UMWERO KINYARWANDA ALPHABET
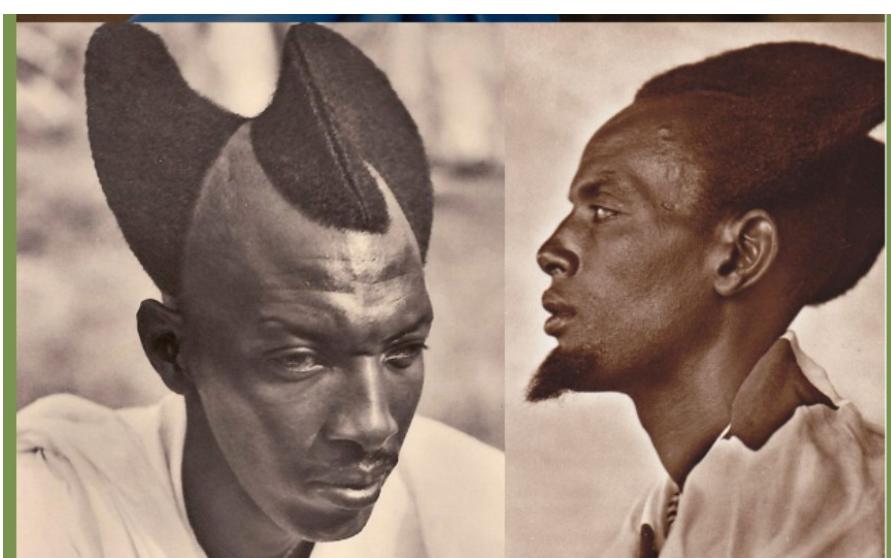
Introduction

The creation of the Umwero alphabet is deeply intertwined with the preservation and celebration of Rwandan culture. As the founder, I, Kwizera Mugisha, embarked on this journey with the mission to create an alphabet that truly represents the phonetic and cultural essence of Kinyarwanda. This essay explores the connection between the Umwero alphabet and Rwandan culture, highlighting its roots in traditional beliefs, symbolism, and linguistic heritage.

Rwandan History

Since ancient times, it has been our culture to respect ourselves, embrace our uniqueness, and find solutions to our problems within our community.
*Rwanda was a vast country with its own distinctive culture and beliefs. The traditional Rwandan hairstyle called AMASUNZU embodies these cultural aspects. The hairstyle "Amasunzu" conveys a profound meaning:"**Umurima w'umuntu ni umutwe we, ubwe**," which translates to: "The person's field of innovation/success is their mind." This saying encourages our people to think before taking action.*

This is amasunzu

This rich culture runs in my blood, and it is why I have developed the Umwero alphabet. It serves as a solution to distinguish Kinyarwanda from other languages and is a tribute to our language, ancestors, and unique culture. Our culture is deeply embedded in our language, as we say: Our culture is back-wrapped in the Kinyarwanda language—*(in Kinyarwanda we say:* **IKINYARWANDA NI INGOBYI IHETSE UMUCO WACU)**.

In Rwandan culture, we cherish our traditional dance called "Amaraba," our songs and poems, and our decorative art known as "Imigongo." We also have various drumming styles that reflect our heritage.
Even though all these cultural elements are our intellectual property, they are not the core of our culture. Our culture and traditions are rooted in three essential aspects: Imana (God), Inka (Cattle), and Ingoma (Drum which is not Drum but a Throne). Understanding these three pillars will illuminate how Umwero is deeply connected to our culture and represents its intellectual essence.

