

# Repositioning Yorùbá Orthography in Christian Yorùbá Hymnal Apps.

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## ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the level of conformity of selected Christian Yorùbá hymns with the Standard Yorùbá orthography based on three different Hymnal Apps. The data for this study are selected from hymnal Apps of three Christian denominations; Christ Apostolic Church, Baptist Church and Anglican Church (CAC, BC and AC respectively) and analyzed within the theoretical framework of orthography principles (easy acquisition theory, spelling theory and tone economic theory). The findings of the paper showed that there are lots of inconsistencies in the use of Yorùbá orthography across the selected hymnal Apps. The study also reveals that the hymns are transcribed using Yorùbá orthography without respect to Yorùbá suprasegmental features which are significant to Yorùbá orthographic rules. The hymns Apps ignore the fact that Yorùbá is a tone language which presents many contradictions and complications across the three Yorùbá Hymnal Apps and against the standard Yorùbá orthography. This paper therefore concludes that Yorùbá scholars should intensify efforts to mend the existing gap between the town and gown by repositioning the Yorùbá orthography in the Christian Yorùbá hymnal Apps to the Standard Yorùbá orthography. This paper also calls for the general review of the accepted Yorùbá orthography.

**Keywords:** Repositioning, Orthography, Inconsistencies, Suprasegments, Hymnal Apps

## INTRODUCTION

Yoruba language is one of the major languages of Nigeria which is predominantly spoken by the South Western Nigeria. It is also spoken within and outside the country. The speakers of Yorùbá are found in Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ondo, Ekiti, Kwara and some parts of Kogi, Delta and Edo states of the country. The speakers of the language can also be found in other nations of the world such as Benin Republic, Togo, Sierra-Lone, Cote d'ivoire, Cuba, Trinidad and Tobago, United States of America and Brazil by the group called Candomblé.

Utterances and expressions during ritual is also common in North America, but they have gone through changes due to the fact that Yorùbá is no longer a vernacular for them and fluency is not required. In Nigeria, the speakers of Yoruba language are approximated to be more than 50million among the primary and secondary speakers as well as other millions of speakers outside Nigeria which makes it the most widely spoken African language outside the African continent.

In this modern era, a transnational language like Yorùbá language must have a standard writing system on the use of its symbols and conventions that regulate their usage in spelling, capitalization, emphasis, punctuation, boundaries, phonemes and so on using the specific rules of the language (Olumuyiwa, 2013). Orthography is therefore referred to as any method of writing a language, without judgment as to right and wrong, with a scientific understanding that orthographic standardization exists on a spectrum of strength of convention (Seidenberg, 1992).

Hymn is coined from a Greek word *hymnos* which means “a song of praise”. Therefore, hymn can be described as any type of songs synonymous with devotional songs for the purpose of adoring a deity or prominent figure. A writer of hymns is known as a hymnist. The singing of hymns is called hymnody. Collections of hymns are known as hymn books or hymnals. Hymns may also be accompanied with instrumental gadgets and may as well be without one.

It is observed that most people are familiar with Christian hymns at the expense of other over 4000 recognized religions in the world such as Ifá hymnody, Islamic hymnody, Hindu hymnody, Sikh hymnody, Buddhism hymnody, Confucianism hymnody, Jainism hymnody, Judism hymnody, Shinto hymnody, Zoroastrianism hymnody and so on.

### **Origin of Standard Yorùbá Orthography**

Standard Yorùbá orthography originated in the early work of Church Mission Society missionaries working among the *Aku* (Yorùbá) of Freetown with their informants being Samuel Ajayi Crowther among others who would later proceed to work on his Yoruba language using Latin alphabets without respect to tone marking. Perceived abnormalities in the work of Crowther gave room for calls for review by early scholars. The recommendations of the scholars and some committees set up to review the Yorùbá orthography include but not limited to the Conference on Yoruba Orthography held at the C.M.S, Faji Mission House, Lagos between 28th and 29th of January, 1875, Practical Orthography of African Languages by the International African Institute (IAI) in 1930's, Yoruba Orthography Committee set up by the Western Nigeria Ministry of Education in January 1966, another in 1969 while Committee of Vice-Chancellors of Nigerian Universities set up another in 1971 before the final Joint Consultative Committee (J.C.C) by the Federal Ministry of Education in 1973. The report of the thorough work of the JCC committee submitted in 1974 is put in use officially till date.

Number of scholars such as Johnson (1921), Ajayi (1960), Bámgbósé (1965), Oyèláràn (1973), Arohunmóláṣe (1987), and Olumuyiwa (2013) among others had worked on Yorùbá orthography but to the neglect of orthography in the Christian hymn books. This paper therefore postulates to what extent is the conformity, accuracy and consistency of the orthography in Christian hymn books to the Standard Yorùbá orthography.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Maduabuchi (2013) described the two approaches to the study of orthography as a *priori* approach and a *posteriori* approach. A *priori* approach deals with the linguistic analysis of a written language with focus on phonology, morphology and syntax of the language while *posteriori* approach deals with investigating the accuracy, consistencies and inconsistencies in the written language in order to make recommendations on the need for proper writing rules. The concern of this paper is the *posteriori* approach.

