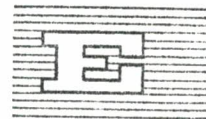


UNITED NATIONS
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SECOND UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON THE
STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES
London, 10-31 May 1972
Item 11 of the provisional agenda

WRITING SYSTEMS

TRANSFER OF NAMES FROM ONE WRITING SYSTEM INTO ANOTHER

TRANSLITERATION OF THE AMHARIC ALPHABET

LON .72-262

- 1 -

WORKING PAPER

Comparative Study of the Romanization of the Amharic Alphabet

Prepared by J. Breu, Austria, Chairman of
The Working Group on a Single Romanization System

I. Description of the Amharic alphabet and its peculiarities:

- 1: The Amharic alphabet is used for writing Amharic, the national language of Ethiopia, belonging to the Semitic group of languages.
2. The Amharic alphabet is a special form of the Ethiopian script, adapted to the peculiarities of the Amharic language. The Ethiopian script belongs to the Semitic scripts. It is amongst them the most accomplished one as it indicates the vowels.
3. The Amharic alphabet runs from left to right. It represents that special form of alphabet which is called a syllabary. It has 33 basic symbols, each symbol having 7 different shapes usually called 'orders' according to the vowel with which the basic symbol is combined. As each graphic symbol - as a rule - represents a consonant together with a vowel the vocalic element cannot be detached from the consonantal element. Only the 6th order can also represent the consonant alone without any vowel.

The following table of W. Leslau (see References no. 4) shows the Amharic alphabet and the pronunciation of its symbols in phonetic script. The 7 columns represent the 7 orders of the alphabet numerically arranged from left to right.

The Amharic alphabet according to the traditional order :

	ä	u	i	a	e	ə	o
ሀ	ha	ሁ hu	ሂ hi	ሃ ha	ሄ he	ህ ha, h	ሆ ho
ለ	lä	ሉ lu	ሊ li	ላ la	ሌ le	ል lo	ሎ lo
ሐ	ha	ሑ hu	ሒ hi	ሓ ha	ሔ he	ሕ ha	ሖ ho
መ	mä	ሙ mu	ሚ mi	ማ ma	ሜ me	ሞ ma	ሟ mo
ሠ	sä	ሡ su	ሢ si	ሣ sa	ሤ se	ሥ sa	ሦ so
ረ	rä	ሩ ru	ሪ ri	ራ ra	ራ re	ር ra	ሮ ro
ሰ	sä	ሱ su	ሲ si	ሳ sa	ሴ se	ስ sa	ሶ so
ሸ	šä	ሹ šu	ሺ šī	ሻ ša	ሼ še	ሽ ša	ሾ šo
ቀ	qä	ቁ qu	ቂ qi	ቃ qa	ቄ qe	ቅ qa	ቆ qo
በ	bä	ቡ bu	ቢ bi	ባ ba	ቤ be	ብ ba	ቦ bo
ተ	tä	ቲ tu	ቲ ti	ታ ta	ቲ te	ት ta	ቶ to
ቸ	čä	ቸ ču	ቹ čī	ቻ ča	ቼ če	ች ča	ቾ čo
ኀ	ha	ኁ hu	ኂ hi	ኃ ha	ኄ he	ኅ ha	ኆ ho
ነ	nä	ኑ nu	ኒ ni	ና na	ኔ ne	ነ na	ኖ no
ኘ	hä	ኙ hu	ኚ hi	ኛ ha	ኜ he	ኝ ha	ኞ ho
አ	a	ሁ u	ሀ i	አ a	ሄ e	አ ə	አ o
ከ	kä	ከ ku	ኪ ki	ካ ka	ኬ ke	ክ ka	ኮ ko
ኸ	hä	ኹ hu	ኺ hi	ኻ ha	ኼ he	ኽ ha	ኾ ho
ወ	wä	ወ wu	ዊ wi	ዋ wa	ዌ we	ወ wa	ዐ wo
ፀ	a	ዑ u	ዒ i	ዓ a	ዔ e	ዐ ə	ዐ o
ዘ	zä	ዘ zu	ዚ zi	ዛ za	ዜ ze	ዝ za	ዞ zo
ዠ	žä	ዡ žu	ዢ žī	ዣ ža	ዤ že	ዥ ža	ዦ žo
የ	yä	የ yu	የ yi	ያ ya	የ ye	የ ya	የ yo
ደ	dä	ደ du	ደ di	ደ da	ደ de	ደ da	ደ do
ጀ	ǰä	ጀ ǰu	ጀ ǰī	ጀ ǰa	ጀ ǰe	ጀ ǰa	ጀ ǰo
ገ	gä	ገ gu	ገ gi	ገ ga	ገ ge	ገ ga	ገ go
ጠ	ጥä	ጠ ጥu	ጠ ጥī	ጠ ጥa	ጠ ጥe	ጠ ጥa	ጠ ጥo
ጪ	čä	ጪ ču	ጪ čī	ጪ ča	ጪ če	ጪ ča	ጪ čo
ጰ	pä	ጰ pu	ጰ pi	ጰ pa	ጰ pe	ጰ pa	ጰ po
ጸ	šä	ጸ šu	ጸ šī	ጸ ša	ጸ še	ጸ ša	ጸ šo

