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WRITING SYSTEMS: ROMANIZATION

Romanization Procedures: Is there a systematic bias against representing musical  
tone?

(Submitted by Sudan)\*\*

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\*E/CONF.94/1

\*\* Prepared by Herman Bell

**Romanization Procedures:  
Is There a Systematic Bias against Representing Musical Tone?**

Submitted by Sudan (Herman Bell)

Many languages, such as Dinka (Sudan), Thai (Thailand) and Lao (Laos), make extensive use of complex systems of musical tone to make phonemic distinctions. Yet the procedures reported in E/Conf.94/CRP.81 generally do not recommend representing tone in romanization systems, e.g.

p. 52: 7 and 10 - 'the tone marks .. [4 Thai symbols] .. should not be romanized'

and p. 72: note 1 - 'Tone marks ... [4 Lao characters] ... should not be romanized'..

When tone is not indicated in these languages, many unnecessary ambiguities result. Geographical names are unnecessarily made more difficult to identify and pronounce accurately.

The bias against representing tone probably arises from the history of alphabets. The ancestor of most of the world's alphabets appeared in the Middle East and was applied primarily to Semitic languages. Via the Greeks a Semitic alphabet was introduced to European languages. Neither the Semitic languages nor the European languages experienced a strong need to develop a system of characters to represent musical tone.

Our alphabet has a systematic bias against representing complex tone systems.

As indicated above, users of certain languages, such as Thai and Lao, found it useful to develop special characters to represent important distinctions of tone.

Users of languages who have found it necessary to develop their own characters to indicate tone should not be discouraged from using corresponding tone characters when their languages are romanized.

If this point is accepted, then standard procedures for representing the tone features could be sought in consultation with UNGEGN.