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WRITING AFRICAN NAMES IN OPAQUE ORTHOGRAPHIES: CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES FOR RECLAIMING LINGUISTIC IDENTITY

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Abstract
African languages are known for their distinctive speech sounds, tonal system, and vowel harmony features, which are largely absent in English, French, and Portuguese scripts within which the majority of African names are recorded. These reductionist scripts create a fundamental orthographic mismatch as they lack the graphemic tools to adequately represent African phonology. This leads to the loss of vital linguistic and semantic data, leading to a loss of phonological precision and a dilution of bearer's cultural identity (if not a total misrepresentation). This paper aims at showing, using names from Ijọid languages (Ìzọ́n, Nembe, and Kalabari), Ọ̀gbíà, and Yorùbá, how writing African names and languages in reductionist scripting hinder the transmission of these salient phonetic, phonological, and semantic features. Data for the study were sourced from the names of attendees[1] of a conference held at a university in Nigeria, where the names were written in reductionist script. The study is descriptive in orientation and is set within the socio-onomastics theory of names. The paper calls for the correct representation of African names and languages using indigenous-centered transparent orthographies. It also proposes a re-evaluation of existing institutional language policies and frameworks in Africa that suppress or limit the use of homegrown writing systems and orthographies. It then contends that the development and implementation of digital indigenous transparent typewriters or online tools for writing, transfer, and communication of African names and languages; as well as writing and reading same in their original forms, would be potential game-changers and timely initiatives that could help cushion the negative effects of reductionist scripting, especially on the attrition of African linguistic and cultural identity.

Keywords: African languages, personal names, writing systems, opaque orthographies, Ìzọ́n, Ọ̀gbíà, Yorùbá.

Muhtasari
Lugha za Kiafrika zinajulikana kwa sauti zao tofauti za usemi, mfumo wa toni, na vipengele vya uwiano wa vokali, ambavyo kwa kiasi kikubwa havipo katika maandishi ya Kiingereza, Kifaransa na Kireno ambamo majina mengi ya Kiafrika yanarekodiwa. Hati hii ya kupunguza uzito inaleta kutolingana kwa kimsingi kwa tahajia kwani haina zana za kisarufi za kuwakilisha fonolojia ya Kiafrika ipasavyo. Hii inasababisha upotevu wa data muhimu ya kiisimu na kisemantiki, na kusababisha upotevu wa usahihi wa kifonolojia na upotoshaji wa utambulisho wa kitamaduni wa mzungumzaji (kama sio upotoshaji kamili). Karatasi hii inalenga kuonyesha, kwa kutumia majina kutoka lugha za Ijhoid (Ìzọ́n, Nembe, na Kalabari), Ọ̀gbíà, na Yorùbá, jinsi uandishi wa majina na lugha za Kiafrika katika uandishi wa kupunguza huzuia kuenea kwa sifa hizi muhimu za kifonetiki, kifonolojia na kisemantiki. Data ya utafiti huo ilitolewa kutoka kwa majina ya washiriki wa mkutano uliofanyika katika chuo kikuu nchini Nigeria, ambapo majina yaliandikwa kwa maandishi ya laana. Utafiti huu ni wa maelezo katika mwelekeo na umewekwa ndani ya nadharia ya kijamii-onomolojia ya majina. Jarida hili linataka uwakilishi sahihi wa majina na lugha za Kiafrika kwa kutumia maandishi ya uwazi ambayo yanazingatia asili. Pia inapendekeza kutathminiwa upya kwa sera na mifumo ya lugha ya kitaasisi iliyopo barani Afrika ambayo inakandamiza au kudhibiti matumizi ya mifumo ya uandishi wa nyumbani na tahajia. Kisha inasisitiza kwamba uundaji na utekelezaji wa mashine za asili za uwazi za dijiti au zana za mtandaoni za kuandika, kuhamisha na kuwasiliana majina na lugha za Kiafrika; kwa kuandika na kusoma sawa katika hali yao ya asili, inaweza kuwa mabadiliko ya mchezo kwa mipango ya wakati unaofaa ambayo inaweza kusaidia kuzuia athari mbaya za uandishi wa kupunguza, haswa kwa utambulisho wa lugha na kitamaduni wa Kiafrika.

Maneno muhimu: Lugha za Kiafrika, majina ya kibinafsi, mifumo ya uandishi, tahajia isiyo wazi, Ìzọ́n, Ọ̀gbíà, Yorùbá.

[1] The conference is here unnamed by way of anonymity. Further appropriate measures have been taken to protect the privacy of participants, such as decoupling full names, ensuring the conference attendees cannot be easily identified.

