

## Notes and News

### *The Vai Script.*

AFTER my article on the Vai script<sup>1</sup> had appeared my attention was drawn to an article by the Rev. A. J. Sumner on 'Mendi Writing', which had appeared in *Sierra Leone Studies*.<sup>2</sup> In 1927, when at Gene, Liberia, on the frontier of Sierra Leone, I had seen Mendi people trying to learn the characters of the Vai script in order to write their own language. With them I was convinced that the Vai script explained the origin and nature of the Mendi writing, and Professor Westermann shared this opinion.

In his article in *Sierra Leone Studies* Mr. Sumner reports what he has found out concerning the origin and nature of the Mendi writing. He tells us that he has been fortunate enough to meet the inventor of the writing himself, Kisima Kamala, a Mendi, and describes some of the 190 characters of the script as well as the rather peculiar and interesting system of notation which is part of this writing, the basis of which is no longer the old Sudanic vigesimal system of counting, but a new European-like decimal one. Mr. Sumner has met a few of Kisima Kamala's pupils, with whom he was able to correspond in the new writing, and he praises the successful inventor as having rescued his people 'from the stigma of illiteracy and placed their feet on the high-road of literacy'.

From the account given by Mr. Sumner it is at once evident that this Mendi script has nothing to do with the efforts of Mendi people mentioned above to adopt the Vai script for their own language, nor can this Mendi script be considered as an offspring of the Vai script at all. It is true that the Mendi script is syllabic, as is the Vai script, and the elements of the characters, which seem to be written unconnected in both scripts, consist of straight and curved lines and dots in the Mendi script as well as in the Vai script. In consequence of this identity of the elements even whole characters may be found to be identical. Of the few characters of the Mendi script described by Mr. Sumner the syllable *vi* in Mendi apparently is written like *ku* in Vai, and if I am not mistaken in understanding the description of the character for *gbe* in Mendi (whether the *e* of this *gbe* is 'close' or 'open' cannot be ascertained from the description) the sign for it is identical with that of *gbe* ('open' *e*) in Vai. But though such similarities occur there is a decisive difference of principle between these scripts. On p. 166 of my article I have referred to the fact that in the Vai script there exists one category of signs derived from others which are original ones. But this derivation is based on similarities between whole syllables as indissoluble phonetical units,

<sup>1</sup> *Africa*, vi. 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Sierra Leone Studies*, No. xvii, February 1932.

when a similarity in meaning or use has not been the cause of the derivation. In the Mendi script too we find derivation of syllabic signs from others, derivation here seems to be even a more fundamental means of devising signs than in the Vai script. But these derivations in Mendi are based on the nature of the syllable as combinations of single sounds. This will be clear from the very beginning of the description of the signs by Mr. Sumner, which runs thus: '*ki* is like 7. *ka* is like *ki* with a dot on top. *ku* is like *ki* with two dots on top. *wi* is like *c* turned the other way. *wa* is like *wi* with a dot inside. *wu* has two dots inside', etc. In the Vai script syllables like *ka*, *ke*, *ke*, *ki*, *ko*, *ko*, and *ku* are essentially distinct concepts and indissoluble entities, the Mendi inventor, on the contrary, though having invented a syllabic system of writing knows that a syllable is only a secondary unit of primary components. In this respect his script, though bearing every feature of a syllabic writing, is no longer on the standpoint of the Vai script, but reminds one of the old script of the Semites of Abyssinia, with the difference that this latter was consonantal by origin and only by the later addition of certain diacritical changes became a sort of syllabic writing, whilst the Mendi script was syllabic by origin.

Whence this knowledge of the phonetical structure of the syllable may have come into the mind of Kisima Kamala is unknown to us. Mr. Sumner states that he is a Muslim by faith. Are we entitled to suppose that he was versed enough in the Arabic script to know from this the value of consonants and vowels, or does he owe this knowledge to his having come in touch with the European script?

Compared with this fundamental difference in the conception of the script little stress is to be laid on the difference with regard to the notation, which is revealed by the comparison of both the scripts. As to the Vai script it too has developed, rather recently, a mode of writing numbers, but the signs for them are only slight modifications of the European ciphers of the units. So the notation in the Vai script, which in practice is seldom used, is decimal according to its origin, though the Vai numeration itself has remained Sudanic, i.e. vigesimal. While Kisima Kamala has invented perfectly new ciphers of a peculiar kind, which, being based on a decimal conception, have changed the original vigesimal numeration of the Mendi language, at least when reading the ciphers of this notation, to a decimal one.

We are right, I think, to conclude from whatever is known of both the scripts concerned that Kisima Kamala when deciding to invent a script for his people may perhaps have been inspired by already existing scripts, which may have been Arabic or European or even Vai. Still his invention is neither a mere copy nor a real imitation of either of them. What he has invented is an invention of his own and carried out in a spirit of his own. And we must give it the credit of being a real invention. In my article on the Vai script I showed that the characters of this latter are developed from original

pictures, so that the Vai script of to-day does not represent an invention out of the void, but is the result of an historical development from a state where there did not exist characters with a phonetical value, but only pictures with a conceptional meaning. But the system Kisima Kamala was determined to invent was to be nothing but a real script, from its very beginning, with letter-signs of a firm and unequivocal phonetical function. He had no prototypes before him, nor did he make use of any existing system of writing as a model, but constructed his letters or sets of letters at will out of geometrical elements, of strokes and circles and dots. If some outward similarities and convergences with Vai characters resulted, this is mere chance. So instead of comparing Kisima Kamala's invention with the Vai script as to its origin it is more correct to compare it with another West African script, which another contemporary of ours invented a few years ago, namely the script of the Basa people in the neighbouring Republic of Liberia, of which I happened to hear from a missionary living in the Basa country. The inventor of this script, a learned Basa native, also devised a system of arbitrarily chosen figures to serve as letters in a way similar to that adopted by Kisima Kamala. The invention of both these scripts in our day undoubtedly shows evidence of the remarkable intelligence of West-Africans, and of their successful endeavour to elevate the standard of the life and culture of their race. (*Communicated by* PROFESSOR A. KLINGENHEBEN.)

*The Linguistic Situation in the Western Parts of the Niger Delta.*

With reference to the Rev. J. W. Hubbard's communication on this subject in the October number, p. 490, it would be of assistance to students if he would suggest what other word he would use instead of 'dialect' for the Isoko and Sobo languages. Much difficulty was experienced by me in making a 'schema' for the classification of Southern Nigerian languages, and a better arrangement would be welcome, but it must be one which can be applied generally. I am away from books but think that my description tallies with that of the chief linguistic authority in this region—viz. Mr. N. W. Thomas.

In disagreeing with my views that the Isoko have been known to Europeans for some hundreds of years, Mr. Hubbard ignores the Portuguese and Dutch adventurers who penetrated into these parts in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The classification suggested in his last paragraph—i.e. 1. Ibo type. 2. Benin or Aka type. 3. Yoruba type (or ?Aka type). 4. Ijo type—is that generally accepted but it is puzzling to find, in the third division, Ishekiri (or Jekri) applied interrogatively to Aka (or Edo) since Yoruba is very distinctive from all Edo languages and Jekri is decidedly a Yoruba dialect.

(*Communicated by* P. AMAURY TALBOT.)