Let dive deep in Rwandan culture and how Umwero brings those Ideas in physical shape of an alphabet:

as I have said, the great and great Root of Rwandan culture Is God, the word God is translated in kinyarwanda as 'Imana' so since ancient Rwanda we believe God is our parent, creator of land, fire,water and air. We believe Imana has no beginning nor ending, the concept of Alpha and Omega was in Rwanda before, where we call it Hero na Herezo, Hero is Alpha means starting, Herezo is Omega means ending. In this theology of my ancient people believed that God is one and has no starting but He is starting of all things, and he has no ending but he is ending of all things, that why God was symbolized by a Circle because circle has no starting nor ending.
*Many Liturals was as is performed inside a circle to strengthen the will, spells, prayer and even to unit people were done inside a circle for*
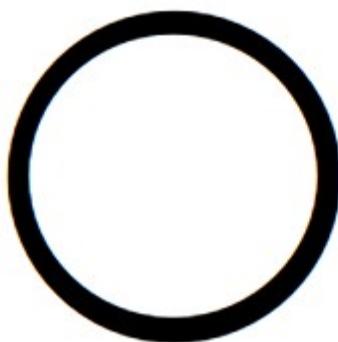
example there is what we say "Mu Urunana twunga Ubumwe" means in the circle we unit

In numbers Rwandan start to count from 1 but they beilved that God is also a starting of numbers and in counting of numbers we believes God is the creator of numbers so he is strating of number, in Kinyarwanda we say He Is 'Ibanze' Let me explain this word litle bit befor showing you the symbol of Imana as Ibanze of All things.

The word 'Ibanze'(starting) come from the word 'Kubanza'(to start), this word is combination of 2 syllables one is 'Kuba' another is 'nza', 'Kuba' means to be'Nza' means a Will in other words this means that Imana is All maybe english speaker understand this when I say 'Kuba', 'nza' means like I will be so if we change 'Kuba'+'nza' to 'nza'+'kuba'= nza kuba means then I become. That why all thing from God is god but not the Creator.

Here below, it is a picture of all the Hero na Herezo of all Creation which is Ibanze in Numbers and it is a circle:

Again, God is revealed in the family concept, symbolized by the relationship between husband and wife with their child, forming a circle. This idea is evident in the ancient Rwandan style of building houses, where the structure often took the form of a circle. In front of the door, there was a prominent circle that held significant meaning in the context of family reproduction.

In Rwandan tradition, the circular shape of homes and the prominent circle at the entrance symbolize the continuity and unity of family life. Just as a circle has no beginning or end, the family unit is seen as an unbroken chain, reflecting the eternal nature of Imana. The circle at the door represents the entry into a life of unity and continuity, reinforcing the cultural value placed on family as the foundation of society.

This symbolism extends to the Umwero alphabet, where the shapes and forms draw from these deep-rooted cultural and theological concepts, making the alphabet not just a tool for communication, but a representation of Rwandan heritage and beliefs.

n ancient Rwanda, when a mother gave birth or brought a child into the world, she was seen as stepping onto another stage—a godly stage. This important transition was symbolized by the adornment she was supposed to wear on her head, known as the parental throne or "Urugori." The image below depicts a mother wearing Urugori, signifying her elevated status and the sacred role she now holds in the cycle of life and creation.

The Urugori represents the crown of motherhood, embodying the idea that a mother, through the act of giving life, participates in the divine process of creation. This cultural practice highlights the reverence for motherhood and the acknowledgment of its profound significance within the community. It also ties into the broader theme of circles and continuity in Rwandan culture, where the circle symbolizes not only unity and eternity but also the cyclical nature of life, creation, and family.

The Umwero alphabet, by drawing on these cultural symbols, transforms the abstract concepts of Rwandan beliefs into a physical and visual form, reinforcing the connection between language, culture, and identity.

After Imana (God), the second great root of Rwandan culture is the cow, referred to as "In'ka" in Kinyarwanda. The cow is the ultimate symbol of prosperity in Rwandan culture. We often say, "In'ka is Rwandan," reflecting its deep integration into our way of life. Cows assist mothers in raising their children; in Kinyarwanda, we say, "In'ka zifasha ababyeyi kurera abana," which means "Cows help mothers to raise their children." This close relationship is why we drink milk and refer to it as drinking "In'ka" (kunywa In'ka/kunywa amata).

