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THE EVOLUTION OF A DJUKA-SCRIPT IN SURINAM

Five years is a lot
Twenty years is the horizon of most people
Fifty years is antiquity

WINSTON CHURCHILL

By the above standard a script, evolved at the time of the last appearance of Halley's Comet (1910), at present should be considered to be an 'antiquity.' Nevertheless, compared with the ages of the scripts generally used, which are reckoned by the thousands of years, the script which is the subject of this paper, is very young indeed. The incidents of its birth might be of interest, not only in themselves, but perhaps also help in understanding the evolution of other systems of writing.

The author of this article, over a period of more than fifty years in connection with his forestry work in Surinam, has known and talked with many people who have interested themselves in the Djuka-script, and from that background this contribution is made.

Morton C. Kahn wrote in 1931 (p. 205): "These phonograms were collected for me by Mr. G. deBies, Dutch Government agent at Albina. They were set down by a Bush Negro, named Aflakka, with the aid of an attendant Krutu or assembly. So far as is known, they are in use only among the Aucaners, and their use is limited to the older members, who employ them for purposes of sending messages over long distances. These characters are extremely difficult to collect, and Mr. deBies is to be congratulated on his efforts in this regard. The characters were redrawn for the purpose of publication by Ruth K. Kahn."

There exists some literature in Dutch which throws additional light on the above remarks by Kahn, and perhaps makes clearer the origin of the Djuka script.

In 1916 Dr. C. Bonne, a physician at the Government Hospital at Paramaribo, saw one of his patients, a Bush Negro by the name of Abéna, of the Aucaner or Djuka tribe, writing strange

aa	ah	ja	oe
a	a	je	pa
be	beh	joe	pe
bi	bo	ka	pi
da	de	ke	po
di	djoe	ki	poe
djo	do	koe	sa
doe	e	kong	se
en	fa	la	si
fei	fi	le	soe
fo	foe	li	ta
ga	ge	lo	ting
gi	dji	ma	tja
go	i	mi	ti
iel	o	mo	to
		na	toe
		ning	wang
		ni	we
		no	wi
		nja	
		njoe	
		o	.(period)
			,(comma)

Fig. 1. Sound value of the Djuka-script of Afaka.

characters. Abéna was quite willing to explain their significance and said that they were originated by another member of his tribe, called AFAKA. Bonne came to know this Afaka, who repeatedly explained to him and to Father Morssink C.Ss.R. (a catholic missionary), how at the time of Halley's Comet he had

a dream in which a Person appeared with a sheet of paper in his hand, ordering him to devise a script for his people. The first should bring the second, the second the third; and so on. Following this vision, he devised a sign, every two or three days, until, in the end he had about 56 characters by which he could write down his thoughts. In 1917 Bonne made a trip to the Djuka country, and by means of the new script he could send messages, which were understood and acted upon.

In 1918 both Father Morssink and myself made two trips to the Djuka country, in the interior of the eastern part of Surinam, Dutch Guiana, bordering on French Guiana. Bonne had asked me to get information from the Djukas in relation with the script. I did not know that Afaka had been in contact with Father Morssink, and he, evidently, did not know my interest in Afaka's script. We met and sometimes travelled together. I regret very much, that it was only after about forty years, and after his death, that I got to know Father Morssink's report about these trips.

In November 1918 – it cannot have been with an interval of more than a few days – we visited Granman Amakti, the head of the Aucaner tribe at Drie Tabbetje, without ever discussing the matter with each other. Morssink reports – and I remember – the exact words with which Amakti gave vent to his displeasure that Afaka “na wissi wassi man fo bilo nengre” (that wishy-washy man from the part of the tribe below Drie Tabbetje on the Tapanahoni) – had made bold to devise a script without first obtaining his, the Granman's permission.