According to Williamson (1984), there are five principles guiding the foundation of orthography decisions; accuracy i.e. the adequate reflection of the structures of the language, acceptability by the people who are end users, predictability of the orthography through consistency, harmonization of linguistic codes for representation of neighboring languages, and convenience where it should be easy for the writers and publishers to be able to produce or learn comfortably.

### **The Easy Acquisition Theory**

This theory as propounded by Wiseman (1989) states that the native speaker must be comfortable with the sound of the alphabets of orthography. The sounds of the alphabets must also be familiar to them. The table below shows the hymn of the Baptist Church (BC), Anglican Church (AC) and Christ Apostolic Church (CAC) with their similar interpretation in English language and Standard Yorùbá (SY).

Table I:

Hymn	
AC Hymn 020, S1,L6	Emi ko bere; ‘sise kan to fun mi
BC Hymn 063	Nki o bere; ‘sise kan to fun mi
CAC Hymn 026 S1, L6	To ese mi, ‘sise kan to fun mi
SY	N kì óò bèèrè, ìsìṣẹ̀ kan tó fún mi
English	I will not ask, one step is enough for me

Considering the data from the selected hymn books of the churches above, it could be observed that a second language learner of Yorùbá or its native speakers would find it difficult to understand the sounds of the alphabets as they are not familiar with the sound /e/ (Emi) in hymn 20, stanza 1, line 6 of Anglican Church and hymn 63 of Baptist Church in ‘sise’ instead of /ẹ/ in ‘ìsìṣẹ̀’ as later re-presented in standard Yorùba.

It is also observed that the standard Yorùbá speaker would not be familiar with the cluster of the nasal syllabic consonant /N/ with ‘ki’ as appeared in the hymn of Baptist Church. It is also noted that there is no correlation between the hymn of CAC ‘to ese mi’ and its standard Yorùbá ‘n kì ó bèèrè’ thereby causing more confusion.

### The Spelling Theory

This theory implies that words are expected to be written in the way they are pronounced. Unfortunately, this is in contradiction to what plays out in the Christian hymn books. Most of the constructions in the hymn books do not follow this application.

Let us consider the table II below.

Table II:

Hymn	
AC Hymn 020, S1,L1	‘Wo Imole! Larin okun aiye
BC Hymn 063	Wo Imole! Larin okun aiye
CAC Hymn 026	‘Wo Imole Larin okun aye
SY	Wo ìmọ̀lẹ̀ láààrin òòkùn ayé
English	Yee light amid the encircling gloom

It is observed that the Anglican Church hymn 20, stanza 1, line 1 presented ‘láààrin’ as ‘Larin’ so they do to ‘ayé’ which was presented as ‘aiye’ and ‘òòkùn’ presented as ‘okun’. The same goes with Baptist Church hymn 63. In the case of Christ Apostolic Church hymn 26, only ‘Larin’ is misrepresented.

### Tone Economic Theory

This is the theory that deals with the tone marking in languages. Yorùbá language is known as a tone language and the inability of the writers of Christian hymn books to recognize this peculiarity is another reason to call for the repositioning of the books. Yorùba language as high tone mark indicated with the (mí /) sign, low tone mark indicated with the (do \) sign and middle tone mark indicated as (re -) to be put on top of the vowel sounds (a,e,ẹ,i,o,ọ,u) and nasal syllabic consonant (m & n) as may be necessary. Note that the middle tone mark is usually left unmarked wherever it occurs. In all the selected hymn books under review, the data showed that there is no respect for the Yorùbá language as a tone language. Hence, it fails the minimal ambiguity theory as the readers may misconstrue the intention of the hymnists as shown in the table III below.

Table 3

Hymn	
AC Hymn 020, S2, L1	Nigbakan ri, emi ko be O pe
BC Hymn 063	Nigbakan ri, emi ko be O pe
CAC Hymn 026 S2, L1	Nigba kan ri, emi ko be O pe
SY	Nígbà kan rí, èmi kò bè ó pé
English	Once upon a time, I did not appeal that

It is observed from the table above that only standard Yorùbá with tone marks has meaningful semantic implication with its English interpretation while others give room for ambiguity.

It is observed that there are different inconsistencies in the orthography of the Christian hymnals varying from denomination to denomination. The possible reasons for the differences in the Yoruba orthography used across the three hymnals of this work can be traced to the variations in the spelling conventions adopted by people who made efforts on the Yoruba orthography without any linguistic knowledge. They had very little or no formal training in the language studies of Yoruba. For instance, Bowdich worked on Yoruba words for numerals in 1817, Mrs. Kilham published Yoruba vocabularies in 1829, Clapperton (1829), Raban between 1830–1832, Gollmer (1847) and so on. This can also be verified in the work of Johnson (1921), Ajayi (1960), Bámbóṣé (1965), Oyèláràn (1973) and Arohunmọ́láṣe (1987) among others. This is also in line with the view of Olumuyiwa (2013).