As cattle breeders, there are many aspects of our culture reflected in the Umwero alphabet, particularly in the number and counting systems. However, let's focus specifically on the cow, especially the Inyambo. Inyambo are cows with long, graceful horns, symbolizing beauty and elegance.

In Rwandan traditional dance, known as "Amaraba," there are two types: one for war and another for cows (In'ka). In the dance dedicated to In'ka, dancers raise their arms to mimic the horns of Inyambo cows. This dance not only celebrates the beauty of these cows but also underscores their significance in Rwandan culture. I wish you could see Rwandan girls beautifully performing the Amaraba dance, which vividly illustrates the horns of the Inyambo cows.

Below is a picture showing how the Amaraba dance portrays the horns of Inyambo cows:

So, we may ask ourselves, how are the Inyambo and the Amaraba dance related to the Umwero alphabet? The connection lies in the design and symbolism of the letters themselves. The first vowel of the Umwero alphabet, the letter 'A' (sound 'Ah'), reflects the head and horns of Inyambo cows. This artistic representation captures the essence of the cow's prominent features.

When we look at the sixth character of the Umwero alphabet, the letter 'B' (sound 'Bah'), and combine it with the letter 'A', they reflect the full shape of the cow (Inyambo). The combination of these letters not only represents the physical form of the cow but also evokes the sound of the Inyambo, which yells or calls out with a sound like "baaaaaaaaa." This sound is significant as it connects to the cultural and auditory experience of the Inyambo.

By observing these characters, we can see how they artistically represent the entirety of the cow, incorporating its body shape and posture. It is important to remember that these letters are an art form, not photography; they embody the cultural and symbolic essence of the Inyambo and the Amaraba dance.

The Umwero alphabet goes beyond mere letters and sounds. It integrates Rwandan cultural symbols, celebrating the profound connections between language, art, and heritage. Through these letters, the Umwero alphabet preserves and honors the cultural significance of the Inyambo and the traditional Amaraba dance, making the alphabet a unique embodiment of Rwandan identity and history.
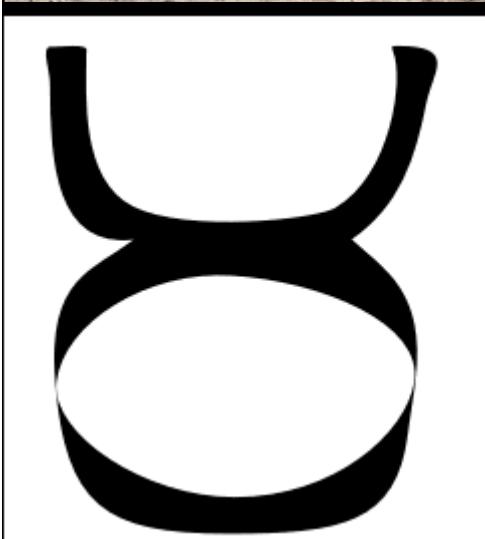
1. Inyambo Cows(In'ka)

