recommendation was however reversed in the J.C.C.- approved orthography, and it appears the newer spellings are now quite popular with teachers as well as writers.

##### (ii) The Assimilated Low Tone

The tone phenomenon that arises from the elision of a low tone has been referred to as the assimilated low tone. The problem it poses for the orthography is that certain contracted forms which are pronounced differently get written alike e.g.

alawo	‘owner of a plate’	
alawo	‘owner of a cult’	
ọlọrọ	‘owner of riches’	( - a rich person.)
ọlọrọ	‘owner of matter’	( - the person in question)

The solution proposed to the effect that the elided low tone be indicated with a dot in these contractions has proved to be unacceptable to the committees that looked into the revision of the orthography. The problem, however, remains very

much with us, since the writing of certain combinations of words in a contracted form is unavoidable. The plea that the context will help to determine which of the forms is meant is only a feeble and untidy way of disposing of an intractable problem.

In the case of an elided low tone followed by a high tone, the rising pitch, of this high tone is more difficult to ignore in a contraction. Hence, it is common practice to write the word ‘cutlass’ as àdà while in the contraction, aládàà ‘owner of a cutlass’, the same word is written ending in two vowels. There are even writers who have other spellings such as with just one vowel and a high tone mark or with one vowel and a rising tone mark i.e.

aládà  
aládă

Given the reluctance to deal squarely with the problem of this tonal phenomenon, it is not surprising that there are inconsistencies in the way these contractions are written. Those who write a high tone mark are simply preserving the original high tone of the word àdà. It is no valid reason to draw attention to the fact that what we actually pronounce is different or that, written that way, the form may be ambiguous. Both these objections are true of the first two pairs of contractions cited above. Those who write a tone mark indicating a rising pitch are only being faithful to the pronunciation. The only objection to their practice is that using this tone mark means adding another tone to the three that already exist in the language. Those who write two vowels are trying to avoid this objection, but in doing so they inadvertently provide two spellings for the same word i.e. àdà (in isolation) àdàà (in a contraction). Besides, the contrasts in other contractions (e.g. the first two pairs) are completely ignored.

Whichever way one looks at it, the problem of the assimilated low tone remains a serious one in Yoruba orthography. This is particularly obvious when writing poetry and texts in Yoruba dialects. The solutions currently adopted (avoiding the writing of contractions, indicating a rising pitch by doubling of vowels and

appealing to context) are largely **ad hoc**. A lasting solution will have to recognize the unity of the problem and so provide an identical device for indicating the elision of a low tone in a contraction. It is of no importance what form this device takes. The important thing is that it must be the same in all cases.

### (iii) Word Division

The area of word division is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, arguments for or against a particular solution often depend crucially on complicated grammatical features which not many people can understand. Secondly, some words have been written together by earlier writers in the language and suggestions that they should now be separated often meet with objections.

Consider the example of the words **kíni** ‘what’ and **tani** ‘who’. These two words have been written in this form for many years. It is possible, however, to show that **ni** is a separate word or particle which should not be written along with **kí** and **ta**. This same particle **ni** is found with many other words and is never written together with them.

e.g.	èlò ni ó gbà ‘How much did he take?’
	kíni ó gbà ‘What did he take?’
	ata ni ó gbà ‘It was pepper that he took’

It is clear from these sentences that **kíni** constitutes an exception and should have been written as **kí ni**. The two Yoruba Orthography Committees decided not to entertain a separation of the word, but the J.C.C.-approved recommendations altered that decision and accepted the strong arguments for writing the word, as well as its counterpart **ta ni**, as two words. The reports of the two orthography committees contain several of such arguments leading to decisions generally based on convention. A list of some typical words is to be found in the J.C.C. - approved orthography.

## 5. SOLUTIONS APPROVED BY THE JCC

The recommendations on Yoruba orthography approved by the J.C.C. are appended as Appendix I to this paper.

### Appendix I

#### J.C.C. - APPROVED ORTHOGRAPHY

##### (a) Spelling of Vowels

1. That, since it has been recognised all along that tone marking renders the use of “i” in the spelling of words such as **àyà**, **àyé**, **ẹyẹ** redundant, and since users, too, and especially teachers are now of this opinion, such words should now be written without “i” as **àyà**, **ayé**, **ẹyẹ**.

2. That the spellings **an** and **on** e.g. **itan**, **ibon** be retained, but that dialectal transcriptions and in indicating pronunciation in dictionaries the author should be free to use whichever spelling is appropriate.