1. Introduction

In some Western traditions, a name is considered an existential label without inherent meaning (Ryan 1981). However, in African cultures, a name is believed to have important linguistic and cultural meaning (Suzman 1994; Carlson 2004). This latter view presupposes that African names are socio-semiotic materials, said to constitute a body of knowledge that reflects the depth and breadth of African culture, language, and worldview. In this sense, they are deeply intertwined with aspects of African life and are used to communicate the same, or index African heritage and foster a sense of identity and authenticity. However, events like colonialism and globalisation have impacted how African names are written, eroding the cultural knowledge they represent, stemming from the lack of homegrown computer technology or the inability to innovate and implement one for writing African names and languages. This has contributed to the misrepresentation of their value in both speech and writing, which is responsible for the overreliance on the English language and other popular exogenous lingua francas for recording African names.

Barquin and Meador (1979) note that a primary requirement for any culture regarding information-processing hardware and software is its ability to represent the spoken and written forms of its native language. However, computer technology in Africa primarily supports the character set of English and other popular foreign lingua francas, ignoring the use of special alphabets, tone marks, and vowel harmony features which are essential for correct pronunciation, writing, and communication of African names and languages. Although English typewriters utilise some common character sets and tone marks to accommodate certain African alphabets and graphemes, a wider range of African alphabets and words are consequently left out. In fact, computer marginalisation of African names phonetically is not unique to Africa alone, it is more or less globally shared. Take English the dominant global technology giant for an example—***read*** *vs*. ***read***. However, the question is, why should African speakers be forced to "settle" for an even worse representation of their names, one that may erode their identity as it lacks their features such as tone, unique segment, and vowel harmony distinction—e.g., 'i' and 'ị'?

While exogenous languages like English facilitate the recording and transfer of African names and languages, this paper shows why they are inadequate and fall short of preserving the linguistic and cultural elements which are inherent in African names and languages. In other words, writing African names in a foreign script like English, French, or Portuguese mostly cause the attrition or loss of critical African language features present in African names, such as its robust sound inventories, tone, and vowel harmony, essential for accurate phonological, semantic, and sociolinguistic description and communication of African names. This paper presents some of these inadequacies, their impact on African languages, and the role of computer technology in closing this gap between reductionism and transparency in writing African names.

2. African languages, writing systems, and socio-onomastics

African languages exhibit linguistic characteristics that distinguish them from other languages of the world. Irrespective of their linguistic sub-phyla, some general characteristics of African languages are tone, vowel harmony, and a large inventory of speech sounds (Pereltsva 2012). Hyman et al. (2019) lists some features of Niger-Congo (NC) languages as word structure (which is mostly monosyllabic, bisyllabic, and agglutinating), nasalisation, and noun classes. Others include verb extension, information structure (or focus distinction), and a syllable structure that favours open syllables. However, this paper focuses on showing the neglect of tone, vowel harmony, and speech sounds of African languages when using English and similar reductionist orthographies. This is because the use of these linguistic features is often outlawed in the orthographies of some African countries such as Ghana (Cahill 2011), Cameroon (Tadadjeu & Sadembouo 1984), the Central African Republic, and Ethiopia (Cahill 2011). However, the paper contends that such restrictive policies de-incentivise African languages and orthographies and perpetuate the underrepresentation of African languages and names in writing and reading, thus

leaving no alternative other than the continuation of the tradition of its respective colonial scripts, and compromising the accurate representation of African names and languages in policies that clearly benefited and elevated English, French, and other opaque orthographies while repressing indigenous languages and scripts.

Terms like "writing", "writing system", and "orthography" all denote different activities and processes, but they are often used interchangeably, leading to confusion. According to Daniels (1996: 3), writing is "a system of more or less permanent marks used to represent an utterance in such a way that it can be recovered more or less exactly without the intervention of the utterer". Baroni (2011: 128) provides a pedagogical definition. He said "by writing, we mean a series of graphic symbols arranged on a surface (be it physical like a sheet of paper, or virtual, a screen), in a certain order and in a certain sequence, so that this series is likely to be interpreted (read) by an interpreter (reader) who knows how to decipher the meaning of these signs". These authors share the idea that writing is a system for representing spoken language or meaning using relatively permanent marks to enable accurate retrieval and transfer of information in the absence of the speaker.

Coulmas (1989) categorises writing systems as either cenemic or pleremic. Cenemic systems represent units of sound, while pleremic systems represent units of content. He groups cenemic systems into: syllabaries, where each graphic unit represents a syllable, typically of the CV-type; abjads, which is consonant-based systems with omitted vowels; abugidas, comprising consonant-vowel systems with recognisable vowel representation; alphabets, consisting ideally, one symbol per phoneme; featural writing, where graphic shapes correlate with phonemic features. Pleremic systems include pictograms (e.g., Egyptian), ideograms (e.g., Chinese), and logograms. However, Mountford (1996: 627—630) suggests a different classification, dividing writing systems into five "functional kinds", such as orthographies, stenographies, cryptographies, pedographies, and technographies. Baroni (2011) also distinguishes between transparent (shallow) and opaque orthographies. According to him, a transparent orthography allows for consistent reading and writing of words, even novel ones, based on a set of basic rules (e.g., Finnish, Italian, Spanish, Turkish, and Georgian orthographies). In contrast, opaque orthographies lack this predictable correspondence between spoken and written forms, requiring memorisation of numerous word spellings (e.g., French, English, and Chinese orthographies). While most African languages adopt transparent, phonological, and semantic orthographic systems (e.g., shallow), the influence of English or French orthographies (e.g., opaque) often introduces inconsistencies, blurring the line between transparency and opacity in the writing of African names.

