Bridgewater Review

Volume 20 | Issue 2 Article 5

Dec-2001

Alphabetic Imperialism?: A Cross-Cultural Glimpse into the Evolution of Writing

Curtiss Hoffman
Bridgewater State College, c1hoffman@bridgew.edu

Recommended Citation
Hoffman, Curtiss (2001). Alphabetic Imperialism?: A Cross-Cultural Glimpse into the Evolution of Writing. *Bridgewater Review*, 20(2), 3-8.
Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol20/iss2/5

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

Alphabetic Imperialism?

A Cross-Cultural Glimpse into the Evolution of Writing

by Curtiss Hoffman

A brief visit to Japan during June of 2000 brought me into contact with the complex writing systems of that island nation, and caused me to reflect upon some of the basic assumptions I was taught about the development of written language, both in the East and in the West. In college and graduate school, I was trained in the ancient languages and scripts of the Middle East, and I had always accepted the received wisdom that writing in that region had evolved through four stages, from

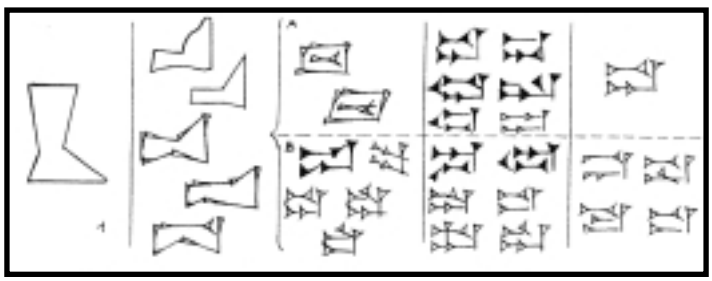
A) a system of 3-dimensional clay tokens *pictographically* representing items of commerce; into
B) the *logographic*, 2-dimensional form of writing we call Sumerian, in which most signs still represent objects or actions, but some have been converted into grammatical particles by the use of homophones; into
C) a *syllabary*, in which all sounds in the language are represented by a more limited number of signs derived from the earlier logographs; into
D) an *alphabet*, in which the number of signs is reduced to between 20 and 30, each representing (more or less) a phoneme in the spoken language.

The received wisdom, again based on the Middle Eastern example, is that each of these four stages was superior to the one which preceded it in precision and intelligibility. The alphabetic stage is supposed to represent a major, perhaps even an inevitable, advance in terms of making the written word more accessible to a larger audience, thus promoting the institution of democracy.

It is this last conclusion that I wish to challenge. As an anthropologist, I tend to be suspicious of any explanation of cultural change which implies that the way in which Western civilization achieved a certain set of cultural characteristics was inevitable for all cultures, or, more perniciously, the assumption that cultures which failed to follow the historical stages we followed are somehow inferior. This kind of explanation strikes me as rather self-congratulatory. Instead, we need to consider each set of developments on a case-by-case basis, and to examine the contingencies which applied in each case. When we do this, we very often discover some surprising results which can broaden our perspective of what is possible, and effective, in the broad span of human cultural diversity.

To do this, I will take the reader through a brief comparison of the writing systems of Sumer and Japan, noting points of commonality. I do not intend by this comparison to imply that there is, or ever was, any direct connection between these two cultures, distant from one another as they are by over 3,000 years and 5,000 miles. Instead, I wish to show that their scripts evolved under somewhat similar circumstances and sometimes in strikingly similar ways.

The origins of Sumerian script lay in the ubiquitous clay "tokens" found at late Neolithic and early Chalcolithic sites (ca 7,000 – 4,000 B.C.) throughout the Middle East. It is now well established that these tokens were used to keep records of commercial transactions: if you sell me 10 sheep, I give you 10 little quarter-sized disk-shaped tokens in the shape of a distinguishing part of a sheep (in this case, the hindquarters, represented by a circle with an x inside it); or, if I put 50 measures of barley into the temple storehouse for safekeeping, I get 50 little conical tokens in the shape of bowls of grain with the fill level marked to indicate my property, in case I need to claim it



This figure shows the evolution of the cuneiform sign for foot, "Du," from an early pictograph of a foot into increasingly abstract forms in cuneiform scripts.

