

The *Guide* is published by the Athlone Press, University of London, for the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, and costs 21s.

New Alphabetic Confusions in Africa

In an article, 'Comment écrire les langues africaines? Nécessité d'un humanisme africain',¹ M. Houis begins by stressing the necessity for Africans to study their own languages and cultures and thus preserve an African 'humanism'. Up till now, he says, African publications in A.E.F. and A.O.F. have had no wide appeal, because their lack of culture policy prevented them from being integrated into a long-term programme of humanism. From this we reach the conclusion that no writing is possible without a proper alphabet, and he goes on to compare what he calls the 'English system' (which appears to be his name for the 'Africa' alphabet) with the French alphabetic system.

He turns down the former, because it imposes on students certain graphic habits different from the notations they are used to from their primary classes; also certain official habits, but none the less general, are already in use in French territories, and it is important to make a 'pratique' of these habits. Elsewhere he tells us that the 'English system' has served its professed purpose in the framework of British imperial cultural policy (such as teaching children to read and write in the mother tongue before proceeding to English for their real cultural studies); but were it to be introduced into the French sphere, it would encounter, besides a number of practical obstacles, certain criticisms, the main one being the impossibility for the system to ensure a genuine humanistic development within the scope of the policy that has apparently inspired it. (Evidently we are to conclude that no present Hausa literature is humanistic.)

The French system as it stands he also turns down because of its etymological heritage, which would have no meaning in languages with a mere oral tradition. It can, however, be modified and systematized according to the principle of confining oneself to the Latin alphabet ('new letters' too are rejected for the sake of universality and simplicity), and relegating one phoneme to one letter or group of letters.

The alphabet which finally emerges and which has apparently had a favourable reception in French circles, is thus a simplified French alphabet, with an all-Latin list of symbols plus three diacritics (one quite new l); its phonetic interpretation differs from that of the 'Africa' alphabet in the following aspects.

'é' and 'ø' represent close varieties of 'e' and 'o' (it is admitted that this may interfere with tone marking where 'é' is concerned);

'œ' is a central vowel;

(One is glad to notice that M. Houis proposes 'u' and 'ü' for French 'ou' and 'u').
'in', 'én', 'en', 'an', 'on', 'øn', 'un' are all nasalized vowels. (No clue is given here as to how to spell words ending with *consonant* 'n' though elsewhere M. Houis has recommended 'ne' and 'nn' according as the sound is final or pre-consonantal in a word.)

'ch' and 'j' are to be pronounced as in 'chapeau' and 'jeu';

'tch' and 'dj' represent the corresponding affricates;

'gn' as in 'épargne';

'ng' as in English 'long' (no clue for the sounds in 'longer');

'kh' and 'gh' represent velar fricatives ('x' is not used at all);

'rh' represents the uvular rolled sound;

(This indiscriminate use of 'h' would certainly not be helpful in the writing of South African or Nyasaland languages, where aspiration is an important factor.)

'B' and 'D' and 'Y' represent the *implosive* sounds as against 'b' and 'd' and 'y' for

¹ *Présence africaine*, déc. 1957-jan. 1958, pp. 76-92.

the *explosive* sounds. (How the author expects writers to maintain this distinction when writing or printing in capitals is again not made clear.)

We seem to be entering now a period of imposed alphabets by the metropolitan powers, each power being influenced by its own orthographic usage of the Latin alphabet. Thus in East Africa the Swahili alphabet (based on the principle 'vowels as in Italian, consonants as in English') is the vehicle for transcribing non-Bantu languages such as Luo and Nandi, and attempts to introduce 'Africa' conventions that conflict with this usage have been strongly resisted except in the Sudan and Uganda; in Kenya the Standing Committee on Geographical Names prescribes Swahili spelling for all vernacular place-names, while in the Belgian Congo and Portuguese Guinea different codes are officially recognized for this purpose—though in the Congo the 'Africa' system plays an increasingly important part in vernacular literature; now M. Houis enters the arena with his own French-biased system. (Thus, to take an extreme case, the sound for which the 'Africa' alphabet prescribes 'c' is to be written 'c' in Uganda, 'ch' in Kenya, 'tsh' in Belgian Congo, 'tx' in Portuguese Guinea, and presumably 'tch' in French Africa. We await with interest the Spanish and Italian contributions to the medley.) This divergence, be it noted, concerns the ordinary letters of the Latin alphabet; even in this field (quite apart from the question of 'new letters') the co-ordinating work of the International African Institute is being undone, and we find ourselves back to the confusions of 1926. Meanwhile the 'Africa' alphabet, the only truly international one, still functions as a guide to missionaries and research workers all over Africa, and it is surely not too late now for this fact to be taken into account at official levels.

A. N. T.

Second Annual Congress of the Historical Society of Nigeria

THE second annual congress of the Historical Society of Nigeria was held at Ibadan on 17 and 18 December 1957. The society, which was founded three years ago, aims to promote interest in and to study the history of Nigeria, to encourage research by members and to improve the standards of history teaching in Nigeria. Membership now exceeds 350 and it is hoped that the target of 500 will soon be reached. Groups of historians have been meeting regularly in Zaria and Enugu during the past year.

Professor K. O. Diké presided over most of the sessions and the congress was opened with an illustrated lecture on 'Swords and Armour of Muslim Nigeria' by Mr. A. D. H. Bivar, Government Archaeologist working in the Museum at Jos. Other papers were: 'Written descriptions of the Niger's eastern delta by travellers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries', by Dr. A. F. C. Ryder; 'Contribution to the study of the origins of the Fulani jihad in Northern Nigeria', by Captain M. Hiskett of the Kano School for Arabic Studies; 'The origins of the craft guilds of Bida', by Mr. H. O. H. Vernon-Jackson, Provincial Education Officer, Bornu; 'The establishment of British administration in the Urhobo country', by Mr. A. Salubi, Assistant Commissioner of Labour, Ibadan; 'Early British expansion on the Benue, 1830-1900', by Mr. A. H. M. Kirk-Greene of the School of Administration, Zaria; 'The age of Ewuare: a history of Benin from the mid-fifteenth to the mid-sixteenth century', by Mr. O. I. Afe of the Western Region Ministry of Finance. The congress closed with papers and reports on the schemes of historical research now in hand. These were given by Mr. P. Morton-Williams of the Yoruba Historical Research Scheme, who also spoke on 'Research into Yoruba traditions at Oyo'. Dr. Ryder of the History Department of the University College also added a note on the progress of the Benin Research Scheme; he is now preparing to study the European archives. During the congress the College's Deputy Librarian, Mr. J. Packman, formerly Librarian to the Royal Empire Society, arranged an exhibition of historical documents in the well stocked room of Africana.