Socio-onomastics investigates names from a sociolinguistic perspective (see van Langendonck 2007, Lieberson 1984, Ainiala & Östman 2017). It posits that name choices and their written forms are deliberate and reflect changing social patterns. This for African names is evidence of the aftermath of colonisation and globalisation, suggesting that the writing of names is a social tool for interaction—hence a socio-onomastic problem. Consequently, when the focus shifts from what names are in use to also how names are written or spelled, the argument remains within socio-onomastics. Because the manner in which a people writes its names constitutes a social trend or pattern. Thus, the practice of writing African names in an opaque popular script rather than a transparent authentic African one makes African names more accessible to non-native speakers, thereby breaking potential social barriers. However, the adoption of Anglicised versions of African names potentially diminishes African names and their associated cultural linguistic significance. When African names are rendered in English or reductionist orthography, the available speech sounds and letter combinations may not accurately represent the original sounds, tones, and nuances of the African languages. This often leads to a loss of the deliberate meaning and the social patterns embedded within the original name. Tonal languages in Africa, for example, often rely on pitch variations to distinguish meaning. On the other hand, opaque scripts typically lack the diacritics or conventions to represent these tones, potentially obscuring the intended pronunciation/meaning and social significance of the name.

This paper advocates for the use of a transparent script for writing African names. It notes the case of Italian and French (see Baroni 2011), which share the Latin/Roman alphabet and script but have different orthographic rules. It argues that the same approach can be adopted for writing African names and languages. It also calls for the digitalisation and use of the appropriate graphemes, diacritics, and tone marks to be adopted for use for African languages to enable the accurate writing of African names. This would help safeguard and transmit their linguistic and cultural elements and meanings.

3. Methodology

The personal name data for this study were collected from abstracts of conference attendees of a conference held at a university in Nigeria in May 2025. All prospective conferees wrote their African names using the English script. The abstracts also revealed the diversity of the names, which came from various Nigerian linguistic groups, including Ọgbịà, Ijọid (Ịzọ́n, Nembe, and Kalabari), and Yorùbá. However, for this study, names from three Nigerian languages—specifically Ọgbịà, Yorùbá, and the Ijọid group (Ịzọ́n, Nembe, and Kalabari)—were used. These names represent three branches of the Niger-Congo (NC) phylum: Kwa (Yorùbá), Benue-Congo (Ọgbịà), and Ijọid (Ịzọ́n, Kalabari, and Nembe). The names of participants from these languages were then rewritten from English orthography into their respective orthographies. In other words, Yorùbá and Ijọid names were transcribed into Yorùbá and Ịzọ́n orthographies respectively, while Ọgbịà names were rewritten using a conventional orthography typically employed by linguists and local language practitioners writing in the language.

The Yorùbá names, along with their pronunciation and meanings, were confirmed and validated on the website yorubanames.com. The data was further validated by a linguist and indigenous speaker who teaches linguistics and Yorùbá language at a tertiary institution in Nigeria. The Ọgbịà names, however, were transcribed by the researcher, who is a native speaker of the language, and were further confirmed by a colleague. For the Ijọid (consisting of Ịzọ́n, Kalabari, and Nembe) names, the researcher consulted three native speakers of Ịzọ́n, Nembe, and Kalabari, respectively, to validate the data and provide their meanings and pronunciation. This information was then presented in this paper in the Ịzọ́n orthography. The theoretical background on Ọgbịà and the Ijọid (Ịzọ́n, Nembe, and Kalabari) vowel harmony, sound inventory, and alphabets follows Rivers Readers Project (1988) and Williamson (2004); and Yorùbá is influenced by the works of Bamgbose (1966) and Archangeli and Pulleyblank (1989).

4.0. Data presentation and analysis

This section presents the data for this study and the analysis of same.

4.1. Unique speech sounds of African languages

The scripts and names in Tables 1—6 reveal that English alphabet lacks characters for certain sounds present in Ọgbịà, Yorùbá, and Ijọid languages, particularly the different low-mid and high vowels found in Ọgbịà and Ijọid.