3. (i) That nasality should be indicated in the third person singular pronoun object, e.g., **fùn u** should be written as **fún un**, **pòn ọ** as **pòn ọn**. Where the orthography does not reflect nasality in the vowel of the verb, nasality should be explicitly indicated in the third person pronoun object; e.g. **mò ọn** (NOT **mò ọ**, or **mòn ọn**) **mù un**; **mì ín**.

(ii) That a lengthened nasal should be represented by reduplication, with the hyphen suitably inserted; examples; **gan-an**; **òfòn-òn**; **tín-ín-tìn-ín**; **sùn-ùn**.

4. That ‘**ón**’ ‘he, she, it’ should be spelt ‘**òun**’

5. That the spelling **òkònrin** (commonly found in the Bible) should be abandoned for the more modern **òkunrin**

6. That the two spelling **obìnrin** and **obìrin** should be accepted as alternative correct spellings.

7. That the diacritic mark indicating open vowels should be a vertical bar (tail) or a dot but never a dash; **ọ**, **ẹ**, or **ọ̣**, **ẹ̣**, (with a sub-dot) but not **ọ̣̣**, **ẹ̣̣**, (with an underline). This should also be the case for the consonant **ṣ** or **ṣ̣** (with a sub-dot)

### **(b) Spelling of Consonants:**

8. That the syllabic nasal should be spelt **m** before **b** but **n** in all other cases e.g. **mbò**, **ńlò**, **ńké**, etc. The spelling **ng** for the first person singular pronoun “I” should be allowed to coexist with the alternative spelling **n**. e.g. **ng ó lò**, or **n ó lò**.

9. That the spelling **nw**, **ny** in words like **nwón**, **nyin**, **ènyin**, should be abandoned, and these words should be written without **n** as **wón**, **yin**, **èyin**. The reason is that the **n** in the **nw**, **ny** spelling has always been seen to be redundant, and the convention on which its use has been based does not offer a sufficiently strong argument.

10. That the spelling of double consonants **tt** and **sh** in place names be discontinued, e.g. **Òttà** should be written **Òtà**, **Òshogbo** should be written **Òsogbo**.

### **Spelling of Tones:**

11. That the tilde (**~**) be discontinued and replaced by a double vowel and that all tones should be indicated on these vowels, e.g., **õrun** should be written **oòrùn** or **oorùn** depending on the context.

12. That where assimilation involves noun beginning with a double vowel (the first of which has a low tone) and a preceding high tone prefix or verb, the resulting combination will have to be indicated by three vowel symbols e.g. **Oní àánu** – **aláàánú**; **gbó òòrùn** – **gbóòóòrùn**.

13. That whereas it is not essential for an author to mark the tone on every syllable except in dictionaries, in poetry, in dialects, and in other special writings, nevertheless, Yoruba being a tone language, there is need for every writer to employ tone marks in a way that will facilitate comprehension.

14. That where the author decides to mark the tone on a given word, the high and low tones should be marked; any syllable not marked can be assumed to have midtone. Where, however, all the tones on the particular word which the author wishes to mark are mid, such tones should be indicated by the use of the macron.  
e.g.  $\bar{a}w\bar{o}$  r $\bar{e}$  dudu;  $\bar{s}in\bar{n}dodo$ .

15. That in any writing where the author is obliged to mark all tones (e.g. dictionaries, poetry, dialectal transcription, teaching manuals for foreign students etc.), the mid tone should be indicated by the absence of a tone mark.

16. That the tone on a syllabic nasal should be indicated, especially where it is likely to be confused with an **n** indicating nasality, e.g. **kòṛkò**, (with a grave accent above n) gbaṅgba (n with a macron):  $d\bar{e}n\bar{d}\bar{e}$ , **dánkú**.

17. That to solve the problem created by the elision of a low tone vowel, the glide which occurs in the syllable preceded by the elided low tone vowel should be indicated by the doubling of the vowel of the syllable in which the glide occurs  
e.g. Ó wá ìsé = **ó wásé** but Ó wá ìsé = **ó wásèé**.

This solution also applies to words such as **yíí** from èyí.

It is recognised that there are other cases where the elision of a low tone syllable could also lead to ambiguities; e.g.

alawo ('owner of a plate', root 'àwo')

alawo ('owner of a cult', root 'awo')

The present committee is of the opinion that the introduction of a new tone mark to remove the ambiguity in such cases would be undesirable. The committee hopes, therefore, that the context will help in such cases to determine which of the alternative forms is meant.



