



An Ethnography of Literacy

in a Vai Town

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## PREFACE

This is the first in a series of reports on literacy-without-schooling among the Vai people in northwestern Liberia. Since 1973 a group of us, trained in various disciplines -- psychology, anthropology, psycholinguistics -- have been studying the social context of literacy practices in this traditional society, and the intellectual skills these activities entail. We were drawn together by our common interest in providing some empirical test for the speculation that people possessing a written language develop ways of learning and thinking that are unavailable to individuals living in an entirely oral culture. The argument that literacy makes a difference to ways of thinking has obvious, yet profound, scientific and social policy implications. But the fact that in most nations of the world literacy is correlated with schooling, age, and special status has placed great obstacles in the way of testing theories about its unique cognitive consequences.

We first learned of an indigenous, unschooled literacy among the Vai people during the course of prior research in Liberia. Excited by what appeared to be favorable circumstances for investigating the "cognitive consequences" question, we made a brief trip to Grand Cape Mount County, Liberian home of the Vai, in January 1973. There we met rice farmers and craftsmen who were literate in the indigenous syllabic script -- and others who were literate in Arabic or English as well. This

Arabic learning and Islamic scholarly activities, and the way in which these intellectual pursuits articulate with the practical demands of Vai society, its traditions, values and beliefs. Smith's last field trip, covering a fifteen month residence in Diyah, will culminate in a full ethnography of the Vai.

The present report focuses on several closely related questions. What uses are made of the technology of writing in a society lacking other complex technologies? What brings people to undertake the effort of learning how to read and write when literacy has no obvious consequences for "upward occupational mobility?"

Information bearing on these questions was secured, in part, by means of a structured interview schedule, developed for use in a survey study in a number of Vai towns. Formal interviewing is certainly not a familiar form of conversational exchange in Vai villages. For this reason, many social scientists doubt it possible to secure trustworthy and "true" information about the experiences and attitudes of traditional people through this technique. Because this problem of method interested Michael Smith, he has laid out for us the way in which knowledge gained through his observations and naturally-occurring conversations confirmed or disconfirmed the interview schedule data.

In addition to probing the meaning of literacy among the Vai, this report tells us a great deal about their living conditions and aspirations. But its story goes beyond the Vai. It is an interesting and sobering fact that in spite of

## Vai Country

The Vai people live in a small coastal area in western Liberia and eastern Sierra Leone. Vai country lies almost completely in the coastal belt of gently undulating low plains, which rarely rise above 50' above sea level, extending 20-25 miles inland. As you go further inland, the plains change slowly to rolling hills aligned parallel to the coastal plains;- these hills rise to barely 300' and are interspersed with wide and rather shallow valleys and numerous watercourses. Coastal sands- heavily leached, poor in plant food and infertile, form a belt extending up to 10 miles inland. About the only useful plant one can grow here is the coconut palm, although the mangrove swamps and bogs, if drained, can be used for the production of rice. Further inland, lateritic soils exclusively occur, except for rich alluvium in the river beds. The laterosols are of low to medium fertility and subject to erosion and run-off due to the formation of hard iron-oxider pans in the subsoil. As von Gnielinski (1972) observes,<sup>1</sup> open cultivated crops can be produced successfully, provided one has the money to apply lime and fertilizers.

"Slash and burn" cultivation has been intensive in the coastal area, with the result that only in the northern part of Vai country are there any extensive stands of primary forest. Owing to repeated cultivation in the secondary forest areas, fertility there is lower than inland, and gradually decreasing. Rainfall is heavy - 160 ins. a year (4064 mm.), most of it in the wet season, from May to September. Temperatures average 75-80°F (24-27°C), which, coupled with the high humidity, reaching 90-100% in the rainy season, discourage strenuous activity of any kind.

The landmarks of Vai country are Lake Piso, a large (6 x 4 mls.) body of freshwater fed by a host of small streams, many navigable by canoe, - and Cape Mount, a 1000 ft high promontory which lies at the end of the long, thin peninsula separating Lake Piso from the Atlantic. Cape Mount has been a landmark to sailors for centuries and was inhabited when visited by the first travellers

Vai are not a numerous people, by comparison with the largest Liberian tribe, the Kpelle (211,000 members), and the total Liberian population (1,016,443). Few employment opportunities exist within Cape Mount County. There is an iron ore mine, an oil-palm plantation, and a few experimental rice plantations and small stores. Of the Vai want employment outside of their farms, they must travel outside of Cape Mount to Monrovia, one of the large rubber plantations or to an iron ore concession. Many, as we shall see, do engage in such cash labor at some time in their adult lives.

for the younger teenagers after dusk. The town people say that a sister cannon lies buried in the undergrowth to the south-west of the town. Along the main street are other seats made of bamboo lashed together. Of a fine evening practically the whole population can be found sitting here or strolling up and down. Many of the living rooms open on to the street and here people gather for cards, to dance to a battery-powered record player or to smoke.

