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Ídébé: *Preserving and Advancing the Igbo Language*

By Idenze Ezeme

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NDÉBÉ

Ndébé: Preserving and Advancing the Igbo Language

By Idenze Ezeme · Cultural Heritage · Ozikoro.com

Igbo is one of the major languages in Nigeria, but it has encountered several challenges over the years. Among these challenges are that fewer young people use the language and that there is no unified writing system that all users adhere to.

The old Nsibidi symbols are a source of cultural pride for the Igbo community. However, they are unsuitable for modern writing and cannot fully express the complex ideas needed today.

The Ndébé script is an innovative attempt to solve all these problems. This new, complete writing system has been designed with care to meet the special needs of the Igbo language. Ndébé makes it not just a good means of communication but an important tool in saving culture, ensuring that the rich history of the Igbo people is passed on to the next generations.

Without further ado, Let's examine the origin of Ndébé, its significance to modern Igbo society, and the revived need for many more individuals to contribute to language building and culture preservation.

Ndébé is a new indigenous script made for the Igbo language by Lotanna Igwe-Odunze. This new writing system links the rich culture of traditional African scripts with the needs of today's communication. Taking its cues from Igbo cultural symbols, Ndébé offers a new way that respects tradition yet is suitable for daily use.

Ndébé has a sound system that can represent all the sounds in the Igbo language. This makes it a good way to share ideas, feelings, and

stories that everyone who speaks Igbo can understand. With Ndébé, the beauty and importance of the Igbo language are kept and honoured, making it an important tool for communication in today's world.

Ndébé: A Revolutionary Writing System for the Igbo Language

Writing some languages using the Latin alphabet can be difficult because its 26 letters often aren't enough to represent all the sounds in those languages. Important elements like tones, nasal vowels, and certain consonants may be left out or written with awkward combinations of letters, like "gb," "ngg," or "ndl." This is a common issue for many languages in Sub-Saharan Africa, which have unique consonants and vowels. Choosing how to adapt the Latin alphabet for these languages has caused debates.

These challenges have inspired people to create new writing systems for their languages. Examples include Vai, Adlam, and N'ko. In the last 15 years, a new writing system has been developed for the Igbo language. Drawing inspiration for the name of the writing script from the Igbo word "ndebe," which means "writing," the writing script was named Ndébé.

Ndébé was first introduced in 2008–2009 by Lotanna Igwe-Odunze. Since then, it has been refined, tested, and improved to become what it is today. It has gained attention online and has been featured in blogs, African Digital Art, and other publications. These steps have helped increase its popularity and opened the door to its potential digital use.

While Ndébé is classified as a syllabary, it works more like an alpha-syllabary.

It can represent 1,174 syllables, far more than systems like Vai, which has just over 200 characters, or Japanese hiragana and katakana combined. This large number comes from the combinations of stems, radicals, and diacritics that make up each Ndébé character. However,

to become literate in Igbo using Ndébé, learners only need to understand 97 core symbols and their components, which are explained on its website.

Unlike many alpha-syllabaries where vowels by themselves are written with separate characters, Ndébé uses vowel diacritics that can also stand alone. These vowel markers indicate tone based on their position: the left is high tone, the middle is mid-tone, and the right is low tone. This system avoids adding extra symbols for tones by using the placement of the existing diacritics instead, making it a unique feature of the script.

Why Nsibidi Doesn't Meet Expectations

Nsibidi is a very important part of Igbo culture. It is a special writing system that mainly expresses abstract ideas and rituals instead of fully representing the language. This complicated script was not designed to deal with the complexities in today's language structures, such as tense, sentence structure, or large vocabulary. It was also used mainly by secret groups and special practices, making it very hard for most Igbo people to understand.

Modern languages require writing systems capable of expressing the small details of sounds, tones, and grammar. This will be vital in creating literature, education, and the use of technology. While Nsibidi has some limitations that make it hard to adapt, Ndébé offers a new approach that can address these challenges. This new way will help meet the changing communication needs of today's society.

Phonetic Representation: Ndébé has been carefully designed to represent the detailed sound features of the Igbo language. Its design considers tone changes and vowel harmony important for sharing meaning in Igbo. This clear representation helps make communication easier and helps people understand the complexities of the Igbo language better. It allows native speakers and learners to connect more deeply with the language.

Ease of Learning: The Ndebe script's clear and logical structure makes it easy to learn. This script matches well with the sounds of Igbo and helps learners who usually struggle with native scripts, thus making it easier for one to learn reading and writing the language. The careful design reduces learning difficulty and encourages more people to use the language.