back later. This system worked well when the amounts exchanged were relatively small, but as Sumerian farmers prospered, the amount of loose change in the form of tokens they had to keep in their possession must have become a nuisance. So they hit upon the idea of enclosing the tokens for each transaction inside a clay envelope, on the moist surface of which the parties to the transaction would stamp or roll their personal seals. Since clay is opaque, they soon discovered that it was now impossible to see how many tokens they had inside the envelope without breaking the seal. So they began to inscribe two-dimensional representations of the three-dimensional tokens on the outside of the envelope. Soon after, they realized that they no longer needed the tokens inside, and the envelopes became inscribed clay tablets. Signs for numbers quickly followed, so that now all I had to do to record the above transactions was to write the sign for 10 followed by the sign for sheep; or the sign for 50 (5 signs for 10) followed by the sign for a measure of barley. This certainly made commerce much easier, though the clay tablets were still rather bulky. It was common practice to discard them after three generations. Even so, commercial texts make up about 80% of all clay tablets found in Mesopotamia.

By the time cities were well established in southern Mesopotamia around 3000 B.C., the priests and city rulers realized that this pictorial representation of the spoken language could be carried a step farther: they could record not only the sales of goods, but also texts of praise for their gods and kings, myths, epics, and eventually diplomatic and personal correspondence. The script in which these were written was streamlined into a system of signs written with a wedge-shaped reed stylus in the moist clay of the tablet (hence the term *cuneiform*, wedge-shaped), each sign standing for an object or an action, plus signs derived from the above which represented grammatical particles on the basis of homophony. Each sign stood for a Sumerian word of one or two syllables, and because it derived from a picture it might be read in any of a number of ways, depending upon the context. For example, the sign which originally depicted a foot (Sumerian *du*) might denote the verb "to walk" (*gina* in the present 3rd person indicative, but with many permutations depending on tense, mood, etc.); or it might denote the verb "to stand" (*guba* in the indicative). To avoid confusion between the three, a glossing sign was added after the sign for foot: e.g., GIN + NA to form "he walks", or GUB + BA to form "he stands." Some of the basic signs were modified by adding marks (*gunu*) to indicate a particular part of the object to which the scribe wished to draw attention; for example, the sign for head (*sag*) with marks over or next to the mouth would indicate "mouth" (*ka*) or "word, speech, language" (*eme*), respectively. In addition, certain types of nouns were glossed with what are called "determinatives," which are not intended to be read but simply inform the reader of what sort of noun is involved: the name of a person, of a god, of a star, a fish, a bird, or of an object made of wood, metal, leather, etc.

There were well over 600 signs in common use, and certainly this made the task of learning Sumerian script a daunting one, even for speakers of the language. We have texts about the schooling of scribes, and practice texts on which the teacher would inscribe an example on one side of the tablet and the student would have to copy it on the other. The profession of scribe was highly honored and paid well, and scribal academies were well-supported, both by tuition from private wealthy patrons who sent their sons to be taught there and by the state, which employed scribes for various tasks: preparing inscriptions for public monuments, writing correspondence between city rulers, keeping track of surplus grain, etc. While most scribes were male in this heavily patriarchal society, we do have evidence of female scribes, and also of a separation into male and female dialects of the language (*eme.gir*, "reed speech," and *eme.sal*, "skinny speech," respectively).

The written word assumed great importance in Mesopotamian culture, in both law and religion. Law codes were inscribed on large monuments placed in public squares so that a person brought before the law, either as plaintiff or defendant, could be shown the written case law that applied to the particular case. And the king of the gods, Enlil, was thought to have control of the Tablets of Destiny upon which were written the fates of men and gods.