Before the time of roads, one had to travel to Robertsport by canoe down the river and across Lake Piso, often a dangerous undertaking - especially during the stormy period at the beginning of the rainy season. It took two days to travel each way. In old times Gɔŋ acted as a station on an important trade-route by which fibres, palm kernels, coffee and slaves were taken to the coast.

In present-day Gɔŋ, the architecture is much as one finds it elsewhere in Vai country, or for that matter, throughout Liberia and Sierra Leone. There are two exceptions - a "modern" concrete bungalow which has its own generator shed and is uninhabited (it belongs to a well-to-do taxi owner/driver); and a religious meeting-hall under construction in the main street. Generally, the living quarters are rectilinear, often square - though elaborations occur as passageways, entrances and verandahs; and are constructed of a wooden frame with mud and wattle infill, mud brick recently, or the residue of old termite nests hardened with concrete. The mud will either be cemented over or whitewashed, often using two colours - white clay dug from the river valleys, and brown mud, the latter usually occupying the lower half of the wall. Some windows are glazed and all have shutters, some gaily painted, some bare. Occasionally the frames are delicately carved and the window-spaces filled in by a lattice pattern of wooden strips. Some houses have Arabic inscriptions on the walls. Practically everyone has the opening sentence of al-Fatihah, the first chapter of the Qur'an, chalked or inked over the lintel of the front door, while on the inside just above it hangs a talisman - a Qur'anic scripture bound up in a little packet. All dwellings are roofed with corrugated iron or, recently, corrugated zinc. Once up a few years they turn a uniform rust colour. Water off the roofs is collected in gutters and fed into old 50-gallon petrol drums for storage.

western side of the town fenced around with a high palisade, whose buildings inside are of wooden construction with thatched roofs. No males may enter, except those connected with the society. It has its own access to the forest, so that the initiates may come and go unobserved.

There are three palaver (discussion) houses in Gɔɔ, each owned by a prominent citizen. Kitchens are usually separate structures and even where they are under the same roof as the sleeping rooms, it is always as an annex. Most kitchens consist of an inner chamber, where wood and possibly food is stored, and an outer roofed cooking area open at the sides. Household lavatories, a concrete or mud shed, are located some yards away from the living and cooking area usually at the edge of the forest clearing. Many have two compartments - for men and women - and some even have a concrete floor with a drain hole - as a washroom; - but more usually the washing area is a spherical fence of logs between the kitchen and the latrine, its entrance facing towards the forest. One also sees enclosures for chickens and goats, areas where okra or cassava are grown, fenced in to keep out the chickens. Lastly the village has four graves - rectangles of low concrete walls filled in with earth. Important chiefs, well-loved relatives and usually the founder of the town are honoured with burial within the confines of the settlement. The other townspeople find their rest in the town cemetery situated a couple of hundred yards outside in the forest.

It is appropriate at this point to discuss what is meant by a Vai "clan". The Vai "clan", and the whole structure of Vai society, is based on the principle of consanguineal kinship in the male line. Yet, based though it may be on this principle, it is but partially realised from it, since common residence is also a factor; and residence may be determined by affinal connections (that is, connections through one's spouse). The whole subject is very complex, since the present political "clans" consist of all those people who happen to live in a certain area; - in the present Zodua



and the empty houses for 4. Although we obtained most of the literates' names at the beginning - the final count numbered 24 people in 18 households - a few people admitted to knowing a script in the course of the interviews. This, together with the limited time available to us, prevented us from surveying exactly the same number of literate and non-literate households. Of the 23 non-literate households, fifteen were surveyed, compared with the 19 houses that comprise the literate sample.

In all, 75 subjects were interviewed for Part 1 of the questionnaire. The original goal of interviewing all adults (those over 16) in an equal number of literate and non-literate households, was tailored to meet the reduced time available. Two or three adults from each house were interviewed and in the houses where there were several literates, at least one non-literate member of the same household. In most cases, a man and his wife (wives) or child(ren) were interviewed; also one sister's daughter; and in two cases - both young men - the relationship to the household head is unclear.

In this analysis a "household" consists of a man and such of his relatives, by blood and marriage or his dependents, friends or tenants who normally live in the house(s) owned by the man. By no means are household heads always men - four women have their own house (Hos.2,3,28,39). Two live alone - both being in their fifties and having been married several times - one lady is childless while the other's children have grown up. The third woman is of the same age, like wise married but childless, and looks after three small children - sister's children's, I think. The fourth female household head is a younger woman of 38, who lives with her younger sister and their four children, while her husband shares his house with his senior wife in another part of the town.