ፀ	ፈ	ፐ	ፑ	ፒ	ፓ	ፔ
ፈ	ፋ	ፌ	ፍ	ፎ	ፇ	ፈ
ፐ	ፑ	ፒ	ፓ	ፔ	ፕ	ፖ

LABIOVELARS

ፈ	ፋ	ፌ	ፍ	ፆ
ፐ	ፑ	ፒ	ፓ	ፔ
ፈ	ፋ	ፌ	ፍ	ፆ
ፐ	ፑ	ፒ	ፓ	ፔ

THE *wa*-SYMBOL

All the consonants can be followed by *-wa* or pronounced rounded with the vowel *a*. This pronunciation is represented by the bracket added to the top or by $\underset{\sim}{}$ added to the bottom of the underlying character written in the 1st or in the 4th order. The characters are :

ㄥ *lwa*, ㄹ (or ㄹ̄) *mwa*, ㄷ (or ㄷ̄) *rwa*, ㅅ *swa*, ㅆ *šwa*, ㅂ *bwa*,
 ㅈ *twa*, ㅊ *čwa*, ㄴ *nwa*, ㄺ *ñwa*, ㅊ *zwa*, ㅊ *žwa*, ㄷ *dwa*, ㄸ *ğwa*,
 ㅌ *ṭwa*, ㅍ *čwa*, ㅍ *ṣwa*, ㅍ (or ㅍ̄, ㅍ̄) *fwa*.

II. General problems of the romanization of the Amharic alphabet.

The Amharic language has 27 consonants and 7 vowels. From the discrepancy between 27 consonants and 33 basic symbols follows that several symbols are pronounced identically. Romanization now can follow pronunciation or try to represent homophonous Amharic characters by different Roman letters or mostly combinations of Roman letters. The main difficulty arises with the 6th order, the symbols of which are pronounced in some cases as consonants only, in others as consonants plus the vowel of the order. All existing romanizations take regard of this alternatives. It would be too strange not to designate a vowel actually spoken or to insert a vowel letter where no vowel is pronounced.

III. Comparison and evaluation of important existing romanizations.

1. The following chronologically arranged romanizations of the Amharic alphabet are of importance:
 - a) BGN/PCGN 1967 System. It is a revision of the romanization adopted in 1949 and published by the US Board on Geographic Names in 1951. Abbreviation: BGN. See References no. 6.
 - b) Romanization used by the Mapping & Geography Department of the Ministry of Land Reform and Administration of the Imperial Ethiopian Government. It was first published in 1958. At present the 2nd revised edition of August 1962 is in use. Abbreviation: MGD.
 - c) Romanization elaborated (published in 1964) by St. Wright and recommended by him to be used in the Journal of Ethiopian Studies (Addis Ababa). Abbreviation: WR. See References no. 7.
 - d) Romanization of the Library of Congress, draft of July 1970. It will be officially accepted by the Library of Congress in the near future. Abbreviation: LC. See References no. 5.

A comparative table of BGN, WR, and LC has been distributed to the members of the Working Group on a Single Romanization System and to the Cartography Section of the United Nations. MGD is copied on the following pages. For the purpose of this working paper the tables of W. Leslau and MGD are sufficient. A reproduction of a full comparative table in the format of this working paper is in consequence to the complication of the Amharic alphabet not possible.