2. Inyambo front–view
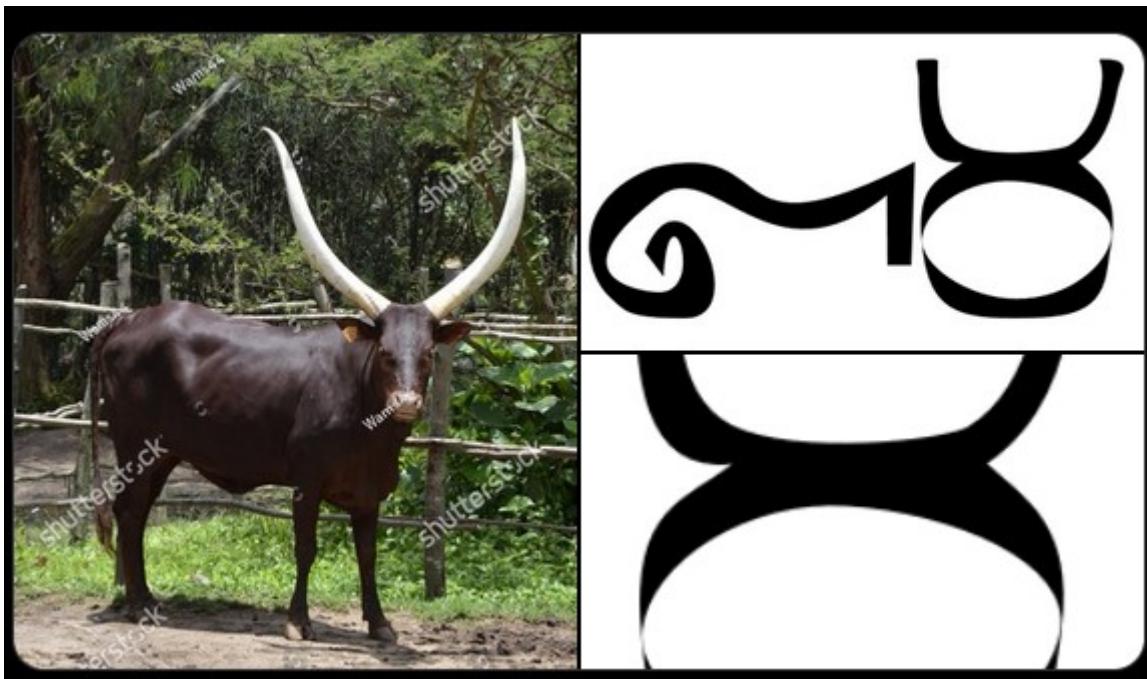
3. Umwero Vowel 'A' which reflect Inyambo head and horn

4. Umwero letter 'B' + 'A' to reflect a cow

II
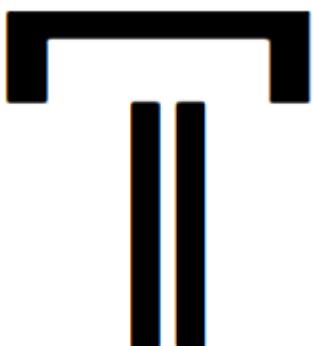
After Imana (God) and In'ka (cattle), the third root of our culture is 'Ingoma.' The word 'Ingoma' is translated as a drum, and while its symbol in ancient Rwanda was a drum, the real meaning of Ingoma was and is a kingdom or throne. Thus, Ingoma was symbolized by a drum. As you see below, this is a picture of Ingoma. This is not a normal drum but a royal drum that reflects a kingdom.

We know that every throne has an owner, who is the king. In Rwandan culture, the king Gihanga Ngomijana was the ruler of both cattle and the throne (Ingoma). His name, "Ngomijana," is a combination of two syllables: "Ngoma," representing the Ingoma or throne, and "Jana," where "Ijana" signifies 100. Therefore, his name means King Gihanga of 100 thrones. Additionally, 'Gihanga' means creator.
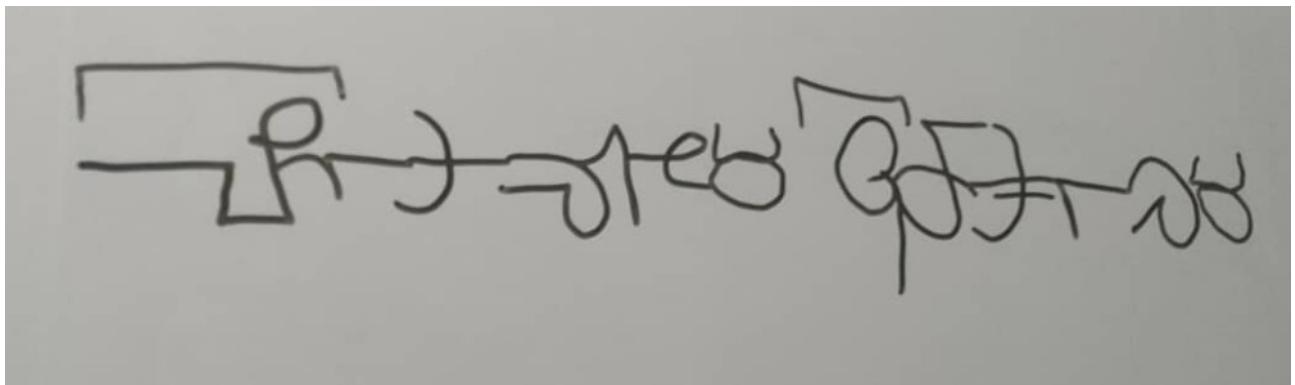
In the Umwero alphabet, you will not find a symbol specifically representing the drum as depicted above. However, we have a symbol that reflects a throne, honoring King Gihanga Ngomijana and preserving his legend in Kinyarwanda as he holds significant importance in our culture. This symbol of the throne serves a dual purpose. Firstly, it is used in numbers. When we place a throne symbol above a number, it indicates that the number has a place value of hundreds, in homage to Gihanga who was the owner of hundreds of thrones. For example, a throne above the number 2 represents 200.