Taking the sample as a whole, just over half the households (18 out of 34) consist of the household head, his spouse(s) children and grandchildren.

how to treat the 16 students of Alihaji Sherif, the Koranic teacher; a few are fluent in the Arabic script, and in time they will form the future educated Muslims of Vai country. Many will combine an Islamic with an American-English education, since more and more parents are persuaded of the advantages of this, providing they can afford it.

᠘᠔᠗ is divided into several "quarters". A "quarter" is an historically separate settlement on the same site as an earlier one, perhaps by members of the same clan. Settlement may require permission of the other quarters, or not;- whatever the circumstances, the importance of a quarter is its separateness, and that its ownership is usually handed down on the male line from the founder. Inhabitants of a quarter are often closely related to each other being children, sibling's children or siblings of the "owner"; - although in many cases the settlement is old enough for the exact relationships to have been forgotten and for the inhabitants to address each other as "father/mother" or brother/sister" depending on the age relationships involved (the former term is used for unspecified paternal/maternal relatives of senior generation, the latter for those of ego's own generation). The status of an "owner" is considerable, for he is by definition a senior resident of the town, and a senior member of the clan. Becoming an "owner" of a quarter means enhancing the already considerable prestige and authority one enjoys;- it does not denote literal 'ownership', in the sense of that word in English, of all the houses in the quarter. Our three "owners" claimed to possess only 6 houses between them. "Ownership" attaches to the authority implicit in the holder's succession from the founder who made the original and therefore special settlement. In no sense is it an office like that of Town Chief, nor is it often referred to, as its incumbents are well enough known by their other statuses.

᠘᠔᠗ Zodua is of course an overwhelmingly Zodua town - 51 of our respondents were born in ᠘᠔᠗ itself and, of the remaining 23 (one response was not recorded) 9 had at least one Zodua parent and a further 13 had at least one Vai parent.

continues. Vaanii's younger full sister is married to the blacksmith and a half-sister is married to Clan Chief Sondifu Kiazolu at Zaave.

There are two sets of brothers whom I always think of together. First Kaamɔ and Mana Kafi Zodua who are mother's brother's sons to old Vaanii; aged 53 and 52, they both are literate in Vai script and Arabic and live next door to each other on the western side of the main street. Secondly, Boima and Fole Sɛmbɛ, both in their late 50's, are sister's sons of Boima John;- both are thin, frail-looking men, but while Fole is a hunter and farmer and knows Vai script, Boima is the imami (Muslim priest) for the town and a Muslim doctor as well as a farmer. He is literate in Vai and Arabic.

Finally, there are men who have made Gɔɔ their recent home. Alihaji Boakai Sherif came three years ago at the invitation of Mana Kafi and Aama Zodua (the younger) his former students, and Chief Lahai acts as his "stranger father" (legal guardian) in the town. Boima Kroma has been here six years with his wife Sata Zodua, who was born in Gɔɔ. Bai Bombo Senwa has settled next door to his wife's brothers, the Kafis, and M.G. Sandemani is a prominent figure in the town; a short, plump man with a worried smile behind thick glasses, he is the only older man who has been to school (he graduated from the Grammar School in Freetown) and who can read and write all the scripts in use in Vai country. When not farming he looks after the family estate, which includes houses in Bomi Hills and Monrovia. His brother Mɔmɔ Bala(not in the survey) lives here, as does Mɔmɔ's son Boima Sandemani. In general, we found that Vai-only literates are very solidly located within Vai country and culture. By no means do they stay at home all their lives; Chief Haamɔ has been to Lagos during a brief period when he served as a deckhand on an Italian cargo-boat in President King's time (1920-30); Vaanii Zodua worked from 1928 to 31 for

Continuing with the subject of travel, 48% (35/73) of our informants have spent their lives in Cape Mount, Lofa and the western part of Montserrado Counties, - including Monrovia. The concessions and mines have been visited by another 16 people, which means that altogether 72.6% of our sample population have travelled only on the routes of heaviest population movement in Liberia. Usually they go to visit relations, to go shopping or to work. Sometimes women go with their husbands who live at these places; sometimes it's young people simply travelling around, "to see the area" for similar reasons as their counterparts hitch about Europe and the U.S. The journeys farther afield are rather special; of the four Vai-and-Arabic literates who went to Sierra Leone, one went for Qur'anic instruction - the others went on various temporary business. One of the Arabic-only literates went with his Qur'anic teacher to Freetown for a few days; while three women went to visit relatives in the eastern part of Sierra Leone. Mole Kaan said he went to Kenema for seven months "to reestablish my family line" but did not elaborate on this description. Sierra Leone, particularly the nearer part of it, is closer geographically and culturally than, say, Firestone or Monrovia but going to "British" as it is often called, is quite an undertaking, since it involves crossing through the police posts and living in a state whose atmosphere is quite different from that of Liberia.