Enlargement of enclosure to Imp. Ethiop. Gov. of July 26, 1927

IMPERIAL ETHIOPIAN MAPPING & GEOGRAPHY INSTITUTE

Amharic To English Transliteration System

1 st	2 nd	3 rd	4 th	5 th	6 th	7 th
ሀ Ha*	ሁ Hu	ሂ Hi	ሃ Ha	ሄ He	ህ Hi	ህ ³ Ho
ለ Le	ሉ Lu	ሊ Li	ላ La	ሌ Le	ል Li	ሎ Lo
ሐ Ha*	ሑ Hu	ሒ Hi	ሓ Ha	ሔ He	ሕ Hi	ሐ Ho
መ Me	ሙ Mu	ሚ Mi	ማ Ma	ሜ Me	ሞ Mi	ሞ Mo
ሠ Se	ሡ Su	ሢ Si	ሣ Sa	ሤ Se	ሥ Si	ሦ So
ረ Re	ሩ Ru	ሪ Ri	ራ Ra	ራ Re	ር Ri	ሮ Ro
ሰ Se	ሱ Su	ሲ Si	ሳ Sa	ሴ Se	ሰ Si	ሰ So
ሸ She	ሹ Shu	ሺ Shi	ሻ Sha	ሼ She	ሽ Shi	ሽ Sho
ቀ K'e	ቁ K'u	ቂ K'i	ቃ K'a	ቄ K'e	ቅ K'i	ቆ K'o
በ Be	ቡ Bu	ቢ Bi	ባ Ba	ቤ Be	ብ Bi	ቦ Bo
ተ Te	ቲ Tu	ቲ Ti	ታ Ta	ቲ Te	ቲ Ti	ቲ To
ቸ Che	ቹ Chu	ቺ Chi	ቻ Cha	ቼ Che	ች Chi	ች Cho
ኀ Ha*	ኁ Hu	ኂ Hi	ኃ Ha	ኄ He	ኅ Hi	ኆ Ho
ነ Ne	ኑ Nu	ኒ Ni	ና Na	ኔ Ne	ነ Ni	ኖ No

ɿ Nye	ʝ Nyu	ʒ Nyi	ʑ Nya	ʒ Nye	ʒ Nyi	ʑ Nyu
ʌ a*	ʌ u	ʌ i	ʌ a	ʌ e	ʌ i	ʌ o
ɸ Ke	ɸ Ku	ɸ Ki	ɸ Ka	ɸ Ke	ɸ Ki	ɸ Ko
ɸ He	ɸ Hu	ɸ Hi	ɸ Ha	ɸ He	ɸ Hi	ɸ Ho
ʋ We	ʋ Wu	ʋ Wi	ʋ Wa	ʋ We	ʋ Wi	ʋ Wo
ʋ a*	ʋ u	ʋ i	ʋ a	ʋ e	ʋ i	ʋ o
ɸ Ze	ɸ Zu	ɸ Zi	ɸ Za	ɸ Ze	ɸ Zi	ɸ Zo
ɸ Zhe	ɸ Zhu	ɸ Zhi	ɸ Zha	ɸ Zhe	ɸ Zhi	ɸ Zho
ʀ Ye	ʀ Yu	ʀ Yi	ʀ Ya	ʀ Ye	ʀ Yi	ʀ Yo
ʀ De	ʀ Du	ʀ Di	ʀ Da	ʀ De	ʀ Di	ʀ Do
ʀ Je	ʀ Ju	ʀ Ji	ʀ Ja	ʀ Je	ʀ Ji	ʀ Jo
ʀ Ge	ʀ Gu	ʀ Gi	ʀ Ga	ʀ Ge	ʀ Gi	ʀ Go
ɱ T'e	ɱ T'u	ɱ T'i	ɱ T'a	ɱ T'e	ɱ T'i	ɱ T'o
ɱ Ch'e	ɱ Ch'u	ɱ Ch'i	ɱ Ch'a	ɱ Ch'e	ɱ Ch'i	ɱ Ch'o
ʀ P'e	ʀ P'u	ʀ P'i	ʀ P'a	ʀ P'e	ʀ P'i	ʀ P'o
ʀ Ts'e	ʀ Ts'u	ʀ Ts'i	ʀ Ts'a	ʀ Ts'e	ʀ Ts'i	ʀ Ts'o

θ	Ts'e	θ	Ts'u	ɛ	Ts'i	ɟ	Ts'a	ɕ	Ts'o	ʈ	Ts'i	ʂ	Ts'o
ɸ	F _e	ɸ	Fu	ɸ	Fi	ɸ	Fa	ɸ	F _e	ɸ	F _i	ɸ	Fo
ɸ	P _e	ɸ	Pu	ɸ	Pi	ɸ	Pa	ɸ	P _e	ɸ	P _i	ɸ	Po

Diphthongs

ɸ	Kw _e	ɸ	Kwi	ɸ	Kwa	ɸ	Kw _e	ɸ	Kw _i
ɸ	Gw _e	ɸ	Gwi	ɸ	Gwa	ɸ	Gw _e	ɸ	Gw _i
ɸ	K'w _e	ɸ	K'wi	ɸ	K'wa	ɸ	K'w _e	ɸ	K'w _i
ɸ	Hw _e	ɸ	Hwi	ɸ	Hwa	ɸ	Hw _e	ɸ	Hw _i