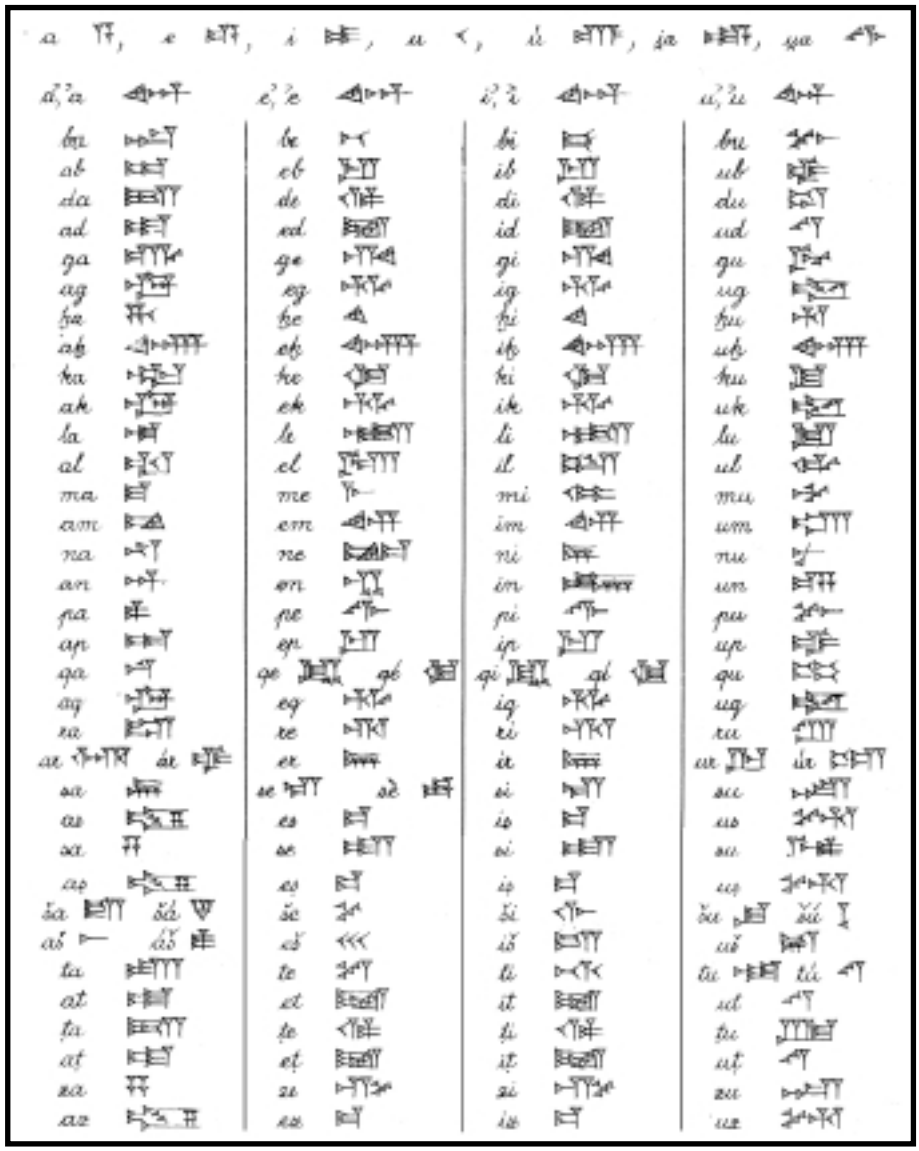
By around 2400 B.C., new peoples were entering the region from the desert. The Akkadians and the Amorites spoke Semitic languages unrelated to Sumerian. At first the Sumerians tried to assimilate them by giving them marginal lands to graze their herds, but eventually the assimilation developed into an outright takeover of the old Sumerian culture. The Semites adopted Sumerian social structure, dress, urbanism, economics, and religion, with a few modifications. The new peoples also took over the cuneiform script and adapted it to represent the sounds in their languages. They clearly had problems with both the writing and grammar of Sumerian, for they created long bilingual lists of terms for reference—luckily for us, for otherwise we might not be able to read Sumerian at all! They also simplified the logographic script into a syllabary of about 100 signs, each representing a vowel (V), a vowel plus a consonant (VC), or a consonant plus a vowel (CV). They retained about 200 of the more complex CVC signs as a kind of

shorthand, or, sometimes in scribal academies, just to show off—but for comprehension, they often glossed these with Akkadian equivalents, in the same way that the Sumerians themselves used glosses for pronunciation aids. Like Latin in Medieval times, Sumerian was retained as a literary language, used primarily in the temples for the preservation of religious and astronomical texts.

With this step, the signs were almost entirely divorced from their original logographic meaning and became sound units to express the spoken language. The syllabic system was much easier to learn and to use, and as a result Akkadian script became the standard for international commerce and diplomacy throughout the region for well over a millennium and a half. Even in Egypt, where parallel developments had independently resulted in the hieroglyphic script, Akkadian was the language in which letters were written to the Pharaoh by petty princes in Palestine during the reign of Akhnaton (ca 1350 B.C.).

Starting in the early 2nd millennium B.C., some Semitic-speaking groups along the Mediterranean coast—in Sinai and at Ugarit in Syria—began to experiment with a further modification: an alphabetic script which reduced the number of signs yet further, each now representing a consonantal phoneme in the language. This may have derived from Egyptian hieroglyphs, which are a combination of logographs, syllables, and consonantal signs. Like the early Sumerian and Egyptian signs, each letter was originally the pictograph of an object (*aleph* = ox, *beth* = house, etc.), but unlike hieroglyphic script they were never used logographically. One of the reasons this system may have become popular among these seafaring tradespeople is that the number of characters in the Ugaritic and Phoenician alphabets is equivalent to the number of days in a lunar month, thereby making it possible to use the set of alphabet letters as a kind of calendar.