The picture below illustrates the representation of the number 200 using the throne symbol:

Secondly, we use the throne symbol on the first letter of a name to highlight that it is the proper name of a person. In our culture, we say, "Akami ka muntu ni umutima we," meaning "the kingdom of a person is in his heart." Currently, in the Umwero computer font and even on the Umwero virtual keyboard, this feature of placing a throne above a letter is

not yet functional. However, the picture below depicts my name, Kwizera Mugisha, written using Umwero on a whiteboard:

UMWERO DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

Before discussing the development process of Umwero, let's delve into the meaning of the name itself: "Umwero."

Literally, for those who may not have a deep understanding of Kinyarwanda, they might translate this name simply as "the harvest." While it does indeed mean "the harvest," it encapsulates much more than that; it captures the essence of Imana (God), In'ka (cattle), and Ingoma (throne).

Explaining this name in a foreign language is challenging, but I will do my best. In Rwandan culture, we believe that "Imana irera" (God is holy), and He is the owner of blessings, meaning He is the one who blesses us. Additionally, the milk of cows is white, and "white" in Kinyarwanda is "Umweru." "Umwe" signifies one, and "eru" refers to milk. Hence, "eru" becomes "Era" when we say "amata ni ayera," meaning "milk is white."

Furthermore, from ancient Rwanda to the present day, our lives revolve around cultivation, and crops are referred to as "Umwero" and are harvested. This concept is challenging to explain in another language, so let's proceed directly to the development process of Umwero.

Kwizera Mugisha, I am multi-talented. One of my talents is writing songs and stories. I declare myself as the best rapper ever, even though I do not rap professionally. When I was young, I aspired to become the best

rapper worldwide. This ambition motivated me to write more songs and even burn some of them to inspire myself and avoid becoming lazy. Seeing the many songs I had written encouraged me to keep going, and this practice of writing songs set me apart from what I had expected.

As I worked hard to write many Kinyarwanda rap songs, the writing process led me to think critically about what I was writing and about the Kinyarwanda language. I began to notice that the way we speak and the way we write Kinyarwanda were not the same. For example, the way we write our country's name, "Rwanda," is not how it is spoken. We pronounce it as "Rw'anda," where "Rw" is read as "Rua." Therefore, when you read "Rwanda," it sounds like "Ruanda." There is a missing sound to capture how we natively speak our language. To reflect native pronunciation, it should be written as "RGWanda," with the missing sound being "G."

I also found similar problems in many other words. For instance, "TW" is read as "Tua," but it should be "TKW," which would be read as "tukuwa" instead of "tua."

After finishing my secondary studies in 2017, I visited my two elder brothers in Nairobi, Gudhurai, where they were living. In Kenya, I encountered another issue that made me continue thinking about writing. Many Kenyan languages are Bantu languages, and Kinyarwanda is a Bantu–speaking language, meaning we share common sounds and a few similar words. However, I noticed that the same sounds we share are written differently. This made me question why we say "Ch" and they say "Ch," but in Rwanda, Burundi, and DRC, it is written as "C," while in Uganda and Kenya, it is written as "Ch."