P R O N U N C I A T I O N G U I D E

VOWELS

1st	form	e	as in	English	M _e t
2nd	"	u	"	"	Y _o u
3rd	"	i	"	"	M _o zine
4th	"	a	"	"	F _o ther
5th	"	o	"	"	M _o y
6th	"	ɛ	"	"	S _i n
7th	"	o	"	"	O _n

CONSONANTS

G	as in	Gu _o d
J	"	J _o hn
Ny	"	S _e n _i r
Zh	"	M _e as _u re

**SOUNDS NOT FOUND
IN ENGLISH**

Letters followed by an apostrophe
require explosive pronunciation
(Example K', T', CH', P', Ts')

SPECIAL NOTES

- ⚡ Sounds identical to fourth form sound.
- (2) The vowel of the 6th form (ɛ) is eliminated in spelling except when needed in English pronunciation (M_en_ig_is_ti = M_en_g_is_ti).

Preliminary Edition October 1954
First Revised Edition April 1958
Second " " August 1962

2. BGN has two variants, one for documentation work and another for more general purposes. BGN, variant for documentation, and LC by using a great number of diacritical signs are strictly reversible, but both of them cannot be handled for romanizing Amharic texts by someone not conversant with the language as - like with all other romanizations - the symbols of the 6th order must be romanized in two different ways according to their pronunciation.

WR provides for two variants, one for documentation purposes, and another for general use. Even the stricter variant is not reversible as some Amharic characters are represented by phonetical reasons by one Roman letter combination only.

MGD represents homophonous Amharic letters by the same Roman letters or letter combinations. It is a phonetic transcription not allowing for reversibility. For documentation purposes BGN (documentation variant) and LC are valuable although both of them are no transliterations in the strict sense. They differ in the choice of the Roman letters, BGN showing the style of English transcriptions, LC following international linguistic usage. Thus BGN needs more Roman letters than LC but less diacritical signs. Examples: shu = šu, chu = ču, nyu = ŋu, zhu = zu. WR is in this respect on the same line as LC, whereas MGD follows English usage.

IV. Practical proposals for acceptance by the 2nd UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names.

The 1st US Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, Geneva 1967, recognizing the need to adopt a single system for the transliteration of Amharic into Roman alphabet, recommended that the "Amharic-to-English transliteration system" to be adopted by the Ethiopian national geographical names authority be considered by the proposed UN Permanent Committee of Experts on Geographical Names for acceptance as a standard international system for the writing of Ethiopian geographical names in the Roman alphabet.

The actual situation is as follows: The Mapping & Geography Department of the Ministry of Land Reform and Administration of the Ethiopian Government functions as national geographic names authority. It uses on its official maps MGD which therefore can be considered of having official status. This situation is documented by the following copy of an official letter:



ተጥር: 3/432/63
No.

የኢትዮጵያ ፡ ንጉሠ ፡ ነገሥት ፡ መንግሥት ፡
የሥራት ፡ ይዘታና ፡ አስተዳደር ፡ ጊዜኑር ፡

IMPERIAL ETHIOPIAN GOVERNMENT
MINISTRY OF LAND REFORM AND
ADMINISTRATION

ቴሌፎን ፡ 45158 45159
TEL.

አዲስ አበባ ፡ ተገቢ ፡ ጊዜ ፡

Addis Ababa July 26, 1971

ፖስታ ፡ ግጥም ፡ 884
P. O. Box

Prof. Dr. Josef Breu,
Austrian Institute of Eastern and
South eastern European Studies,
Josefsplatz 6, A-1010,
Wien 1, Austria.

Dear Professor Breu,

Referring to your letter dated July 6, 1971, (Ref, Dr, B/wb) concerning "Standardization of Geographical Names", we hereby send you the required information.

Please be informed that, eventhough the Geography Department of our Ministry is considering and taking care of such matters, no legal "Tepemey Commission" has existed so far. However, production of maps at various scales uses the enclosed system of transliteration.

The difference between the system used by U.S. Board of Geographic Names and that of ours is only in minor matters; specifically, overlining and underlining of two vowel orders and a couple other points.



Sincerely yours,

Teye Reta
Director General
Mapping & Geography Department

Encl. Amharic to English
Transliteration Chart

Second Revised Edition, August 1962

If one postulates the principle that romanizations officially accepted by the donor country itself ought to be recommended for international cartographic use MGD will be the right choice. If one would like to give preference to reversibility LC or BGN, narrow variant, are recommendable. Linguistics and documentation - even within English speaking countries - will prefer LC as it follows in the choice of special Roman letters a well established scientific tradition and as it can do with shorter combinations of Roman letters in representing Amharic characters by making ampler use of diacritical signs.

References:

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Josef Breu
manu propria