

Your name:

The UK Linguistics Olympiad 2021

Round 1



Problem A1. Mandombe (15 marks)

Mandombe is a script created in 1978 by Wabeladio Payi. Today, it is used to write the Democratic Republic of the Congo's four national languages—Kongo, Lingala, Tshiluba, and Swahili. According to legend, the script was revealed to Payi by Congolese prophet Simon Kimbangu in a dream; and at one point, the script landed its creator in trouble with the authorities because in traditional Kongo culture, mirrors are powerful, magical devices. Clearly, something about the script was too mirror-like.



Here are some words (A-V) written in Mandombe and their corresponding Roman transliterations (1-22) and English translations.

A.		L.	
B.		M.	
C.		N.	
D.		O.	
E.		P.	
F.		Q.	
G.		R.	
H.		S.	
I.		T.	
J.		U.	
K.		V.	

1	wonso	at all
2	tewa	bang
3	tuti	cloud
4	mfumvu	cord
5	ngombe	cow
6	umbuka	dead
7	kutu	ear
8	tiya	fire
9	mfinda	forest
10	mpunda	horse
11	lumonso	left
12	mongo	mountain
13	mpuku	mouse
14	mwisi	smoke
15	fula	to blow
16	zenga	to cut
17	zuba	to hit
18	simba	to hold
19	yimbila	to sing
20	venza	to strike
21	maza	water
22	nani	who

Your name:

The UK Linguistics Olympiad 2021

Round 1



Q.A1.1. Use the table below to match the words (A-V) with their transcriptions (1-22).

Mandombe	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K
Roman											
Mandombe	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V
Roman											

Q.A1.2. The numerals **1**, **2**, **3**, and **4** are written in Mandombe as shown below.

1	2	3	4
፩	፪	፫	፬

How would you write the numeral 5? Choose one of the following alternatives by writing its letter-name in the bottom-right cell.

፭	፮	፯	፱	፲	your choice from a-e
a	b	c	d	e	

Your name:

The UK Linguistics Olympiad 2021

Round 1



Solution and marking.

Scoring: (max 25)

- **A1.1:** 1 point for each correct number. (max 22)
- **A1.2:** 3 points for a correct choice. (max 3)

Q.A1.1

Mandombe	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K
Roman	1	8	13	9	6	2	18	3	5	7	15
Mandombe	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V
Roman	14	16	17	4	22	12	21	19	11	10	20

Q.A1.2

					your choice from a-e
a	b	c	d	e	e

Your name:

The UK Linguistics Olympiad 2021

Round 1



Commentary

The following comes from the Omniglot website (<https://omniglot.com/writing/mandombe.htm>). The following notes are based on the table of syllable shapes pasted at the end of the explanation.

- Mandombe is built round the shape which looks like either 5 or 2, depending on its orientation. Call this shape '5/2'.
- Each vowel consists of 5/2 combined with another shape. For the five basic vowels the second shape is also used for a number 1-5, so the vowel-shapes follow the phonetic vowel triangle, reading from front (e, e) to back (u, o) and top (i, u) to bottom (a). See the diagram below. (The sixth vowel doesn't occur in our data.)
- Consonants are attached to one corner of 5/2, and combine with it to define a V or CV syllable. CCV is covered by other rules.
- Consonants are classified in terms of 4 families and 5 groups.
 - The families determine the position of the consonant relative to its vowel as well as the orientation of 5/2:
 - 5: top right or bottom left
 - 2: top left or bottom right
 - The groups determine the shape of the consonant, but the shape is rotated or reversed according to how it is positioned:
 - with 5: basic
 - with 2: reversed
 - above 5/2: basic
 - below 5/2: rotated

Thus families 2 and 4 are the rotated versions of 1 and 3, and 3 and 4 are the mirror images of 1 and 2 – hence the mention of mirrors in the introduction!

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Round 1



Vowels

	i	u	e	o	a	ü
Consonants	Family 1	Family 2	Family 3	Family 4		
ŋ	ŋ	ŋ	ŋ	ŋ	ŋ	ŋ
Group 1	na	va	sa	ta		
g	g	g	g	g	g	g
Group 2	be	de	fe	ge		
ɛ	ɛ	ɛ	ɛ	ɛ	ɛ	ɛ
Group 3	ko	mo	lo	po		
ɔ	ɔ	ɔ	ɔ	ɔ	ɔ	ɔ
Group 4	wi	ri	zi	yi		
Mazita ma zindinga	shu	dju	tshu	ju		