#### (d) Word Division

18. That vowel lengthenings between words should not be indicated,  
e.g. ( **ọmọ mi** and not **ọmọọ mi** )

19. That no elision should be indicated for fixed verb + noun combinations, e.g., **tọjú, rántí**, for separable verb + noun combinations, except where there is a word qualifying the noun part, e.g., **ṣiṣẹ**, but **ṣ'ṣẹ ipá**; **ó lọ sókè** but **ó lọ s'ókè ọjà**.

20. That where an apostrophe is inserted to indicate an elision, it should be put where a vowel has been elided. In the case of two identical vowels it should be assumed that it is the vowel of the first word that is elided, e.g. **ṣ'ṣẹ ipá**;  
**kọ 'lé èwé; r'aṣọ àrán; p'èrò púpọ; s'òrò èké; n'Ibàdàn**.

21. That the verbal particle **i** should be written as an independent item and not together with the following verb, since writing it together with the verb will give the impression that the Yoruba language has words with high tone vowels at the initial position.

#### Examples:

<b>ní í ẹ</b>	and not	<b>ní íẹ</b>
<b>kì í ké</b>	and not	<b>kì íké</b>
<b>kò ní í wá</b>	and not	<b>kò ní íwá</b>

Where, however, the verbal particle **i** is assimilated to the final vowel of the preceding word, the assimilated form should be written with the preceding word.

Example **Ó ẹ̀ro í ẹ**, but **Ó ẹ̀roó ẹ**.

22. That the following words should be written as single words:

**níbo**

**níláti**

**ìbá**

23. That the following items should **not** be written as single words:

ta ni

kí ni / kín ni

èwo ni

jé kí

wí pe

gégé bí

ẹni tí

ìbì tí

nítorí náà

nítorí tí

nígbà tí

nígbà náà

nígbà gbogbo

níwọ̀n ìgbà tí

lẹ̀hìn náà

bí ó tilẹ̀ jẹ̀ pé

This list is not necessarily exhaustive.

24. That nominalised expressions should be hyphenated if they contain two or more words, Examples: **Akun-yun-un; A-da’na-ija; Ogbóri-egun-bá-wọn-jó -dundun-nilé-Ilorin**

#### (e) General

25. That the above recommendations should not necessarily apply to the spelling of personal names, nor to poetry, dialectal transcriptions, dictionaries, grammars and other technical writings, where authors should have the freedom to depart from the generally accepted orthography if the nature of their material or presentation compels to do so.

### Appendix II

#### SAMPLE TEXT IN THE APPROVED ORTHOGRAPHY

Nísisi yíí, onjẹ rẹ tí n fẹ́ẹ̀rẹ̀, ìbànújẹ gidigidi ni èyí jẹ́ fún un; pàápàá nígbà tí òun kò mọ́ ìgbà tí ìrìnkèrindò rẹ̀ lè dé òpin.

Kò pẹ́ púpọ̀ tí ó rìn dé itòsí odò kan bá yíí, odò náà gbòòrò lójú sùgbón kò jìn rárá; nígbà tí ó dé etí odò náà, ó nígbọ̀ tí àwọn kan ní kùn yunmu-yunmu sùgbón kò lè fi ojú rí wọn. Èrù bà á, ó fẹ́ sá padà.

Làìpẹ́ ó fojú kan òkè kan bá yíí. Kò sí òkè tí a lè fi wé ní òde ayé. Bí ó ti rí òkè náà, ó ni “Pátápátá parí po-o, mo rìn rìn mo dé òpin ayé mi, àbùṣe bùṣe”. Kò sí ẹnì tí yóò dé ẹ̀sẹ̀ òkè náà tí kò ní sọ irú ohun tí Ajítóní sọ yíí. Tí àṣodùn kó, òkè ràbàndẹ̀ rabandẹ̀ náà ga tó pètẹ̀ẹ̀sì alájà mẹfà, ó sì dúró ṣanṣan, bèẹ̀ l’ó nyò. Bí ẹnìkẹ̀ni bá sì gbìyànjú láti gùn ún títa ni òkè náà yóò máa ta á láyà tí yóò sì máa jan ìkòkò ìdí mọ̀lẹ̀ gbin!