I found that this difference stems from the colonial period. Many African languages were spoken without a script, and Kenya and Uganda were colonized by Anglophones, which is why they write "Ch." On the other hand, Rwanda was colonized by Francophones, which is why we write "C."

As I continued my research on Kinyarwanda and its writing system, I discovered that the alphabet we use is derived from Latin, brought by colonizers who did not know how to speak Kinyarwanda or listen to it. Because they had their alphabet, they used it as a tool to help them understand Kinyarwanda. However, this was not truly Kinyarwanda, and

the draft they used to help them understand the language was adopted as the Kinyarwanda writing system.

Since 2014, the Ministry of Culture and Language (Inteko y'Umuco n'Ururimi) has made changes to the way we write Kinyarwanda because the old system was seen as difficult and not understandable. Again in 2020, they made another change, and even in this year, 2024, they are planning to revert some of the changes. All these efforts are proof that the Latin alphabet cannot fully capture the sounds of Kinyarwanda.

All of these experiences inspired me to create a better Bantu alphabet to write the Kinyarwanda language as it is spoken. However, I didn't know where to start, and no one believed in me. Even I was unsure if I was on the right path. I kept asking myself where to start, how to proceed, and when to begin. The only thing that kept me going was the belief that "every culture is protected by its language, and any language may be protected by its own writing system."

I remember it was my first year at university, studying Computer Science in 2019. I was still uncertain about where to begin until I found something profound while looking in the mirror. In the mirror, I noticed that all letters change the way they look or stand, but a circle never changes; it remains the same. I also realized that people are like those changeable letters. When we see each other naturally, there is a cross sign in our eyes, meaning my right eye looks at your left eye, but in the mirror, my right eye aligns with my right eye. This led me to understand that the alphabet is like the human body, which can die or come to life through birth, and a character or alphabet is the body of a spirit, which is a sound. This realization prompted me to start with the unchangeable shape of a circle.
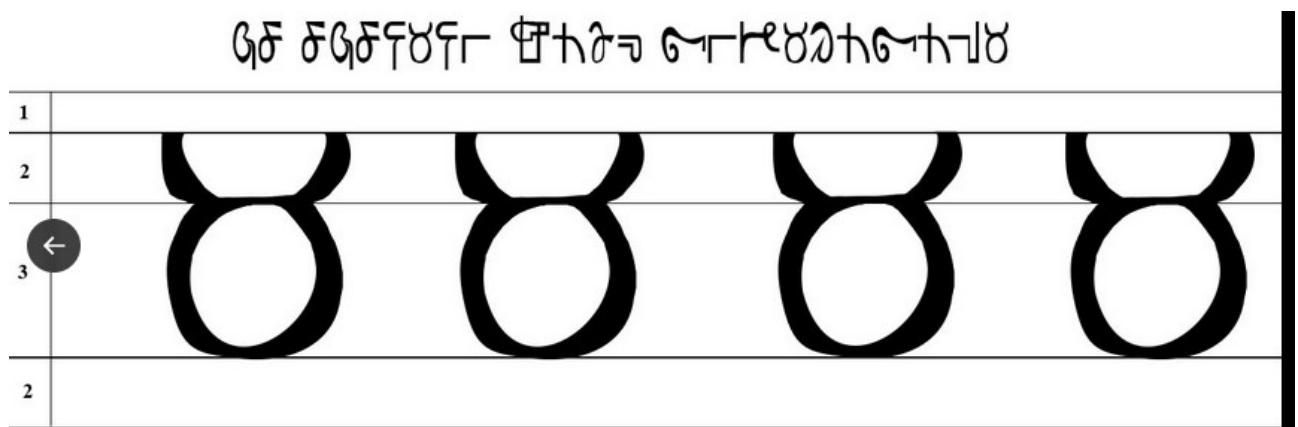
Initially, I didn't know that this approach would fit my culture and tradition as well as it does today. I created some characters by referring to cultural elements and others based on my own feelings without any cultural reference, but later found how they connected with Kinyarwanda culturally and traditionally. For example, I created letters like 'A,' 'B,' 'M,' 'D,' and the throne symbol by referring to Kinyarwanda and cultural elements. However, I created letters like 'J,' 'Mf,' and 'Y' based on my own intuition, and later discovered their cultural connections. This made me understand

that it was not just me who created Umwero but Imana, who is the creator of all languages and scripts.