It is observed that the orthography of Christ Apostolic Church is closer to the use of Standard Yorùbá orthography than Baptist Church and Anglican Church. The reason can be traced to the history of the establishment of the churches in Nigeria. The first mission of the Church of England was established in 1842 in Badagry by Henry Townsend. In 1864, Samuel Ajayi Crowther was elected Bishop of the Niger and the first black Bishop of the Anglican Communion and Lagos became a diocese of its own in 1919.

Comparing the year of establishment of Baptist Church, which its first missionary, Rev. Thomas Jefferson Bowen arrived Badagry area of Lagos state on the 5<sup>th</sup> of August, 1850 and officially formed Nigerian Baptist Convention in the year 1914; to that of CAC, which was however established formally in 1941 as a result of the split from The Apostolic Church, the original church that was brought to Nigeria by the original Aladura Organization. It is necessary to note that the growth of CAC was led by Apostle Joseph Ayo Babalola, a revivalist reported to have performed several miracles and canvassed several traditionalists into Christendom. It could be deduced that the Christ Apostolic Church was the least in terms of year of establishment (1941), some years after the second conference of 1930's organized to review the orthography of African Languages. This may be adduced as the reason its orthography is a little similar to the Standard Yorùbá orthography.

### **The Implications of the Inconsistency in the Hymnals.**

Tracing the history and antecedent of Yorùbá orthography especially among the hymn books with focus on the Christ Apostolic Church hymn, Baptist Church hymn and Anglican Church hymn, it is worthwhile to note that the inconsistencies of orthography in the hymn books did not just emanate overnight but the results of development that emanated from linguistic and social events. The implication of these inconsistencies in the writing system in the hymns of the different denominations is that the Yorùbá orthography remains incoherent as the hymnists have the freedom to alter the orthography without any hindrances. Several years after Yoruba orthography has become official, the writing system of hymns of the churches remain in a highly inconsistent state in the sense that there is no uniformity in spellings and punctuations of the hymn books as shown in the discussed data.

Though there are opinions on whether there is perfect orthography but to avoid heterogeneous writing convention, there is need to follow whatever inadequacies noted in spelling or punctuation convention a known standard orthography. This is also in line with the thought of Olumuyiwa (2013). We cannot shy away from the fact that perfect orthography does not exist anywhere in the world and Yorùbá cannot be an exemption. Hence, the inconsistencies in the hymn books would create a discordant writing convention which will adversely affect the Yorùbá orthography.

In view of the advent and widespread use of online (soft version) hymnal, occasioned by artificial intelligence (AI), many of the soft hymnal draw data from the existing Yorùbá orthography available on the internet which serves as the data base for AI. Since there is no standard orthographic input in the data AI data base, the various soft hymnals are left to manipulate the Yorùbá orthography as much as they can afford. This has a general implication on the Natural Language Processing (NLP) system to accommodate the Yorùbá orthography.

Semantic and phonological (pronunciation) complication are likely to erupt within this spectrum as the omission of tones and diacritics on the soft hymnals' orthography are likely to make it difficult to pronounce homonyms appropriately especially in cases where the suprasegmental features are lexically significant. When this happens, the semantics may be lost in the singing of the hymns. For instance, *Nigba kan ri, emi ko be O pe*, compared with 'èmi kò bè ó pé' in the SY, lack of tone and diacritics can actually be misleading until the lyrics is considered in context. It may be grievous to see 'okun' in different tonal patterns in 'Wo Imole! Larin okun aiye' as rope of life [Mid and High], ocean of life [Low and Mid], or even 'greetings of life [Mid and Mid]' where the tone pattern of the last is most appropriate, whereas, it is the least related in the context of use. This compared with the SY 'Wo imólè láààrin òòkùn ayé'.

In a similar vein, the fact that orthographic modernization already removed 'i' in the spelling rule of former 'aiye' which affects related words such as eiye (bird) and Jayeiola (name) to remove redundancy and maintain the principle of convenience, by default presents contradiction with the orthography of the Baptist Hymnal. Invariably, if a Baptist hymnal user attempt to search for the first line of the song 'Wo Imole! Larin okun aiye' in the hymn App of CAC, the AI will not be able to provide the needed prompt as a result of the inconsistency in the representation of 'aye' and 'aiye' differently, whereas, the SY orthography is presented as 'Wo imólè láààrin òòkùn ayé'.

## CONCLUSION

The focus of this paper is on Christian hymn books. We discussed the state of the hymn books vis-à-vis the theories of orthography. Findings showed that there is need to repositioning the orthography in the hymn books as there is no uniformity in their spellings and punctuations so as to meet the Standard Yorùbá orthography. The linguistic knowledge is the ability to harmonize the town with the gown. In order to carry the end users along, it is suggested that Yorùbá language scholars intensify efforts on how we can harmonize the existing hymn books and re-present in a Standard Yorùbá orthography as the academics seems now far away from influencing the religious aspect of language. The churches are admonished to make use of the existing Standard Yorùbá orthography appropriately. It is also observed that the review of the current accepted Yorùbá orthography is long overdue. Hence, this paper also calls for the review of the current Yorùbá orthography.

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