In conversation I tried in vain to bring Amakti and his right-hand man, the highpriest Kanapé, to a better appreciation of Afaka. They did not tell me that he already had died or that

The image shows three lines of handwritten Djuka script. The characters are stylized, with some resembling Latin letters like 'A', 'B', 'C', 'D', 'E', 'F', 'G', 'H', 'I', 'J', 'K', 'L', 'M', 'N', 'O', 'P', 'Q', 'R', 'S', 'T', 'U', 'V', 'W', 'X', 'Y', 'Z' and others like 'a', 'b', 'c', 'd', 'e', 'f', 'g', 'h', 'i', 'j', 'k', 'l', 'm', 'n', 'o', 'p', 'q', 'r', 's', 't', 'u', 'v', 'w', 'x', 'y', 'z'. The script is written in black ink on a light background.

Fig. 2. Note of Captain Alofaisi (1958) – Transcription: ALOFAISI TAKI KONGKUIBI BIGI ODI / TING MI KONG NA FOTO A SA SI MI. Translation: Alofaisi says Gonggryp great greetings. When I come to town he will see me.

the Christian Missionary was interested. Morssink spoke at an official Krutu or assembly and, unknown to me, pleaded in the same sense as I did. The Djuka chiefs allowed the companion of Father Morssink, an old Saramaccaner, named Antonio, to talk in the Krutu. He recalled that many nations had their own script: Chinese and Javanese have their own way of writing; and now God has given Djuka its own script; therefore, do not reject it. – But to no avail.

Afaka had a second name: *Atumisi*; and a 'bookname': *Usa*. On August 11, 1918, Father Morssink had visited the burial place of Afaka, who had died the previous 8th of July. His grave bore a beautifully worked cross with an inscription in Djuka characters: "Masa Atumisi fu da Santa Katoliki Kerki." He had died before he could have been baptized. Father Morssink knelt down together with his yet unbaptized followers, and prayed for him, whom he hoped he could consider as belonging to the Church by the baptism of desire.

Father Morssink supposed – and I agree with him – that the opposition of the Djuka chiefs (staunch supporters of the Djuka Gods) was due to the Christian leanings of Afaka and to a fear of losing privileges connected with old practices and with old superstitions. Morssink had corresponded with Afaka and his friends in Djuka script. He had established a catechism with fifty questions and answers in that script. And he found the study

The image shows a handwritten note in Djuka script, consisting of four lines of text. The script is a mix of uppercase and lowercase letters, some of which are stylized or combined. The first line is the longest, followed by three shorter lines. The handwriting is clear and legible.

Fig. 3. Note given to Mr. G. de Bies. (about 1930). – Transcription: MASA KANI SENI GI ME WANG TU OLO BOLO / MASA DIBISI ABENA / TING JU SABI DA JU TAKI DJUKA WINTI / MASA GADU. Translation: Mr. Kahn sends giving me one two old shirts. Mr. de Bies, Albina. When you know that you talk Djuka winti. Master God.

of this catechism by the children of his correspondents as fruitful as he had experienced in Paramaribo with a catechism in Latin script. Even a child of seven whom he had never seen, knew the lessons perfectly. There were then (november 1918) more than thirty 'book-men,' people who knew the script, and these were divided over seven of the twelve or fourteen *lo*'s or sub-tribes, which make out the Aucaner-tribe. Morssink gives the names of the *lo*'s, which had 'buku-men.' They were: Dikan, Brei, Njamfai, Dju, Misidjan, Pedri, Pulugudu. Father Morssink was jokingly promoted to an eighth, honorary *lo*. Afaka, in a document he gave to Dr. Bonne about 1916, lists the men and women who then knew the script. They were: Afaka, Abena, Amine, Alofaisi, Dedo, Abopeje, Delipi, Ta-a-kasili, Aja-una, Asiti; ten in all.

In 1957 and 1958 I tried to trace the distribution of Afaka's script. I got in contact with only one 'bookman,' Captain Alofaisi of Godoholo, of the Dju-lo, an 'opo-nengre,' from the division of Djuka upstream from Drie Tabbetje. I wrote him a letter, in the script, asking how many people knew it. The reply was that he would visit me when he came to town. It is quite impossible that this Alofaisi, a follower of the Djuka-gods, is identical with the Alofaisi registered in 1916 by Afaka. He is too young. However, he understood my letter, and I understood his.

