Introducing a new alphabet for the Igede language

by Richard Bergman

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1. Description of people

A. The community

The Igede language is spoken by about 100,000 people, in a rural area of about 30 by 40 miles, in east central Nigeria. Except for a few who are teachers, traders, or government employees, the Igedes live in extended family villages and raise yams, manioc, rice, maize, benin seed, some vegetables, and fruit, along with a few chickens and goats.

Colonial authority was effective in the area by 1930, bringing peaceful and steady development for the next 50 years, except for the Nigerian civil war, 1967–1970. Nigerian independence took place in 1960.

The Christian gospel came to the area in two different ways. One way was that, beginning in the 1920s and particularly in the 1930s, itinerant Methodist and Roman Catholic missionaries evangelized through schools and preaching. By 1950, missionaries resided locally and were in charge until the mid-1970s, when Nigerians filled virtually all roles of leadership.

The other way that churches began was that an Igede man studied at an Assembly of God (AG) Bible school some 60 miles away, and returned to Igede to preach. By 1964, there were 40 or 50 Assembly of God churches. AG white missionaries have never held leadership positions in the Igede area.

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B. Change agent

An SIL team came to live in the Igede area in 1964. Martin Leigh and Dick Bergman spent May through November 1964, in an Igede village and then Dick and Nancy Bergman continued the work from April 1965, spending substantial time in the area through 1971. All the denominations desired to have the Bible in Igede, and warmly welcomed the Bergmans.

2. Problem to be solved

When the SIL team arrived, the two main Protestant denominations were using materials in different alphabets.

The first person to write the Igede language for practical purposes was an Ibo school teacher. He wrote Igede, using the Ibo alphabet which includes the five English vowels and ọ, ọ and consonants ṃ and ǹ. By the late 1950s, his alphabet was being used particularly by the government adult education teachers and by the Assembly of God. The AG began printing Sunday School lessons for their churches; by 1964, several hundred Sunday School quarterlies were published each quarter by the AG press in Nigeria.

About 1959, the Methodist missionary in the area took a summer SIL course. He knew that the Igede alphabet was inadequate, but he did not have time to study it properly. However, he went ahead and published a sizable hymnal using a, e, i, o, u, e, ɛ, ɔ and ŋ. The hymnal quickly established this alphabet as the “Methodist alphabet,” in contrast to the “old” alphabet used by the Assembly of God. We can ask how the Methodist missionary was able to so easily change the alphabet. One reason was that he was a strong leader; another may be that the Methodist school teachers controlled the Methodist church and viewed themselves as modern educated men, in contrast to the uneducated leaders of the Assembly of God church. Perhaps this helped the teachers accept a “modern” alphabet more easily.

In any case, the two alphabets became identified with the respective denominations and church members became accustomed to using only their own particular alphabet. The difference added fuel to a denominational rivalry which had developed.

In 1965, before this problem could be resolved, the Roman Catholic missionary published a catechism using the English alphabet, resulting in a third Igede alphabet.

It was obvious that we needed to have only one alphabet for Igede, so one Bible could be used by all.

3. Actions and results

What happened could be outlined as follows:

1. Linguistic research took place. Within six months, we had a definitive list of the phonemes of Igede which included not six or seven vowels, but 10, along with length, and four tones which could occur with each vowel. The alphabets using six or seven vowels, with no length or tone marked, were reasons why Igede was difficult to read.


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2. We got to know many Igede teachers, pastors, chiefs, adult education officers, and laymen. Each Sunday, we tried to visit a different church and tried to divide ourselves equally between the denominations. Through service and involvement, we became respected members of the Igede community.

3. We discussed the problems of writing Igede with everyone we met, showing why we needed to write more of the vowel sound and indicate some tone.

4. We organized an orthography meeting in August 1966, and invited all leaders—traditional, adult education, and church. At the meeting, we explained the problems with writing Igede and the recommended principles to follow in deciding on solutions. Concerning the vowels, we presented only one solution, an unorthodox system of marking vowel harmony, so we could write the 10 vowels with the five vowels of English. On marking tone, we suggested diacritics. For consonants, we suggested using English symbols ng and gb (instead of nj and bh), but we had no recommendation for ngm/nm, nor for some words with phonemic variations. A lively discussion took place and they made decisions. For example, they accepted the English symbols we had suggested, and chose nm rather than ngm.

5. We developed a book, *Reading and writing Igede*, which was published two months after the meeting was held. It included an explanation of the sounds, rules for writing words, traditional stories, and a 1,200-word dictionary list. To illustrate the impact this book had: One of the stories was an account by a young man of a well-known story about how Igedes came to that area. A couple of years after the book was published, a Swedish anthropologist tried to record oral history. At least a few Igede men declined giving their version of the accepted story because “it is in the book.”

