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THE ENDANGERED LANGUAGE BLOG

Sources for Learning About Endangered Writing Systems

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Hello everyone!

Over the last few months, I've come across some great websites on the endangered writing systems of the world. Just as minority languages are marginalized by global superpower languages – English, Mandarin, Spanish, Arabic, etc. – minority writing systems struggle for prominence over dominant scripts such as the Latin alphabet, Chinese characters, Cyrillic, and more. A shift to a script with greater prominence could put indigenous writing systems at risk. Additionally, in recent years, speakers of certain endangered languages have crafted new scripts to better represent their language and culture than a script imposed by a former colonizer. These young scripts often face a battle for legitimacy over a dominant script that has been in use for a longer time (see the fight for use of the N'Ko alphabet over the Latin and Arabic scripts used for writing Mande).

Linguists and language enthusiasts alike have put together a number of resources on these scripts, making information on their history and use accessible. This post is dedicated to two unique sources that I think are very user-friendly and perfect for sparking your curiosity in the world's great variety of scripts!













The World's Writing Systems

I cannot explain how excited I was when I somehow stumbled upon this site. Three screenshots are not enough to convey how cool it is, but I'll try to explain it in a nutshell, and then I strongly encourage you to go click around on it yourself.

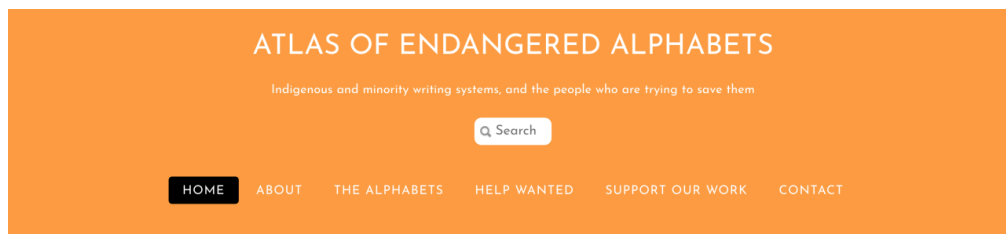
The World's Writing Systems is simple and aesthetically-pleasing: one glyph from every writing system in the world is shown. Clicking on a glyph reveals its region/time of origin and some links to learn more about the script.

The images below show three of the five ways you can organize the list: grouped by region, from oldest to most recently developed script, or alphabetically.

The one-glyph-per-script design is visually appealing and puts the writing system at the forefront. The website is part of a larger initiative called the Missing Scripts Project. The goal of the project is to identify which writing systems have not yet been made Unicode compatible. In the simplest terms, Unicode is a worldwide standard for encoding the world's writing systems into computer-compatible text. Unicode is updated with new versions every few years and new scripts have been added over time; the latest update (March 2019) included support for Wancho, a script used to write the Wancho language of north-eastern India, and Nyiakeng Puachue Hmong, used to write several dialects of the Hmong language of China. However, there are still 146 scripts that have not yet been encoded. You can learn more about the project and the people who developed the website from this video.

TIME	REGION	NAME	UNICODE	STATUS
AFRICA				
				
		ADLAM AFRICA 1980s — today		
				
		BA (FULA 2) AFRICA 1981 — today		
				
		BAGAM AFRICA 1910 — late 30 c		
				
		BAMUM AFRICA 1896 — today		
				
		BASSA VAH AFRICA 1907 — today		
				
		BERIA AFRICA 1980s — today		
				
		BORAMA AFRICA 1981 — today?		
				
		BÉTÉ AFRICA 1990s — today		
				
		DEMOTIC AFRICA -600 — 6 c		
				
		EGYPTIAN HIEROGLYPHS AFRICA -30 c — 1 c		
				
		ETHIOPIIC AFRICA -4 c — today		
				
		FULA DITA (FULA 1) AFRICA 1998 — today		

Atlas of Endangered Alphabets



If something is important, we write it down. Yet 85% of the world's writing systems are on the verge of vanishing — not granted official status, not taught in schools, discouraged and dismissed.

