

ETHNOLOGY

Ethiopia's Alphabet Ingenious

Sequoyah's Invention For Recording Cherokee Was Thought of First in Africa 2,000 Years Earlier

By EMILY C. DAVIS

REVOLUTIONIZING the alphabet! That is a daring deed in any day and age. But the Ethiopians did it. What is more, the clever old alphabet invention of Ethiopia has been invented all over again in modern America with applause and approval.

Ethiopia's alphabet inventing took place away back at the beginning of the Christian era, says Dr. John P. Harrington, linguistic specialist of the Smithsonian Institution.

"Ethiopians," explains Dr. Harrington, "inherited the old Semitic alphabet in common with the Hebrews, Aramaics, and Arabs. It was a cumbersome system of writing consonants of words and then placing the vowels, if written at all, outside the contours as dots and dashes—not unlike some forms of shorthand. Books in Hebrew are filled with this over-dotting which Germans aptly call 'eye-powder.'

"Ancestors of Emperor Haile Selassie did away with all this bric-a-brac outside the contours of letters, thereby helping eyesight 100 per cent. They noticed that each consonant letter had four corners, and their bright idea was to join a tick to each corner to express one or another of the vowels following the consonant. This gave them an alphabet of syllables, but syllables easy to remember.

"Ethiopians also reversed the order of writing, so that the eye moves from left to right as in modern English print, instead of the reverse as in old Hebrew and modern Yiddish."

Sequoyah Not First

When the American Indian Sequoyah invented an alphabet for writing the Cherokee Indian language over a hundred years ago, he was repeating the very invention Ethiopians had made some 2,000 years earlier, Dr. Harrington finds. Sequoyah's alphabetic symbols represent a consonant plus a vowel. Unlike the Ethiopians, however, the Indian alphabet maker was weak on system, and his alphabet is about five times as hard to learn as the old Ethiopian product.

It is quite possible, Dr. Harrington be-

lieves, that Sequoyah had heard something of the ancient Hebrew and Ethiopian systems from missionaries.

Coming to still more recent times, French Canadian missionaries, among the Cree Indians of the Hudson Bay region, repeated the same discovery in the 1880's. Working in collaboration with Cree Indians themselves, and certainly with some knowledge of Ethiopian and Hebrew writing in the back of their heads—as Dr. Harrington points out—the missionaries invented a system whereby Crees could write their own language. Their system is more like the Ethiopian than Sequoyah's had been. Using simple geometric figures to represent consonants, they turned the consonant symbols in various positions to indicate the vowel following.

Oldest Language in World

While bold in improving their written language, Ethiopians have conservatively preserved the spoken language of their ancestors down through 7,000 years. Sounds of the oldest language in the world can be heard in the royal palace and churches in the city of Addis Ababa. The words are more primitive in sound and form, says Dr. Harrington, than the dialects of the Semitic language—Hebrew and Aramaic—in which the Bible was written.

"Proto-Semitic" the language student would call these ancient primitive speech forms heard in Ethiopia. By proto-Semitic he means the basic language spoken about 5000 B.C., by people who founded civilization in the Old World.

How can scientists tell what human

speech was like in those days, before man had begun to record the sounds of words in systematic writing?

"By a laborious comparison of Hebrew, Babylonian, Arabic, and Aramaic," explains Dr. Harrington, "it is possible to reconstruct definitely the basic language which developed into Semitic languages. Ethiopians in their isolated highland country retained the primitive form of the language as no other people managed to do. The language of the free, as they call it, has come to have seven dialects which depart slightly from ancient forms. But in masses and rituals churches of Ethiopia still use the ancient language of the free in its pure forms."

A strange blending of races, if Italy carries through her project of making Ethiopia a great Italian colony, is foreseen by Dr. Harrington.

"The population of Ethiopia is ten million, of a uniform skin color, rated by anthropological tests a dark yellow brown," says Dr. Harrington. "Suppose Italy establishes a population of ten million Italians in this same area. The experience of Portugal in Africa, and in fact all history, proves that the result will be a blood mixture. Despite slight deviations brought about by social standing, religion, and the Mediterranean feeling of aloofness, it will be merely a matter of time until every individual in this population of colonists has in his veins some percentage of Ethiopian blood.

Would Penetrate Italy

"And since these people would be a part of greater Italy, with improved means of transportation between the Italian peninsula and Italy of the African mountains, the blend would in time be pretty complete in Italy proper. The Ethiopians by blood would have conquered their conquerors, just as centuries

Ethiopian	∧ la	∩ lu	∟ lii	∧ laa	∩ lee	∧ lö	∩ loo
Cherokee	W la	M lu	P li		∩ le	∧ lö	G lo
Cree	∟ la		∟ li		∩ le		∩ lo

ETHIOPIAN ALPHABET INVENTION

A slight variation in the writing of a symbol indicates the vowel sound that follows the consonant in these three alphabets based on the same ingenious idea. Here you can see how the letter "L" is written in the three alphabets to express various syllable sounds. The English letters following each symbol show how it is pronounced. Ethiopians, who originated the idea, had the best system, with forms for all vowels. Sequoyah, who invented a similar alphabet for Cherokee Indians, varied his symbols more, making his alphabet harder. Canadian missionaries devised the third system for writing the Cree Indian language.

ago the Italians by blood conquered the blond and blue-eyed Goths when Gothic kings added Italy to their dominions. Conquest by race is a slower, but surer, conquering agent than arms."