The advantage of this kind of writing system was that the student had far fewer characters to memorize. The disadvantage was that the vowel sounds were mostly left out and had to be inferred from a knowledge of the spoken language—like modern alphabetic shorthand. Only where the vowel was preceded by a glottal stop was a, i, or u indicated. This remains the case with the two chief modern descendants of these scripts in the region: Arabic and Hebrew. While both languages developed a system for denoting vowels during the first millennium A.D., in practice today (both religious and secular) the markings are often omitted. Students first



The Babylonians simplified the pictographic/logographic Sumerian signs into a system of syllables, each represented by a particular sign.

learning the language are supplied with the vowel pointings, but once they become fluent with these they learn to read texts without them. Yiddish, the language of the Jews of Eastern Europe, is written with Hebrew script without vowel pointings, but since it is about 80% German some of the glottal consonants are forced into service as vowels instead.

The Greeks, who were heavily involved in trade with the eastern Mediterranean coast, adopted this system fairly early, as inscriptions in Linear A and B show. By the mid-first millennium B.C. they had converted it into a true alphabet, in which vowels as well as consonants are represented. The advantage of this is that one does not have to be fluent in the language, only in the sounds assigned to each letter, to understand what it sounds like. The disadvantage is that one has to use far more characters to represent a word than with the earlier logographic, syllabic, or consonantal sign sets. For example, the preceding sentence required 125 alphabetic characters. If I had used only the consonants and initial vowels it would have taken about 75 characters; if I had used a syllabary, 42 characters; if I had used logographs (excluding definite articles and verb tense and noun case markers), only 15. This may not seem important in this day of word-processors, but it would make a big difference if one had to engrave a long text on a stone monument!

Alphabetic scripts began to eclipse the Akkadian syllabary during the latter half of the first millennium B.C., and by the time of Alexander's conquest they had completely won the day. The last cuneiform texts were written around 200 B.C., in temples. After that, it was a lost language, forgotten and unreadable until the early 19th century adventurer Henry David Rawlinson copied, at great personal risk, the trilingual inscription at Behistun in Iran and Robert Koldewey deciphered its Akkadian text from the better known Old Persian cuneiform.

All of the alphabets in wide use today—Roman, Cyrillic, Arabic, Hebrew, Greek , Hindi—derive from the early alphabets developed on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean around 1700—1400 B.C. Each culture which received it adapted it to its own sound system, some more successfully than others. English, the most widely circulated written language in the world today, is not one of the more successful adaptations! Compared to Italian, for example, we have far too many silent letters, extra vowels, etc.

Now for the Japanese side of the story. Writing was introduced to Japan around the 5th century B.C. from China, which had had a well-developed logographic script for thousands of years (and still does, though streamlined by Mao into the *pinyin* system). The Japanese made some changes according to their preferences and to suit their language, which is unrelated to Chinese. But they have kept the system of logograms, called *Kanji*, to the present day. As with Sumerian, each *kanji* character stands for a word or idea, sometimes of one syllable, sometimes of several, and is derived from a pictograph. Japanese is well suited to a logographic system, because it is a highly agglutinative language (so is Sumerian!)—compound words are formed by combining existing characters. A well-schooled reader of Japanese today is expected to know a minimum of 1500 *kanji* characters.

Like Sumerian cuneiform, *kanji* was taught in academies and in the households of high-status men, but only to boys. Traditional Japanese society was just as sexist as Sumerian; girls in these households were not expected to be literate. But by the 12th century A.D., with increasing prosperity under the Tokugawa shoguns, many young women desired an education. They were easily able to overhear the lessons their brothers were receiving through the rice-paper walls, but they were barred from the lessons themselves. So they devised their own form of writing, a syllabary called *Hiragana*. Like Akkadian cuneiform, the individual signs, while possibly derived from *kanji*, do not carry meaning, only sound value. Also like Akkadian, *hiragana* affords a radical reduction in the number of characters to be learned, to only 109. *Hiragana* allows only two types of characters, V and CV; Japanese does not permit VC or CVC clusters, with the exception of final m or n, for which there is a separate *hiragana* character. In addition to the main vowels (a, e, i, o, and u) there is also a series of "y-glides" for most consonants. These are derived from the "e" version of the corresponding CV signs, with a mark (like the Sumerian *gunu*) added. The unvoiced consonants (g, z, d, b, and p) were similarly derived from their voiced equivalents (k, s, t, and h) by the addition of marks.