This journey of creating the Umwero alphabet taught me that a language's writing system should reflect its unique sounds and cultural essence. The Umwero alphabet not only captures the phonetic intricacies of Kinyarwanda but also honors and preserves the rich cultural heritage of Rwanda.
I decided to create this alphabet out of self-respect, to honor my language, and to preserve it, as the current writing system is contributing to the degradation of Kinyarwanda. Umwero is meant to embody Kinyarwanda identity and, by extension, the identity of Rwanda. This endeavor is also about achieving independence and can be seen as a form of decolonization.

In creating Umwero, I aimed for all characters to have a uniform height, using the measure of 8. Interestingly, I later discovered that in Kinyarwanda, the act of giving or inheriting is symbolized by the number 8. Below is the measure of an Umwero character, adhering to this principle:

୪ **A-->ah**	ᔒ U--->uh	ᐱ O--->oh	ꓫ E-->eh	ᒥ I--->ih	ᖌ Ra	ᖬ Ba
� Na	ᘜ Ma	ᑌ Ta	ꓱ Ka	ᔓ Sa	ǂ Ga	�47 Za
ᑎ Cha/ca	ᓂ Ja	ơ Da	⌣ Ha	⌣ Ya	ℬ Wa	ᕹ Va
ᵮ Pa	ᐎ Fa	ᖮ Mba	ᗡ Nja	ᘏ Nya	⼁ Nsa	ᕹ Cya/Kya
ᑎ Sha	ꔸ Jya	ꔸ Njya	⅄ Nca	ꝑ B	ᇫ SHY	ᇫ Nshy
ᖌ′ Nha/(Nt)	ᘜ′ MH/(Mp)	ᖬ Tsa	� Nkha	ᗡ Mva	ᗷ Nsha	ᖬ Mfa
⊖ Pfa	⎁	ᖯ	ᛏ	ᖭ	ᖬ	⌢

The Blue highlights are those this special meaning and connection to Kinyarwanda or culture or Traditions

The brown highlighted charaters are character/sounds which are not used in the common Kinyarwanda but they are used by other fellow bantu speakers like Burundi Dza, ets

ᘜ′ is a nosal sound of ᘜ and This ᖌ′ is a nosal sound of ꓕ
also this ᇫ sound is derrived from this ᇫ sound as this ꔸ is from ꔸ
then you take 43-4 = 39 means Kinyarwanda sounds are 39 sounds which create mamy more other sounds for example as I have said the name Rw from Rwanda must be RGW = ᖌ + ǂ + ℬ = ᖮ
ᖮ୪ꓫ୪ ᒥ Rwanda.

As I mentioned before, I can't forget how I shared the idea of Umwero creation, especially regarding numbers, with Craig Cornelius. He helped me develop a virtual keyboard for Umwero. I explained to him the concept of Gihanga Ngomijana and how the throne would be the symbol for hundreds. Craig corrected me when I initially made errors in writing numbers, such as representing them in tens followed by the throne symbol. His guidance was invaluable.

Here, let me share with you the Umwero virtual keyboard: [Umwero Virtual Keyboard](#).

Conclusion

The Umwero alphabet is more than just a writing system; it is a symbol of cultural identity and linguistic preservation. By capturing the phonetic intricacies and cultural essence of Kinyarwanda, Umwero serves as a tool for decolonization and the revival of our linguistic heritage. It honors the rich traditions of Rwanda and ensures that future generations can connect with their cultural roots through their language.