Table 1: Table 1: Ọgbịà alphabets and sound inventory

	Alphabets	Sound inventory
Upper case	Ạ A Ḅ B BH Ḍ D Ẹ E F G GB GH Ị I K KP L M N NY Ọ O P R S T Ụ U V W Y Z	

Lower case	ạ a ḅ b bh ḍ d ẹ e f g gb gh ị i k kp l m n ny ọ o p r s t ụ u v w y z	ə a ɓ b β ɗ d ɛ e f g gb ɣ ɪ (ị) i k kp l m n ɲ ɔ o p r s t ʊ (ụ) u v w j z

Table 2: Ìzọ́n alphabets and sound inventory

	Alphabets	Sound inventory
Upper case	A B D Ẹ E F G GB GH Ị I K KP L M N NGH Ọ O P R S T Ụ U V W Y Z	
Lower case	a b d ẹ e f g gb gh ị i k kp l m n ngh ọ o p r s t ụ u v w y z	a b d ɛ e f g gb ɣ ɪ (ị) i k kp l m n ŋ ɔ o p r s t ʊ(ụ) u v w j z

Based on Rivers Readers Project (Nigeria) (1988)

Table 3: Yorùbá alphabets and sound inventory (based on Bamgbose 1966: 12)

	Alphabets	Sound inventory
Upper case	A B D Ẹ E F G GB H I J K L M N Ọ O P R S Ṣ T U W Y	
Lower case	a b d ẹ e f g gb h i j k l m n ọ o p r s ṣ t u w y	a b d ɛ e f g gb h i dʒ k l m n ɔ o kp r s ʃ t u w j

In Yorùbá, for example, the name **Romoke** (opaque or reduced) corresponds to **Rọ́mọ̀kẹ́** (transparent). Here, the letters 'o' and 'e' in the English spelling fail to distinguish between the various vowel sounds (e.g., [o] vs. [ɔ] and [e] vs. [ɛ]). Similarly, the letters 'i', 'a', and 'u' in English orthography are inadequate for distinguishing the vowel sounds [ɪ(ị)] vs. [i], [ə] vs. [a], and [ʊ(ụ)] vs. [u] in Ọ̀gbíà and Ijọid languages.

Finally, the English orthography sometimes fails to capture specific consonantal distinctions. In Ọ̀gbíà, for example, the opaque **Azibaoguanasi** corresponds to the transparent **Àzìbàógùànàsì** where the consonant [b] in the reductionist form represents the implosive [ɓ] in the transparent form. In Yorùbá, the reduced **Sogbesan** misses the distinction found in **Ṣógbẹ̀san**, where 'ṣ' represents the consonant [ʃ] (like 'sh' in 'ship').

Therefore, the opaque or reductionist spellings are less predictable, requiring speakers of the African language to learn the specific, non-standard English convention used for their names. For non-native speakers, however, the English spelling provides little to no guidance on correct native pronunciation. Consequently, both native and non-native speakers of African languages writing or reading African names in English script would need varying degrees of intervention to decipher the spelling, pronunciation, and meaning.

Furthermore, the presentation of the names in English scripting (see opaque column of Tables 4—6) demonstrate opacity. Here, the spelling often does not directly and consistently represent the spoken phonemes of the original language (compare Tables 1—3).

Table 4: Ọ̀gbíà names

Opaque	Transparent	Gloss
Azibaoguanasi	Ạ̀zìbà́ógùànàsì	‘God does not change’
Azibaolanami	Ạ̀zìbà́ólànàmì	‘God is with me'
Oniopusaziba	Ọ̀nì́ópúsạ̀zìbà	‘Nobody is greater than God'
Owede	Ọ̀wẹ̀dẹ̀	‘Father’
Edoghotu	Ẹ̀dò̩ghótù	‘Haven’
Yameluan	Yámẹ̀lù̩àn	‘Give me blessings/bless me’

Table 5: Yorùbá names

Opaque	Transparent	Gloss
Romoke	Rọ́mọ̀kẹ́	‘Found a child to cherish’
Obasanjo	Ọ̀básanjọ́	‘The king ensured good returns on ones labour’
Adewale	Adéwálé	‘The crown has come home’
Ogunlana	Ogúnlànà	‘Ogun cleared the path/paved the way’
Olayinka	Ọ̀láyínká	‘Prestige surround me’
Oluwadamilola	Olúwadámilọ́lá	‘The lord has made me wealthy’
Sogbesan	Ṣ́ógbẹ̀san	‘The sorcerer revenged’
Eniayewu	Ẹ̀niayéwù	‘One who desires to live’
Olawale	Ọ̀láwálé	‘Prosperity came home’
Jegede	Jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́	‘A weakly growing tree’

Table 6: Ijọ̀id names

Opaque	Transparent	Gloss
Akpoebi	Àkpọ̀ebí	‘Life is good'
Tuotamuno	Tù̩ọ̀támù̩nọ́	‘Who is God?’
Diri	Dirì	‘Book/snuff'
Sotonye	Sọ̀tọ́nyé	‘Heaven’s desire'
Alabo	Alabọ	‘A chief'
Oyakemeagbegha	Ọ̀yàkẹmẹ̀ágbẹgha	‘Poverty does not befit a person'
Ebisindor	Ẹ̀bìsíndọ̀	‘Very good/perfect/excellent '
Kuro	Kù̩rọ́	‘Strong/strength/power'
Berezi	Bẹ̀rẹ̀zí	‘A matriarchal clan name'
Doubra	Dọ̀brà	‘Wish/will’
Timi	Tìmí	‘Stay’
Preye	Prìyé	‘Gift’
Obriki	Ọ̀brìkí	‘Fishing net'
Funimi	Fúnímí	‘Someone who is knowledgeable / a seeker’

Thus, the names in the opaque spelling contradict the definition of writing or orthography, which Baroni (2011: 128) defines as a series of graphic symbols that can be “interpreted (read) by an interpreter (reader) who knows how to decipher the meaning of these signs”. In other words, compared to the names in transparent orthography, the letters of the names in the reductionist script are more difficult to decipher.