Hiragana proved extremely popular among women, and the first novel written in Japan, *The Tale of Genji*, was by a female author in this script. It is used today by both men and women for literature, for descriptive works, and also as a gloss on *kanji* characters to show grammatical particles—much like the glosses used by Sumerian and Akkadian scribes on Sumerian logograms. *Hiragana* characters tend to be cursive and flowing.

Not to be outdone, the all-male academies responded with a syllabic script of their own, *Katakana*, modeled exactly on the 109 *hiragana* characters. However, these characters are more angular in shape. They are used

today in business, commerce, advertising, and any situations in which Japanese interact with foreigners (*gaijin*). Moreover, the syllabic systems of *hiragana* and *katakana* began to assume symbolic importance: statues guarding the entrances of Buddhist temple complexes are depicted as fierce warriors, the one on the left with his mouth open voicing the first character in the syllabary, "a," the one on the right with his mouth closed voicing the last regular character, "n/m." This is similar to the Greek concept of the *alpha* and *omega*, representing the totality. It is also a variant on the Hindu/Buddhist sacred word AUM or OM.

Once Japan was opened to the West during the Meiji Restoration of the mid-19th century, the Japanese began to use the Roman alphabet, and Arabic numerals, in addition to their own scripts. This is referred to as *Romanji*, but it is almost exclusively used for foreign words, sometimes glossed by *katakana* characters. Signs on public accomodations such as train stations are written in *kanji* and *romanji* (the latter for the benefit of *gaijin*; as tourists we found this to be most useful!) Japanese children are taught *hiragana* and *katakana* first, and are then gradually introduced to the *kanji*. Walter Carroll of the Sociology Department has informed me that American G.I.s billeted in occupied Japan after World War II who wished to learn the local language could only find female tutors, and thus learned *hiragana* and the women's dialect. When they attempted to use this in the company of Japanese men it was, shall we say, a source of innocent merriment!

Most young Japanese are also now learning English as a second language for economic reasons, but they have not shown any signs of abandoning the syllabaries, or the logographic *kanji* which lie behind them. While in Japan, we were interviewed by several middle-school age children, who had been given the assignment to find some *gaijin* and ask them questions in English. We noticed that while the questions were all written in *romanji*, they recorded our answers in a mix of *romanji*, *hiragana*, and *kanji* (not *katakana*, as one might expect for an interaction with *gaijin*—but our interviewers *were* girls). We also saw an I-Book computer with *hiragana* characters as well as *romanji* on the keys—and we were told that the computer translates these into *kanji* when it displays them on the screen or in printout. Public billboards and advertisements in subway cars are often a bewildering (to us!) mix of all four scripts.

While the four stages I have described for Near Eastern scripts certainly do reflect the historical progression over a period of some 2500 years in that region, my experience in Japan has caused me to question its causality, as well as its inevitability. The Japanese have never quite adopted an alphabetic script, though literacy in Japan is as high as in any other modern industrialized country today.

This suggests that the move to alphabetic scripts was not necessarily an inevitable evolution, or even something which would have necessary social consequences such as the rise of democracy. In the Middle Eastern case, it is possible to argue that the successive conquests of the region by the Greeks and the Romans, and the subsequent domination of learning by the Christian

	a	e	i	o	u	ya	yi	yu
	あ	い	う	え	お			
k	か	き	く	け	こ	きゃ	きゅ	きょ
s	さ	し	す	せ	そ	しゃ	しゅ	しょ
t	た	ち	つ	て	と	ちゃ	ちゅ	ちょ
n	な	に	ぬ	ね	の	にゃ	にゅ	にょ
h	は	ひ	ふ	へ	ほ	ひゃ	ひゅ	ひょ
m	ま	み	む	め	も	みゃ	みゅ	みょ
y	や	(い)	ゆ	(え)	よ			
r	ら	り	る	れ	ろ	りゃ	りゅ	りょ
w	わ	(い)	(う)	(え)	を			
	ん	final n/m						
g	が	ぎ	ぐ	げ	ご	ぎゃ	ぎゅ	ぎょ
z	ざ	じ	ず	ぜ	ぞ	じゃ	じゅ	じょ
d	だ	ぢ	づ	で	ど			
b	ば	び	ぶ	べ	ぼ	びゃ	びゅ	びょ
p	ぱ	ぴ	ぷ	ぺ	ぽ	ぴゃ	ぴゅ	ぴょ

This table shows the Japanese *hiragana* script, the cursive variant of their syllabic form of writing.