When a culture is forced to abandon its traditional script, everything it has written for hundreds of years — sacred texts, poems, personal correspondence, legal documents, the collective experience, wisdom and identity of a people — is lost.

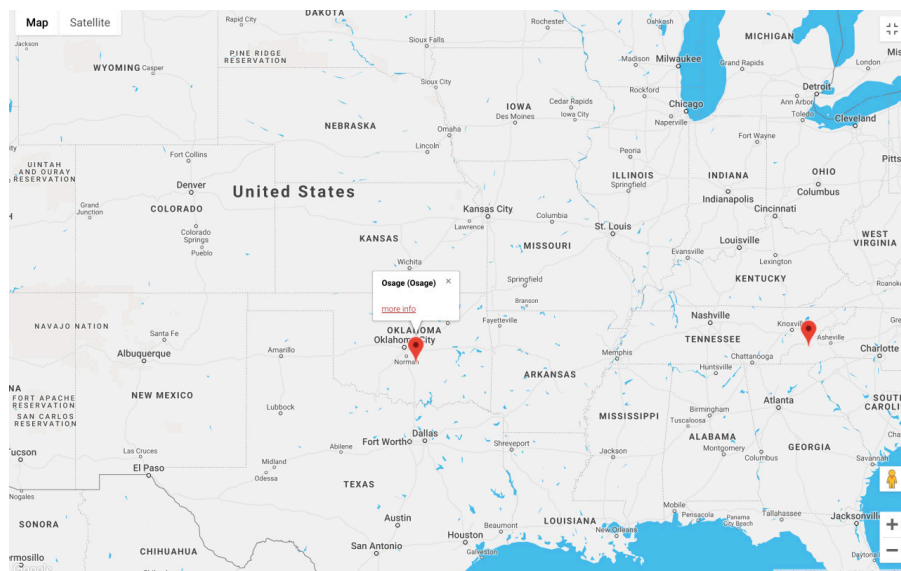
This Atlas is about those writing systems, and the people who are trying to save them.



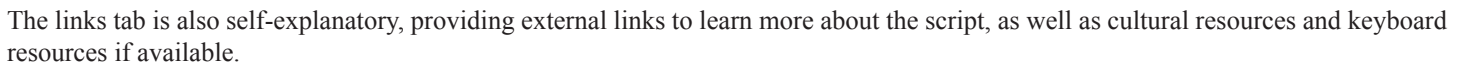
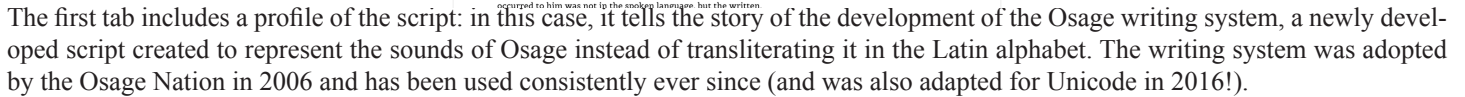
While the previous resource is inclusive of all the world's writing systems past and present, this next resource is exclusively dedicated to currently endangered writing systems. The Atlas of Endangered Alphabets is a great resource spawned from the larger Endangered Alphabets Project, a Vermont-based nonprofit. The project is the brainchild of Tim Brookes, a writer who began creating beautiful wood carvings of endangered writing systems in 2010. I've been reading Brookes' book *Endangered Alphabets: An Essay on Writing*; the book is more of a personal overview of Brookes' journey of how he got into carving endangered writing systems, and how his interest in carving grew into a larger passion for researching the scripts. Inevitably, this passion led to the creation of an interactive atlas for mapping out the world's endangered scripts.

The atlas isn't just pins on a map by any means. There is so much information to be discovered by clicking on every pin, I'm impressed with how much care and detail went into providing resources and images for every writing system. Let me demonstrate with the entry for Osage, the script for the language of the Osage people of Oklahoma.

Here's its pin on the map, pretty self-explanatory. Clicking on the "more info" link brings you to the script's very-own page.



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The gallery tab provides some real life examples of the scripts being used in signs, classrooms, and artwork. Together with the profile tab, this really creates a warm, personal vibe to learning about the scripts and the people who support their use.