Tables 4—6 also exemplify transparency, where names were presented in their transparent and indigenous conventions, where there is a closer, more consistent, one-to-one correspondence between the written symbols (graphemes) and the spoken sounds (phonemes), including tones and other features. As Daniels (1996: 3) puts it, this type of writing system or scripting mirrors the utterances in such a way that they can be "recovered more or less exactly" without the intervention of the speaker or any other media. According to Baroni (2011: 128), such orthographies can be "interpreted (read) by an interpreter (reader) who knows how to decipher the meaning of these signs". Most African language orthographies traditionally adhere to this cenemic alphabetic transparent framework. This stands in contrast to the reductionist scripting of standard Latin alphabets, which are often used to write African names. It is the latter practice that creates the linguistic and cultural mismatch that this paper seeks to highlight for the reader.

4.2.Vowel harmony

African languages, particularly those in the NC phylum, are well known for exhibiting various types of vowel harmony. The most prominent of these is ATR harmony, which has an extensive phonological and phonetic literature (see Casali 2008). This system involves vowels from two mutually exclusive groups: [+ATR] vowels are articulated with the advancement of the tongue root, which widens the pharyngeal cavity. Conversely, [-ATR] vowels are articulated with the retraction of the tongue root. ATR harmony is found throughout NC languages in virtually every major family, as summarised in Casali (2003). These families include Atlantic, Mande, Gur, Kru, Kwa (e.g., Yorùbá), Ijọid, Benue-Congo (Bantu, Defoid, Edoid, Igboid, Nupoid, Central Delta, e.g., Ọgbịà, etc.), Ubangi and Kordofanian. This widespread presence underscores the importance of this phonological property to African languages and African names, as presented in the following Ọgbịà, Yorùbá, and Ijọid names:

4.2.1. Ọgbịà names

a. ɔ̀zìɓógùɔ̀nɔ̀sì
Àzìɓɔ̀ógùɔ̀nɔ̀sì
Àzìɓɔ̀-ó-gúɔ̀nì-ɔ́-sì
God-He-change-He-not
'God does not change'

b. ɔ̀zìɓólɔ̀nàmì
Àzìɓɔ̀ólɔ̀nàmì
Àzìɓɔ̀-ó-lɔ̀-dínà-àmì
God-He-present-and-me
'God is with me'

c. ɔ̀nìópúsɔzìɓɔ̀
Ọ̀nìópúsɔzìɓɔ̀
Ọ̀nì-ó-ɔ̀pú-sì-ɔ̀zìɓɔ̀
Person-he-greater-not-God
'No one is greater than God'

d. ɔ̀wɛ̀dɛ̀
Ọ̀wɛ̀dɛ̀
'Father'

e. ɛ̀dɔ̀ɣótù
Ɛ̀dɔ̀ghótù
'Haven'

f. jámɛlɔ̀àn
Yámɛ̀lɔ̀àn
Yá-àmì-ɛ̀lɔ̀àn
Give-me-blessings
'Give me blessings/bless me'

4.2.2. Yorùbá names

a. rɔ́mɔkɛ́
Rɔ́mɔkɛ́
Mo-rí-ọmọ-kẹ́
I-found/see-child-cherish
'Found a child to cherish'

b. ɔbásãndʒɔ́
Ọbásanjọ́
Ọba-sanjọ́
King-pay back
'The king ensured good returns on ones labour'

c. adéwálé
Adéwálé
Adé-wá-ilé
Crown-come-home/house
'The crown has come home'

d. ọ̀gúnlànà
Ọ̀gúnlànà
Ọ̀gún-la-ọna
The Yorùbá god of iron-clear path
'Ogun cleared the path/paved the way'

e. ɔlájĩ́nká
Ọláyínká
Ọla-yi-mi-ka
Renown/success-surround-me
'Prestige surrounds me'

f. olúwadámilɔ́lá
Olúwadámilọ́lá
Olúwa-dá-mi-ní-ọ́lá
Lord/God-make rich-me-FOC-make rich
'The lord has made me wealth'

g. ʃógbɛ̀sãn
Ṣógbẹ̀san
(O)ṣó-gbẹ̀san
Sorcerer/the fertility deity-revenge
'The sorcerer revenged'

h. ɛniajéwù
Ẹniayéwù
Ẹni-aiyé-wù
Person-life-to desire
'One who desires to live'

i. ɔláwálé
Ọláwálé
Ọlá-wá-ilé
Wealth-come/arrive-house/home
'Prosperity came home'

j. dʒɛ́gɛ́dɛ́
Jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́
'A weakly growing tree'