6. We soon began to publish Scripture portions, and eventually all of Luke and Acts in 1972.

7. When we returned from our first furlough in 1969, we found that the Assembly of God no longer were publishing their Sunday School quarterly, because the AG press was located in the rebel area. Igede leaders had purchased a typewriter and mimeograph machine, but did not know how to efficiently produce the quarterlies on a schedule which made the books available in time for each new quarter. We saw this was a golden opportunity to get the Assembly of God into the new alphabet, and offered to help if the quarterly could be in the new alphabet. So, before a quarter began, the three pastors who were doing the translation came to our house (one at a time). We went over their translation, transposing it into the new alphabet, and training the pastor to write words correctly. We would then type the stencils and spend a day, each quarter, helping train a man to run the mimeo machine. Later, they provided their own typist. In 1972, we were no longer able to help, because we moved into branch administration duties.

   We tried, similarly, to help the Methodist church members adjust to the new alphabet. The main book in Igede for the Methodist churches was their hymnal, so when a new and larger edition was needed, we offered to help prepare the manuscript for publication. We were able to make sure all songs were written according to the new system.

   When Catholics put out some materials in Igede, we also helped them to properly write the new alphabet.


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Martin and Pat Leigh spent over two years working on Igede literacy and one writer training workshop was held in 1975.

8. We often heard complaints from lay people that “our language is being changed,” but because the leaders had agreed to the new alphabet and materials were being printed in it, the die was cast.

9. Concerning marking tone, the first books marked only some words where we thought there would otherwise be problems in reading. Later, it was realized (under the influence of literacy consultants, such as Sarah Gudschinsky) that arbitrary marking of tone could not be easily defended and so a trial primer was produced marking all tones. The reaction was strong. One leader told me, “We do not want our language written like that! It looks like Greek!” We ended up printing the New Testament with a minimum of tones marked.

10. Igede has 10 vowels that can be labialized, for example, \(kw\) and \(gw\), but the labialization is non-phonemic before \(u\). However, the \(w\) had been used in the old alphabet to distinguish words which would otherwise look the same because not enough vowels were being written. For example, \(kwu\) and \(ku\) in the old alphabet really had different vowels. For the sake of phonemic economy, we did not write \(w\) before \(u\), but we were never able to convince Igede speakers that \(w\) did not need to be written. After some six years of arguing the case, we accepted the fact that Igedes wanted to see a \(w\) before \(u\), and we published the New Testament and Genesis with the \(w\)s.

11. Genesis, the New Testament, a new Methodist hymnal, and current Assembly of God materials are all produced in the new alphabet.

4. Evaluation

A. What contributed to the successful introduction of a new alphabet?

1. Everyone viewed the SIL team as “experts” who had come to solve the problem of no Bible in Igede.

2. We took a careful, neutral position concerning our association with the denominations. We visited many Methodist and Assembly of God churches to show we were not associated with either denomination. We also made a special effort to show the Roman Catholics we respected them and wanted to cooperate.

3. We made strong efforts to discuss the alphabet with everyone who came to our home or wherever we went. When the orthography meeting was held, most of the people there had already thought about the problems.

4. The new alphabet was not identified with either of the main alphabets in use, so we did not need to “take sides.”

5. We had friendships with many leaders. They trusted and accepted us.

6. We produced materials in the new alphabet. People were anxious for books and became accustomed to the new alphabet.

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B. Where were we weak in applying the principles now taught in the course, “Training across cultures”?

1. **No previous planning**
   Looking back on all that happened, I do not recall that we ever sat down and planned what we would do to deal with the whole problem. Perhaps the branch director gave some advice, but I do not recall ever discussing the problem with him, only details of the alphabet which we were to recommend. The main things we did, such as helping with the Sunday School quarterly and talking to many church leaders, obviously needed to be done, and so we intuitively went ahead and did them.

2. **No testing**
   There was no testing of the alphabet before it was introduced, mainly because there was no time to do so. (Our program included more than the Igede language project.) We simply made the assumption that a consistent system of writing words morphophonemically would work.

3. **Little input by Igede leaders**
   We, as an SIL team, made many major decisions without input from the Igede people. Involvement by Igede leaders could have been increased with a result of greater success in the program. The late date that we came to the conclusion that \( w \) must be written before \( u \), indicates that we were not getting adequate feedback at an earlier stage.

4. **Ineffective training in literacy**
   There needed to be a more effective way to train Igedes to write the new alphabet. Few men were trained and some poorly-written material has been published since the SIL team left.

5. **Principles derived from the experience**

   1. Over a number of years, an ethnic group often develops an interest in using their own language. We need to evaluate the interests of the people in their language as well as the changes which could take place.

   2. As “experts,” we have a responsibility to work toward what we believe to be better ways, but we must be sensitive to how the community feels about those changes.

   3. Spending considerable time working on the language and getting to know people before coming to any conclusions provides a reasonable basis for introducing change.

   4. Being ready to do extra work, such as helping the Assembly of God with their quarterly, or the Methodists with their new hymnal, or the Catholics with their liturgy, helped insure a successful transition to the new alphabet.

   5. Formal public decisions are sometimes needed, for example, the orthography meeting.

   6. The impact of published books must not be underestimated, for example, the book to introduce the new alphabet and other materials using the alphabet were quickly produced and widely distributed.

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