Granman Amakti had said in 1918 that in case Afaka wanted to write, he could learn the 'bakra-script' of the white people. This, of course, cannot be denied. But, on the other hand, the intellectual power demonstrated by an unschooled primitive in

Fig. 4. Note of Abena (1916). - Transcription: NA WANG SATARA MAMATING / NING E DATARA BONI SI / A BOKU FU DJUKA NINGRE. Translation: On a Saturday morning (two letters exclamation), Doctor Bonne sees the book from Djuka Negroes.

producing a usable script for his language, merits the greatest respect. The script remained alive forty years after the death of its founder, without any support by tribal or government authority.

More than twenty years after Bonne's publication, K. Ratelband in 1944 pointed out the similarity of the phonograms of Afaka with a script of the Vai tribe in West Africa. His attention in this matter was caught, when he saw Afaka's script in Bonne's publication at the time he obtained the national anthem of the Republic of Liberia in the Vai script. Thirty four of the fifty-six signs of Afaka are identified with signs of the Vai script, also a syllable-script, which has 164 characters in all. It was originated in the seventeenth century. The sound value of the signs of the Vai script is not given. The similarity in the form of the characters cannot be denied.

At the time when Ratelband wrote his paper, I told him I felt certain that there was no possibility that Afaka could have had any direct contact with the present-day Vai people. The Djuka tribe was officially named and recognized in 1760 by a peace-treaty with the Dutch at a place called Auca, from which the name Aucaners is derived. They have remained always faithful to this treaty, ready to give armed assistance against enemies of the Dutch, white or black, and fighting especially, allied with the Dutch, against new bands of run-away slaves, often desperados who attacked indiscriminately plantations of the coastal area or Djuka settlements in the interior. However, with the introduction of West-African labourers into French Guiana about 1882, there is a little chance that Afaka can have seen some Vai script. He had definitely much more opportunity to see printed matter or writing in Dutch or French.

According to an article in the German language (*Ztschr. D. Morgenl. Ges.*, 1913), referred to by Ratelband, the Cherokees, a North-American Indian tribe, made extensive use of the signs of the Latin script, in devising a script for their own tribe. Afaka did not do so. There does not seem to be any reason to doubt his explanation that he every two or three days or so 'thought out' a sign.

In conformity with the Vai script – and with Siamese, Burmese, Javanese, and other oriental scripts descended from the Sanskrit – Afaka's script is a syllable-writing, proceeding from the left to the right hand side. There certainly is no reason to think that Afaka had any connection with Sanskrit.

Ratelband points out the similarity of Afaka's *A* and *O* with our handwriting. It cannot be accidental that the letter *O* conforms to the form of our lips in uttering the sound. Consequently it is not impossible that the fathers of our script and Afaka arrived at this sign independently of each other. It cannot be accidental that Afaka's sign for *ning*, i.e. 'name' in Djuka-language, is a cross by which every unlettered Djuka signs his *name* in documents, when required to do so. Nor can it be accidental that the sign for *fo* ('four' in Djuka language), is figured by *four* vertical dashes connected by a horizontal line. The signs for *U* or *ku* (continental pronunciation), or *uku* ('hook' in Djuka-language), consists of two *hooks*. This sign has had some further development, no doubt, because it could be mistaken for the sign for *le* or *li*.

Kong ('come' in Djuka-language), is figured by a wandering scrawl and a straight line *coming* to you, if you have the script in the correct position. *Go* (the same in Djuka and English), has a similar wandering scrawl with a straight line *going* from you.

It is possible, that a more intimate knowledge of Djuka-language and Djuka symbols would give further enlightenment. Afaka cannot be questioned any more as to why he assigned the separate signs to the sounds given. It seems that the instances cited indicate a close connection of the sound value of Afaka's phonogram with his language, and thus make more probable the originality of his script.

Melville Herskovits and Frances Herskovits (1936, plate XV) give a sample of writing produced under a state of *winti*, and of the normal handwriting of the same individual, an unnamed informant of Paramaribo. They say (p. 83): "One of the things he does under possession, and which he did when possessed in our hotelroom, is to write the language of his *winti*. We reproduce a sample written while in a state of possession. Since leaving Suriname, we have had several letters from him which contained this writing, included, he explained, as a greeting of his *winti* to us. Objectively considered, the symbols he employs are consistent, and we have seen him write them with ease. He has not yet solved for himself the meaning of this writing, for he still questions us about the peoples in Africa who know how to write, though he assures us that once the *winti* is pacified, it will make known to him the meaning of the symbols, and their origin."