K. ì̀dòwú
Ìdòwú
'A child born after a set of twins'

l. olúmidé
Olúmidé
Olú-mi-dé
Lord/hero-mine-arrive/return
'My lord/hero has come'

m. ɔládʒídé
Ọlájídé
Ọlá-jí-dé
Wealth-awaken/arise-arrive/return
'Wealth arose/awoken to come'

n. ɔládɔ̀tũn
Ọládọ̀tun
Ọlá-di-ọ̀tun
Wealth-become-new
'Wealth is renewed'

o. ojĩnlojè
Oyinloyè
Oyín-ni-oyè
Sweetness-is-honour
'Honour is sweet'

p. adémɔ́lá
Adémọ́lá
Adé-mọ́-ọla
Crown-along with-wealth/success/nobility
'Crown has arrived along with wealth'

q. adédòkũn
Adédòkun
Adé-di-òkun
Crown-become-ocean
'The crown becomes the ocean'

r. àbádũ̀nmí
Àbádùnmí
À-bá-dùn-mí
We-could have-be pained-me
'I should have been hurt'

s. ì̀gè
Ìgè
'A child born feet first'

t. májɔ̀wá
Máyọ̀wá
Mú-ayọ-wa
Bring-joy-bring
'He/she brought joy'

4.2.3. Ijọid names

a. àkpèbí[2]
Àkpọ̀ebí
Àkpọ̀-ebi
Life-good
'Life is good'

b. tòòtámónɔ́
Tụ̀ọ̀támụ́nọ́
Tụ̀ọ̀-támụ́nọ́
Who-God
'Who is God?'

c. sɔ̀tɔ́njé
Sọ̀tọ́nyé
Sọ̀-tọ́nyé
Heaven-desire
'Heaven's desire'

d. dirì
Dirì
Book
'A book'

e. alaɓɔ
Alaḅọ
Chief
'A chief'

f. ɔ̀jàkɛmágbɛɣa
Ọ̀yàkẹmẹ́ágbẹgha
Ọ̀yà-kẹmẹ̀-ágbẹ-gha
Poverty-human-befit-not
'Poverty doesn't befit anyone'

g. èḅìsíndɔ̀
Èḅìsíndọ̀
Èḅì-síndọ̀
Good-complete
'Very good/perfect/excellent'

h. kòrɔ́
Kụ̀rọ́
'Strong/strength/power'

i. dɔ̀brà
Dọ̀brà
'Wish/will'

j. ọ̀brìkí
Ọ̀brìkí
'A fishing net'

k. tìmí
Tìmí
'Stay'

l. fúnímí
Fúnímí
Fú-nímí
Book-to know
'Someone who is knowledgeable /a seeker'

m. prìjé
Prèyé
Prè-yé
Give-something
'Gift'

n. bɛ̀rɛ̀zí
Bẹ̀rẹ̀zí
'A matriarchal clan name'

As observed by the composition of the morphemes in each name above, the vowels in Ọ̀gbíà names data exhibit a full set of contrasts (also compare Table 7 below and Williamson 2004). These vowels cannot co-occur within morphemes; consequently, [o] and [ɔ] for example are two distinct phonemes in the language. However, when names from the language are written in English script, both phonemes or letters are treated as a single alphabet, 'o'. The same distinction applies to the other contrasting vowel pairs, for example [i] vs. [ɪ], [a] vs. [ə], [ɛ] vs. [e], and [u] vs. [ʊ]. These ten distinct alphabets in the language are all reduced to five letters — 'a', 'e', 'i', 'o' and 'u' — when Ọ̀gbíà names are written using English script.

As for Ijọid names above, their vowel harmony (also compare Table 8 below) show what Williamson (2004) terms a triangular vowel system. Its nine-vowel system is grouped into [+ATR] and [-ATR] sets, with the low vowel [a] being neutral and able to co-occur with vowels from both groups.

In the case of Yorùbá names above, however, the mid-vowels (also compare Table 9 below) are particularly subject to vowel harmony (also see Archangeli & Pulleyblank 1989),

[2] V1 elision occurs across morpheme boundary.

meaning they tend to align with the [±ATR] status of other vowels within a word. Yorùbá does not exhibit full harmony, unlike Ọ̀gbíà, where all ten vowel types must agree, or like Ijọid languages, where only one vowel is neutral. Instead, Yorùbá is considered a limited harmony language, primarily affecting its mid-vowels.