Church, resulted in the elimination of all competitors. By contrast, Japan, an island nation, was literally insulated from unwanted foreign influences for a long time. After the initial conquest by the ethnic Japanese in the mid-second millennium B.C., it was not again successfully invaded until 1945. In the West, the alphabet was a standardized form which could be (and was, and still is) used as an instrument of tyranny and imperialism as readily as it is used as a tool to promote democracy. Think of the wide dissemination of *Mein Kampf* in pre-World War II Germany, for example. While democracies certainly do depend upon the dissemination of information through a free press, Japan has no difficulty maintaining its active democracy by means of its syllabic and logographic writing systems. Millions of Japanese inform themselves of current events every day by reading newspapers printed in a mix of all four scripts.

Nor is this the only example of a non-Western people adopting and maintaining a syllabic script in the face of outside domination. In the state of Kerala in southern India, which I visited during the summer of 2001, the conventional script of north India, *devanagari*, has made little headway against the local *Malayalam* syllabic script of about 900 characters. This is said by some to have derived from north Indian models, and by others from Aramaic (a script very similar to Hebrew) introduced early in the first millennium A.D., but neither of these scripts is syllabic. In recent times, the number of characters has been reduced to about 90 to accommodate computer keyboards. The Keralans have absorbed many of the customs, religion, and mythology of the northern Indo-Aryans, yet they gently but firmly maintain their cultural identity through state-wide annual ceremonies, language, and the use of the Malayalam script. We saw far more transcriptions of this cursive script into English than into Hindi in Kerala. Far from being a barrier to literacy, Malayalam is read by over 95% of the approximately 30 million residents of Kerala—the highest literacy rate of any state in India.

I have also learned of a syllabic script in use among the *Vai* people of northern Liberia. This was evidently devised during the first decades of the 19th century by a local religious mystic on the basis of a dream. It contains 175 V and CV characters and was first noted by missionaries accompanying freed African slaves from America to that portion of the African coast. It is still in use today, despite the dominance of English in the cities. I am told that it is a way of maintaining Vai cultural identity, as well as being a much better fit to their language than the Roman alphabet.

I want to close by mentioning two other more recently innovated syllabic scripts in use on the North American continent today. The first is Cherokee, or *Tsalagi*, an 85-character syllabary which was supposedly innovated by their chief Sequoia in the first decades of the 19th century. Some Native Cherokee informants maintain that Sequoia only modified a much more ancient system of writing, though there is little archaeological evidence of this (Not *none*: a lead Sumerian cuneiform tablet was found at the Hearn site in west Georgia in 1945. I have examined this site and found it to be of an age roughly equivalent to the date of ca 2050 B.C. on the tablet). Before the U.S. Army forced them to take the Trail of Tears away from their homelands, the Cherokee had established printing presses in southern Appalachia and were publishing books and newspapers in this script. It continues in use today among their communities, both in Oklahoma and in North Carolina. I have to wonder whether Tsalagi might have been the inspiration for the Vai script, since the prosperous Cherokee did keep (and sometimes manumitted) African slaves.

The second example is *Inuktituk*, a syllabic script introduced to the Inuit in northeastern Canada and Greenland by a late-19th century missionary. It has 59 characters, a mix of syllables and consonants, and is roughly based on Pittman shorthand. It is catching on in the newly autonomous Canadian region of Nunavat. Just as the Quebequois insist on French-English bilingualism in lower Canada, the Inuit are now publishing books in bilingual facing-page English and Inuktitut. Both Tsalagi and Inuktituk are used as a means of maintaining cultural identity, and learning them is a matter of pride for their young people. It may be one means by which these cultures achieve sustainability in the fast-paced 21st century.

In conclusion, syllabaries are alive and well, and some of them have successfully resisted the repeated attempts of alphabetic systems to colonize them. It may even be the case that the requirements for learning them sharpen the mind—I can certainly attest to that from my own learning curve for cuneiform! We should not hasten to declare them inferior to alphabetic systems, but instead we should try to understand them as effective alternatives to alphabetic imperialism.

—Curtiss Hoffman is Professor of Anthropology.