Aesthetic Appeal: Ndebe draws from the fine traditional Igbo art and cultural patterns. The script is much more than a way of communication; it pays homage to Igbo culture, showing its artistic spirit and traditions. This beautiful aspect makes Ndebe unique and a cultural item appreciated for its art and usefulness.

Versatility: Ndebe, unlike the Nsibidi system, is so versatile that it can be applied in many different situations, such as formal and informal communication. It works well in books, public signs, online platforms, and language studies. The many uses of Ndebe make it appealing to different groups of people, thus showing how important it is as a modern tool for expressing and keeping the Igbo language and culture alive.

Cultural Preservation: In today's fast-globalising world, the Igbo language is at risk of being submerged by English and other widely spoken languages in Nigeria. With Ndebe, a writing system solely for the Igbo language, the Igbo people can reclaim and take pride in their rich linguistic heritage, ensuring that this important aspect of their culture is passed on to future generations. This modern script shows how special the Igbo language is, emphasising its value and role in a more connected world than ever.

Enhancing Language Identity: Language is a fundamental pillar of identity, deeply intertwined with cultural heritage and personal expression. The adoption of Ndebe would not only give new life to the Igbo language but also signal a strong resurgence in Igbo cultural pride. Such initiatives create meaningful bridges to ancestral traditions, enabling individuals to return to their roots while addressing modern communication needs.

Promotion of Education: Including Ndebe in school programs is a great avenue to get the youths involved in the Igbo language. A well-defined writing system designed for the unique sounds and patterns of Igbo would enhance the way students learn about the language, making it more enjoyable and efficient. It will make the students appreciate their language heritage and develop a deeper appreciation for their culture.

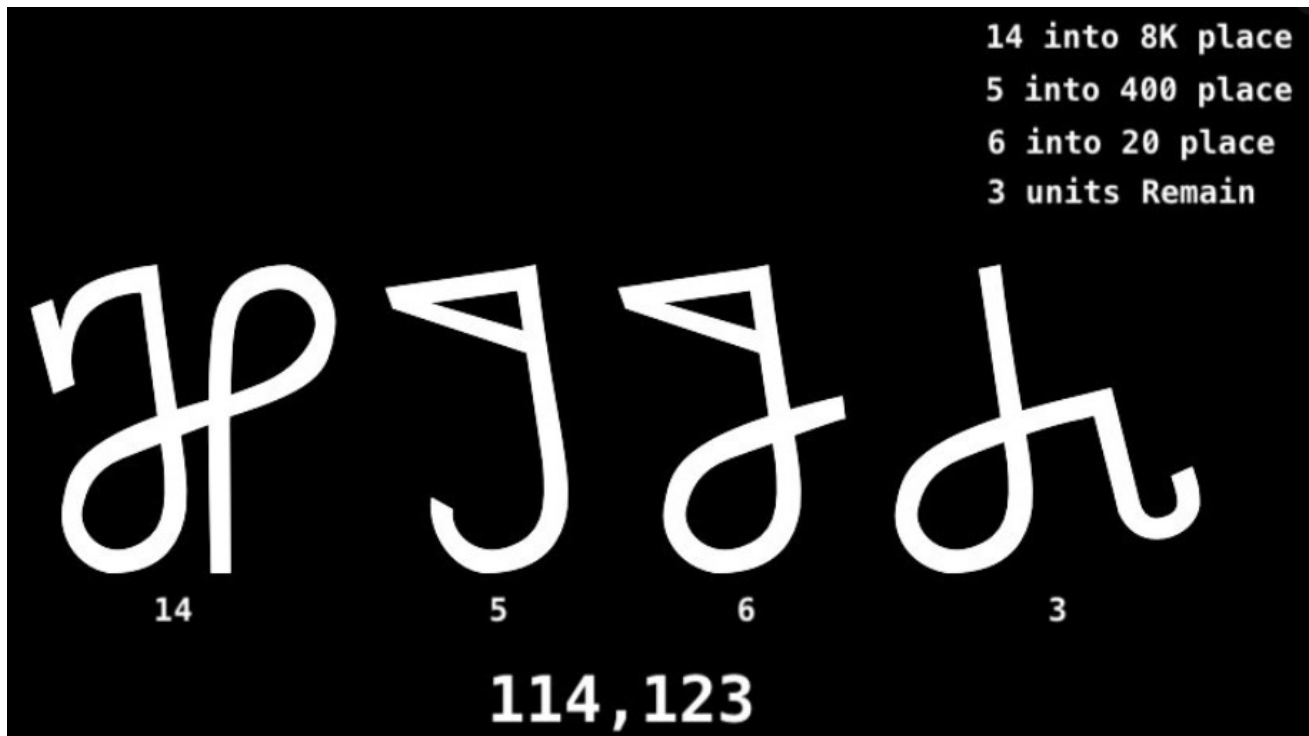
Increased Use of Technology: With more digital communication today, modern scripts like Ndebe are important for the future of the Igbo language in technology. When Ndebe is made to work with software, apps, and digital keyboards, it will easily fit into the daily lives of Igbo speakers anywhere. This connection would make communication easier and improve the status of the Igbo language in digital forms.