Table 7: Ọ̀gbíà ATR contrast

	[+ATR]			[-ATR]		
	Front	Central	Back	Front	Central	Back
High	i		u	ɪ(i̩)		ʊ(u̩)
Mid	e		o	ɛ		ɔ
Low		ə			a	

Table 8: Ijọid ATR contrast

[+ATR]				[-ATR]		
	Front	Central	Back	Front	Central	Back
High	i		u	ɪ(i̩)		ʊ(u̩)
Mid	e		o	ɛ		ɔ
Low		a			a	

Table 9: Yorùbá ATR contrast

[+ATR]				[-ATR]		
	Front	Central	Back	Front	Central	Back
Mid	e		o	ɛ		ɔ

Tables 7—9, which use the data of the names being studied, show the vowel harmony of the African languages. Compared to the opaque versus transparent names in Tables 4—6, Tables 7—9, along with the examples of names in section 4.2, help to simplify and buttress the centrality of vowel harmony to African names. All three data illustrate why its attrition and constant neglect in the writing of African names as seen in the opaque spellings could negatively impact African linguistic and cultural identity. Furthermore, reductionist orthographies used for writing African names often inhibit the use of certain speech sounds and tones. NC languages characteristically feature complex phonology, including implosives (e.g., /ɓ/, /ɗ/), doubly articulated stops (e.g., /kp/, /gb/), and dotted vowel sounds (e.g., /ɪ/, /ʊ/).

4.3. Tone

It is a well-established fact that NC languages—and African languages generally—are often tonal (see Welmers 1973, Hyman et al. 2019, Casali 2003), meaning pitch is a constructive exponent of

at least some morphemes (Welmers 1973). This implies that virtually all NC languages are tonal, including those whose inclusion into the phylum are debated, such as Mande, Dogon, and Ijọid (see Hyman et al. 2019). Thus, the widespread presence of tone across diverse languages within the NC family supports the view that tone can be reconstructed to Proto-Niger-Congo. However, as demonstrated by the names data and Tables 4–6, tone, which is indicated by accents in the transparent orthography, is completely absent in the reduced English spellings. Tone influences the meaning of a word in African languages, making the opaque spelling highly misleading for both pronunciation and meaning. This does not imply that native speakers may lose the meaning of a name or that the meaning itself may change. Rather, these mispronunciations often create humorous or even offensive situations where native speakers find amusement or embarrassment when a mispronunciation unintentionally distorts an existing meaning. In other words, the reductionist script barely gives non-native speakers the incentive to achieve near native pronunciation. Consequently, African languages risk using less of their tonal features due to these reductionist orthographic conventions.

4.4. Strategies for Reclaiming Africa's Linguistic Sovereignty

Barquin and Meador (1979) assert that a primary prerequisite for any culture in information processing is the ability to represent the spoken and written forms of its native language in hardware and software. They contend that this capability provided English language with leverage and competitive advantage, given that early computer technology and typewriters were encoded using the standard Latin alphabet. Therefore, to address this disparity with African languages and reclaim Africa's linguistic and cultural sovereignty, this paper proposes intensifying computational and sociolinguistic solutions. These aim to halt the current practice of rendering African names in reductionist scripts and to facilitate the adoption of transparent scripts for them.

The orthography of most African languages is connected to their source language and the cultural context of their society of origin. Transcribing these names into English or any other opaque orthography can sever or weaken these links, particularly if the writing is inaccurate or alters the phonetic/phonemic and visual form of the name. Such alterations often lead to mispronunciation and a diminished appreciation of the cultural and linguistic roots of the names. This paper argues that the interface between computer programming, Artificial Intelligence (AI), and linguistics holds the potential to reverse the recurrent decline in the use of African orthographies and mitigate the imposition of exogenous orthographies on African names. This orthographic autonomy through computational solution supports the development and implementation of indigenous digital typewriters and software, along with the exploration of AI machine-learning alternatives for the writing, reading, transfer, and communication of African names and languages. This approach aims to lessen the influence of exogenous typewriters and writing systems that currently hinder the presentation of African names and languages in their authentic forms.

This goal becomes imperative because of ongoing advancements in computational linguistics and artificial intelligence which enable a multilateral linguistic ecosystem for the languages of the world. Within this ecosystem, languages, along with their various scripts and writing systems, can coexist and thrive in their respective domains. This situation contrasts sharply with the unilateral ecosystem of the pre-AI and analogue typewriter era, where lingua francas like English and French undermined writing of African languages. This historical context is evident in the rigid orthographic policies of nations like Ghana (Cahill 2011), Cameroon (Tadadjeu & Sadembouo 1984), the Central African Republic, and Ethiopia (Cahill 2011). In these contexts, the use of unique African linguistic features—such as tone marks, vowel harmony, and dotted vowels essential for the proper contextualisation of African words—were forbidden. Such exogenous policies compromised the accurate representation of African names and languages, clearly benefiting and elevating English, French, and other foreign writing conventions on the continent while repressing indigenous innovation, languages, and perpetuating their underrepresentation or use in writing.

