

Notes on the Ma'di Okollo Language Alphabet

Why is the Ma'di Okollo language being written with strange marks?

Over one half of the world's languages are tonal languages. That is, the meaning of a word changes depending on voice pitch (tone). Where tone carries a 'high function load', many of these languages already use marks in their writing systems to show the difference between the tones. For instance, Aringa with 4 tones, Kresh with 5 tones, and Vietnamese with 6 tones all currently use marks to indicate the different tones.

The Ma'di Okollo language is also a tonal language (with 5 tones plus falling and rising combinations). For example, 'ori' can be many different words with different meanings depending on the tone, but you can't tell which meaning it has just by looking at it. Adding tone marks will immediately tell the reader which 'ori' is meant.

Why does the Ma'di Okollo language need marks if English doesn't?

Simply because English is not a tonal language. English belongs to the Indo-European language family which is not tonal. The Ma'di Okollo language belongs to the Nilo-Saharan language family which is tonal. In fact, the Moru-Ma'di subfamily is highly tonal.

The Europeans who first began writing Moru-Ma'di languages like Ma'di Okollo were only familiar with non-tonal languages. They didn't know how important tone was for distinguishing meaning, and they didn't have experience with other tonal languages that were using tone marks to the writing.

Won't these new marks slow down writing?

If you are writing only English consonants and vowels, you are writing only part of the language. It takes a bit more time to write all the sounds. When you first learned to write as a child, you wrote slowly, but with practice you gained speed. The same thing will happen as you learn to write with tone marks. Be assured that the

little time spent in adding tones will pay back in much greater comprehension and fluency for the readers.

Why not use context to determine meaning?

Context certainly helps a reader, but to rely on context alone makes reading unnecessarily difficult.

The Ma'di Okollo language is nearly impossible to read if only consonants and vowels are written – unless you already know what is meant. Often one must read a sentence 2-3 times, read the next sentence, and then go back to the first sentence before figuring out the context.

Reading should not take such effort! By reading with tone marks, the reader will not have to read a sentence several times before understanding; he will read it correctly the first time.

Don't these marks make the Ma'di Okollo language too complicated?

For adults who want to write the Ma'di Okollo language without extra marks, the writing system with marks will seem difficult at first. Like learning anything new, it will take effort, practice and determination before it becomes natural and easy.

The effort will be worth it! History has shown that tonal languages are read much more easily if tone is marked. Once you have learned the marks, the Ma'di Okollo language will become easy to read and understand. Books of Ma'di Okollo proverbs, oral traditions, local newsletters, and the Ma'di Okollo Bible can then be written clearly to preserve and expand the use of the Ma'di Okollo language.

For children the tonal marks will quickly become just as normal as consonants and vowels.

The tone plays an important role in the verb system of the Ma'di Okollo language. The tone of a verb changes in different grammatical situations. For example, **ori** means “it settles” while **orí** means “they settle”. All the tones can be found in the verb system:

jó tjü	<i>to thatch</i>	tjü	<i>to produce</i>
ti jó	<i>he thatches</i>	tj	<i>she produces</i>
tí jó	<i>they thatch</i>	tj	<i>they produce</i>
i'do jó tí	<i>begin to thatch</i>	i'do tj	<i>begin to produce</i>
tii jó ku	<i>he doesn't thatch</i>	tj ku	<i>she doesn't produce</i>
tíf jó ku	<i>they don't thatch</i>	tj ku	<i>they don't produce</i>

tjü	<i>to put in row</i>
tj	<i>he puts in a row</i>
tj	<i>they put in a row</i>
i'do tj	<i>begin to put in row</i>
tj ku	<i>he doesn't put in a row</i>
tj ku	<i>they don't put in a row</i>

When the Ma'di Okollo language is written without any marks, the following sentences were written the same way. By using marks, you can read the difference in meaning.

Tone

The Ma'di Okollo alphabet has 2 types of new marks: those above the vowels and those below. Marks above vowels show tone. Tone can be heard clearly by whistling the words. Words with the same tones will be whistled the same.

The Ma'di Okollo language has 5 tones: High (á), Mid-high (ä), Flat (a), Low (à), Rising (â). The High tone looks like an arrow shooting high in the air. The Mid-high tone is two dots above the vowel. The Low tone points down to the ground. The Rising tone looks like a roof pointing up. Any vowel that is unmarked has a Flat tone.

Combinations of falling (âà) and rising (ää) tones can occur. These combinations are written with tones on two vowels: ââ, äâ, âä, ää ...

Look at the following words. Pay attention to how the tone marks tell you the right way to say them.

<u>Tone</u>			
High	rú	<i>name; many seize</i>	tj <i>cows; many produce</i>
Mid-High	rü	<i>sudden</i>	i'do tj <i>to produce (i'do tj)</i>
Flat	ru	<i>seize, catch</i>	tj <i>mouth; produce (children)</i>
Low	rù	<i>sound of falling</i>	tj <i>to flood, put in a row</i>
Rising	rû	<i>suddenly</i>	tj <i>many put in a row</i>

<u>Tone</u>		
High	nyá	<i>many eat</i>
Mid-High	nyä	<i>grave</i>
Flat	nya	<i>eat; millet</i>
Low	nyà	<i>flash of light</i>
Rising		

Here are more examples of how tone specifically shows you what is written:

Nāa na naä.

That one dodged there

Naa ná naä.

The three dodged there.

Light and Heavy Vowels

The Ma'di Okollo language also has a distinction in vowel quality: Light and Heavy vowels. Light vowels are made with the tongue root back in the throat; Heavy vowels are made with the tongue root pushed forward. Heavy vowels are written with a dot under the vowel. The vowel "a" is always Light, so it never needs a dot.

The words on the left below have Light vowels; the words on the right are Heavy. Pay attention to how the dot signals a Heavy vowel sound.

Light

ru	<i>respect</i>
rú	<i>many respect</i>
urū	<i>wake up</i>
ūru	<i>sleep in eye</i>
mbu	<i>jump</i>
òku	<i>gather, collect</i>
ìnzi	<i>sneer</i>
ti	<i>hang</i>
tí	<i>many hang</i>

Heavy

ru	<i>seize</i>
rú	<i>many seize</i>
urū	<i>high place</i>
ūru	<i>up</i>
mbu	<i>drink</i>
òku	<i>old</i>
ìnzi	<i>honor</i>
tí	<i>produce</i>
tí	<i>many produce</i>

Using both tone and vowel quality marks, notice how 'ori' can be written so that you don't have to guess the meaning:

ori	<i>god</i>	òrì	<i>fear</i>
ori	<i>settle (v)</i>	òrí	<i>lice</i>
òri	<i>seed</i>	orí	<i>rust (v)</i>
òrī	<i>they sat</i>	orí	<i>snake</i>
orí	<i>they settle</i>		