No mention is made of Afaka's script.

There is what could be called a family-likeness between this winti-writing and Afaka's symbols. I have tried, without success, to read the winti-writing. In case the informant of Herskovits was bonafide, it would seem that the characters of the 'winti-writing' and Afaka's script, both of the same type, could be considered as strengthening the supposition that both sets of characters stemmed from a common deep subconscious. In case the winti-man was pretending, he could have seen samples of Afaka's script and have tried to reproduce them more or less.

There are some differences between the script collected by Mr. De Bies and that published by Dr. Bonne. They can be reduced

Fig. 5. Note of Afaka (1916). – Transcription: KE MASA JEISISI KELESISI / MI E TAKI AGA JU FI JU ALIKI / MI AGA PIMISI AGA LESIPEKI / DE AFILIKA NINGGE DI JU BE PUU NA / SARANA SITAAFU SI DE GO NA BOSI / DE WANNI DINI MASA GADU EKE / PAKARA. Translation: Please, Master Jesus Christ I am talking to You that You hear me, with permission, with respect. The African Negroes whom You have taken from Surinam punishment, since they have gone to the bush, they want to serve Master God like the whites.

to inconsistencies in the material. E.g. the same sign is given by De Bies for *le* or *li* and for *si*. This is a mistake. On the same line De Bies produces the correct sign for *si*, given also by Bonne and by Captain Alofaisi.

For *bi* two signs are given by De Bies. That on Kahn's page 207 is the sign for *ti* or *ting*, as given on the last line of page 206 and also by Bonne. On the same line 'winti' is spelled as to sound 'tingti'. The correct Djuka spelling could be 'wi-ni-ti' (see fig. 3, line 3).

Bonne gives the same sign for *ba* and *di*. This sign can only be pronounced *di*, as indicated by the texts of Abena and of De Bies. Afaka writes *bakara* as *pakara*, which he could not have done if he had a sign for *ba*. The alphabet given by me in 'Opbouw' was changed correspondingly.

The signs for *cha* and *ca* of De Bies seem to me to be incorrect and redundant, and they have been omitted.

The wavy line under the text by Afaka was explained as indicating the bottom of the page. Maybe the 'bookmen' later on discovered that they could manage also without such a naive implement.

Kahn (de Bies) and Bonne give the characters a different sequence. A rigid sequence makes certain that in summing up the characters no one is forgotten. In figure 1 Afaka's characters are given in order of the Latin alphabet. Added are the published texts (figs. 2-5) together with their transcription and English translation. The catechism of Father Morssink seems to have been lost. But it is perhaps of more interest to reproduce what the Djuka have written on their own account, than what the 'bakra' could graft on their original endeavours.

With which I do not want to substract anything from my appreciation for the work of Father Morssink.

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Since the above was written, the journal *De West* mentioned, 25 February 1960, that Abéna, a captain of the Aucaner tribe, after a prolonged illness died in the hospital of Stoelmanseiland on the Lawa river and, being a Christian, was buried by the Evangelical Brother Axwijk at Karmel, near Sajé on the Tapanahoni river.

Some months before this captain Alofaisie told me that Abéna was his father. Alofaisie is somewhat older than his brother Datra Bonoe, born in 1918, named thus in honour of Doctor Bonne, and baptized Alfonsus by Father Morssink. He is younger than his brother Delei, also mentioned by Father Morssink. Alofaisie, at present the head of the 'bookmen', must have been born around 1915.

He is in possession of a pocketbook written, perhaps by him, in the script.

Mr. C. Dubelaar, to whom I showed some copies of pages of this booklet, discovered in part of them a Protestant version of the Lord's prayer. The rest, repeatedly calling 'mi gadoo', 'mi masa', (my God, my Lord), evidently also had religious intent. But until now we could not understand its meaning.