Conversely, empowering African languages through the development and implementation of digital African linguistic tools should be at the forefront of an African linguistic renaissance. This new outlook is particularly crucial and achievable given the increasing digital awareness among the youthful population of the continent, coupled with the growing accessibility of AI-powered typewriters, and other digital linguistic tools essential for advancing African linguistic interests. Organisations like Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) have long been leaders in advancing the cause of the languages of the world (Brenda & Pike 1977). In recent years, SIL has focused its attention on creating a multilateral linguistic ecosystem by digitising orthographies and writing systems globally, notably through its Keyman software. This software supports digital scripts for numerous languages, including African languages such as Kiswahili, Hausa, and Igbo among others. This initiative, despite its understandable shortcomings as a work in progress, is helping to address the misrepresentation of some African languages.

The sociolinguistic solution is designed to complement the digital solution. The sociolinguistic approach requires individuals, communities, and language institutions encouraging and advocating for the use of African language orthographies and digitising them to enhance their use across multiple domains. Such measures would help to foster the correct writing, pronunciation, and transfer of African names and languages between users and across linguistic communities. These two approaches offer an alternative to achieving homegrown transparent writing systems. The current system of writing African names is not just context-reliant but it is "insider-dependent", requiring acculturation, otherwise, "deciphering" African names may be problematic, leading to some sort of barrier to phonetic and semantic comprehension, effectively rendering the name "unreadable" to anyone outside the immediate speech community.

5. Summary of Discussion

In summary, African names are rich with robust speech sounds, tone, vowel harmony, and cultural and linguistic meaning. However, when fitting these names into complicated orthographic system (see Tables 1—9 and section 4.2), they can be simplified or altered, potentially colouring the original lexical meaning and the rich sociolinguistic information embedded within the name. This alteration can disconnect the written form from its intended cultural and linguistic contexts, often resulting in the jettisoning of the original orthography, pronunciation, and, eventually, obscuration of meaning. This, in turn, impacts the cultural and linguistic heritage associated with the names. Language is a means of asserting sovereignty, just as names are a linguistic means to projecting anti-imperialism and also identity. This is why African names are deeply tied to the heritage and identity. Sadly, when writing these names in opaque orthographies, individuals and communities often given-in to the pressure of having to adopt/adapt the spellings to facilitate integration into English-speaking contexts. This recurrent socio-onomastic practice, however, creates tension between asserting linguistic independence and original identity versus conforming to the dominant imperial linguistic norms.

6. Conclusion

This paper addresses a significant and timely issue which is the intersection of orthography, identity, and the preservation of African linguistic heritage. The paper has demonstrated that the practice of rendering African names—specifically those from Ijọid, Ọgbịà, and Yorùbá—in a reductionist orthography, such as English, constitutes a significant linguistic and cultural disservice. The study established that this practice invariably leads to the attrition or complete loss of crucial phonetic, phonological, and semantic features inherent in these languages. The analysis highlighted the systematic failure of opaque orthographies to accurately capture the robust sound inventories, distinctive vowel harmony patterns (like ±ATR features in Ọgbịà, Yorùbá, and Ijọid languages), and tone that are central to meaning and structure of names across NC phylum. The comparison between opaque and indigenous transparent spellings (Tables 4–6) revealed a fundamental disconnect: the written English reductionist form is often uninterpretable for accurate native pronunciation or meaning usually without external intervention, thereby violating the core

function of a transparent writing system. This sociolinguistic pressure to conform to the dominant imperial exogenous norms creates tension, consequently diminishing the value of African names as socio-semiotic materials that index heritage, language, and worldview.

Reclaiming the linguistic and cultural identity of Africa requires a dual approach rooted in both computational innovation and institutional reform. We cannot expect 21st-century Africans to reclaim their identity using 19th-century typewriter logic; hence this work proposes Smart Keyboards, OCR (Optical Character Recognition) that recognises tone marks, and LLM (Large Language Model) integration that respects ATR vowel harmony. This strategy moves beyond the constraints of hardware and software designed for exogenous languages, creating a multilateral linguistic ecosystem where African orthographies can thrive in their original, transparent forms. This technological push must be coupled with a re-evaluation of existing institutional policies and frameworks that historically suppress or limit the official use of indigenous writing systems. Such reforms would reverse colonial-era restrictive policies and empower African languages to be represented accurately in all domains of public life, from official documentation to digital communication.

Therefore, the core argument of this paper about the accurate and authentic representation of African names in transparent indigenous-centered scripts is not merely an academic exercise in transcription; it is an imperative for cultural and linguistic preservation. Through the rigorous computational encoding and deployment of appropriate graphemes, diacritics, and tonal markers, Africa can safeguard the linguistic complexity and rich semantic heritage embedded in its names. In fact, embracing a future where technology supports linguistic sovereignty and authenticity is the most powerful means of countering the negative socio-onomastic consequences of reductionist orthographies and strengthening the foundation of African identity for generations to come. The time to transition from linguistic compromise to digital and cultural sovereignty is now.

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