Bridging the Gap Between Past and Future: Ndebe respects and builds upon traditional scripts like Nsibidi to create a detailed connection between past and future. This two-sided approach respects the cultural heritage of the Igbo people while offering something useful for today's needs. The Igbo community can use Ndebe to ensure their rich history and traditions are kept and will grow with new developments in today's world.

Let's write 114,123 in Ndebe Script step by step:

- First, we see how many 8,000s fit into 114,123. When we divide, we get 14 with some left over. So, we put 14 in the 8,000 spot.
- Now, we look at what's left: 2,123. Let's see how many 400s fit into that. We get 5, with a little left over. So, we put 5 in the 400 spot.
- Next, we take what's left: 123. Let's see how many 20s fit into that. We get 6, with just a tiny bit left. So, we put 6 in the 20 spot.
- Finally, what's left is 3. That's the number of ones, so we put 3 in the unit spot.

So, 114,123 becomes: 14 (8,000s), 5 (400s), 6 (20s), and 3 (ones).

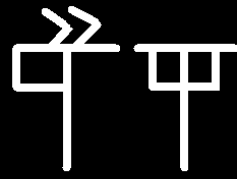


Breaking down 114,123 in Ndébé Script / X – NdebeScript

Ndébé Script: Capturing Igbo Sounds and Counting Systems

The consonant shapes in Ndébé are designed using a grid system. This grid shows which stem and radical combine to form a consonant, such as /s ~ sh/. Some consonant shapes can represent different sounds, like /s ~ t/ or /f ~ p/. This helps include sounds that are used interchangeably in the Igbo language, making the writing system flexible enough to cover all Igbo sounds. Many scripts have a similar feature. For example, in Tamil, the character ?? can represent several sounds like /k/, /g/, /x/, /ɣ/, /h/, or /ɦ/. This flexibility in Ndébé might also help represent differences in how words are pronounced across Igbo’s 20+ dialects.

Igbo has two counting systems: one based on 10, like in English, and another based on 20, similar to systems used in Yoruba and Mayan languages. The Ndébé script reflects this with unique characters for 10 and 20. Numbers are written with special markers, like vowel diacritics, placed on top of a base numeral to show values such as “50” or “2000.”



The number “2020” in Ndébé, using the base-20 character for 20.

Despite the benefits of adopting Ndébé, some tough challenges stand in the way of its general acceptance:

Awareness: Many Igbo speakers know little about Ndébé and how it can change their community. It is important to start a strong awareness campaign to address this issue. This campaign should clearly explain the benefits of Ndebe, encouraging speakers to feel a sense of ownership and excitement about it.

Standardisation: For Ndébé to become popular and work well, it needs a complete standardisation process and support from important language and culture organisations. Such a framework will help unify the various interpretations and applications of Ndebe, ensuring consistency and reliability in its use across different contexts.

Integration into Curricula: If Ndébé is to be used by people in the long run, then it has to be integrated into the curricula of schools and universities. By making Ndébé one of the subjects taught in school, future Igbo speakers will be better prepared to understand and use this language.

Technological Support: Any transition towards a digital world requires the development of unique tools to assist people in accessing Ndébé. Font developers must design user-friendly fonts while developing new keyboard layouts so that Ndebe learners can interact with them comfortably through the internet. This way, Ndebe’s importance will not vanish from the face of modern society.

Ndébé is an important step forward in restoring the Igbo language. It offers a new way to write it that overcomes the limitations of traditional Nsibidi symbols. This modern approach can improve Igbo literacy and education. It changes how Igbo is written, enhances teaching methods, and helps change how people view the language.

The Igbo people need to adopt this new writing system now. By embracing Ndebe, they can preserve a key part of their cultural heritage. This change will help them grow linguistically and culturally in today's fast-paced world. It will keep the language alive and make it more relevant and useful in modern society. This way, the Igbo identity can continue to thrive for future generations.

You can watch a basic tutorial on the Ndébé script here:

- Channels Television. (2020, October 3). The Igbo language gets its own modern script—but will it matter?
- Ndebe. (n.d.). Official site of the Ndebe script. via ndebe.org
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Nze is an Igbo history and culture enthusiast with an in-depth passion for exploring the rich cultural heritage, traditions, and historical narratives of the Igbo people. His works is mostly focused on pre-colonial Igbo societies, traditional belief systems, leadership systems, and the impact of European colonialism.



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