Admitting that this has not occurred in various other parts of Africa, Dr. Harrington finds conditions different. South Africa had a sparse native population, beaten back by British and Boers, and these races have an exceptionally strong tendency to keep aloof from natives in their colonies. Other parts of Africa proved too unhealthy for colonials to settle down permanently in larger numbers. Moslem faith, as in Egypt, acted further as a fairly strong barrier to mixed marriages.

Favorable Conditions

But in Ethiopia the conditions would favor rather than deter a racial blend, as this anthropologist analyzes the situation. As factors promoting mixture, he cites these: the vast mountain region with a climate that can—by sanitary engineering—be made as healthful as the Swiss Alps; the fairly heavy population of "dark yellow browns," with their Christian religion. Any attempt to dislodge the natives from their age-long homes, to segregate them, would be bitterly fought by them. And forbidding racial mixture would be a gesture inevitably futile.

Two Gibaltars guard the destiny of the British Empire—and the other one is Ethiopia, in the opinion of Dr. Harrington.

Vital Waterway

"Ethiopia and the rock of Gibraltar guard opposing ends of a waterway vital to the British Empire," he explains. "By her past history, Britain is committed to giving a free and just government to large populations at the extreme west of Europe and in southern Asia and Australia. These two large groups, in East and West, depend on the water road of communication from the Atlantic Ocean through to the Indian Ocean. To complete the highway the expensive Suez Canal was built, and if a single point is blocked from Gibraltar's rock at the Atlantic end, through the Mediterranean, across Suez, down the Red Sea and through the Straits of Bab-el-Mendeb into the Indian Ocean, England would be seriously hampered in her contact with India and her other eastern colonies.

"The Gibraltar of the West is only a rock less than three miles long, but capable of raking far into Africa with its guns. The Gibraltar that protects the eastern end of Britain's water highway is

Sounds of Ethiopian Names in the News

Haile Selassie (Hhay-leh Seh-lah-syeh). Means Power of the Holy Trinity.

Addis Ababa (Ahd-dis Ah-bah-bah'). New Flower.

Aduwa (Ghad-wah'). Where the Ethiopians repulsed Italy 40 years ago.

Tsana (Tsah-nah'). Important lake, source of the Blue Nile. Ethiopia is from Greek words meaning sunburnt or dark face.

Sounds of War Words in Ethiopian Speech

Weh-tad-der'. Soldier, fighter.

Tor. Spear.

Yeh-medf tor. Artillery; literally "cannon spear."

Yeh-bah-buhr'. Airplane pilot.

Sam-djah'. Bayonet.

Guhd-gwahd'. Trenches.

Yeh-irq mah-gah-nay-nyat'. The peace meeting (League of Nations meeting).

a whole plateau of African mountains—the impregnable fortress of Ethiopia, capable under scientific management of sustaining a population of perhaps up to 50 million people.

"Neighboring African lands are incapable of use to dominate the scene. They are too starkly desert or too insufferably hot or unhealthy. But from Ethiopia, strategically placed to control or close the waterway, guns could be fired over the Red Sea with devastating results to British communications, while a thrust to the west would cut the railway that connects with South Africa. This railway runs almost in the shadow of Ethiopian mountains.

"Equally vital to Britain is Ethiopian Lake Tsana, source of the Blue Nile, which sends its waters into Egypt at just the right time when waters of the Nile derived from other tributaries are getting low. The project of irrigating Egypt in future years takes into account the necessity of harnessing Lake Tsana.

Free for 3000 Years

"A military coup which could be given from Ethiopia might settle the fate of the British Empire and cut the connection between England and India at a time when this connection was urgently needed. British liberality has left free this country, which is the most important to Britain of all the regions of Africa, but which has an unbroken record of over 3,000 years since it paid tribute to any conquering nation."

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MEDICINE

Find Astringents Protect Against Sinus Disease

NEW weapons for the fight against sinus disease were described at the meeting of the American Academy of Ophthalmology and Otolaryngology.

Weak solutions of astringents such as tannic acid and sodium alum greatly diminished the amount of infection in experimental animals when the astringents were used before germs were injected into the sinuses, Drs. Ralph A. Fenton and Olof Larsell of the University of Oregon Medical School reported. These specialists have been conducting a five-year research on sinus disease. The work has been financed by the Academy.

Another weapon which may prove useful is the fluid from the birth sac of animals (sterilized amniotic fluid). Improvement in experimental and human sinus disease was brought about by the local use of this fluid, Drs. Fenton and Larsell reported. The fluid possesses high reparative powers because of its content of so-called growth hormones and active cell juices, they explained.

Similar improvement in sinus disease was noted after the use of certain rare new chemicals resembling ephedrine.

Local use of the quartz light was not found to help in the repair of chronic inflammation. Powerful antiseptics were found almost always irritating when used after sinus inflammation has become established.

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