Some spectacular journeys have been undertaken - Chief Haamɔ sailed as a deckhand on an Italian freighter in the West African coastal trade for six months and travelled as far as Lagos; M.G. Sandemani toured the then Belgian Congo for two months with his paternal uncle; Bendu Zodua, the only woman literate in Gɔŋ, spent nine months in Bamako, the capital of Mali, visiting her second husband's mother, and Alihaji Sherif has, as his title indicates, made the hajj (pilgrimage) to Mecca.

To find out about local movement, we asked about the last time that respondents had left Gɔŋ. 77% of people had been on a trip within the last month, all but two of them to country towns

We further pursued the general area of work by inquiring into people's ambitions for their children. Two questions were asked together;- "What kind of work do you think your children will do?" and "What kind of work would you like your children to do?" in respect of both boys and girls. It was quickly discovered that the "think" question was interpreted as "would like", since, on being asked what they would like, respondents usually replied, "But you just asked me that!" So we changed the order and asked "would like" first, making a point of explaining that, for the second question, we were interested in what you thought your girl or boy would end up doing. A number of people said they had no children and others failed to answer. Some gave double answers ("nurse and marketing") and triple answers ("carpenter, mechanic, doctor" etc.). Several people who have grown-up children simply told me what their sons and daughters were doing. Sometimes long replies were offered and as an example of the problems of reporting the complexities of a survey, I quote Paramount Chief Lahai Siim explaining why he finds it difficult to answer the two questions separately; "I would like them (my sons) to do what I plan for them - masonry for Boakai, carpentry for Momo; - to become educated, after that you'll think of work. What you plan for your child and what they do for themselves are often different. For example, I told Boakai I wanted him to be a mason and he learned to be an electrician. He got part way through and found that what I'd suggested was the best plan. So he learnt to be a mason and now that's how he earns his living".

A large proportion of respondents (47%) wanted their daughters to take up "traditional" occupation open to women (marriage and farming) and country training in the Sande bush that leads to it. 15% chose "transitional" activities like marketing (street-selling) or tailoring, while 28% chose "modern" careers in medicine, office work or teaching. Fourteen men and 11 women felt that their daughters should remain in "traditional" activities, but only 4 men and 11 women chose a "modern" career. Similarly,

In some ways, the information that we have collected on Part I of the questionnaire is a little eclectic for an ethnographic account, and does not easily fit together into a readable narrative. We were not directly interested in kinship data or agriculture, for example, except in so far as these form a background to the cognitive and literacy studies. What is not covered here is to be found in Holsoe's ethnography (1967). The following analyses are to be found here, not so much because they are in logical order, but because they do indicate more broad difference between literates and non-literates in Vai society.

Everyone in Gɔɔ speaks fluent Vai- it being the first language of all informants, except one woman who was born in De country and some Mende refugees who were not in the survey.

Nearly half the surveyed population (47%) speak only Vai. This includes two-thirds of the women and five of the seven Vai-only literates-another indication of how firmly located are the latter in Vai society, physically, intellectually and socially. Not many people speak fluent English - possibly about five or six in the whole town.

When we turn to matters of religion and belief, we find that everyone is a Muslim - except for two of the schoolboys who are Christians. The Liberian school system is avowedly Christian in bias and actively preaches Christianity to its charges, as of course do the mission schools. Thus every student has at the very least been exposed to Christianity even if many Vai reject it for Islam, which is systematically discriminated against within the American-English school system, or for an agnosticism-cum-scepticism, increasingly fashionable among younger urban dwellers. We further asked whether people believe in "water-people" - that is, - the jinna or "genii" who are a focus of Islamic and Vai lore. Opinion was evenly divided; - of the 70 replies, 46% were for and 54% against. The women were equally divided, as were the non-literate men.

human being" or "in our fashion of Arabic learning, people's ways of thinking are studied by the formation of their skull and heel". However, some were quite specific about what a newly-arrived stranger would be thinking; "He will think of the distance that he walked that day" or "a stranger always thinks about lodging and eating". Old Vaanii Zodua echoed a concern for first impressions and good manners which is a very noticeable aspect of conversations about other people. Vaanii said, "the manner in which he or she greets me will determine what kind of person he/she is, but not exactly what they're thinking about". Most of the women (63.6%) said "Definitely no", versus 36% of the men. 36% of the men also said "No, but possibly yes". Only 11% of the women said "Yes" as against 22% of the men. Literates are more likely to say "Yes" than non-literates and less likely to say "No"; their answers are more evenly spread through the three categories.

In Question 53, respondents were asked to rate their approval of the following proposition:- "Learned men (scientists, scholars ) in the universities are studying such things as what determines whether a baby is a boy or girl and how it is that a seed turns into a plant. Do you think these investigations are:

- A. All very good
- B. All somewhat good
- C. All somewhat harmful
- D. All very harmful

The results were very clear; every man, and every literate chose A, as did 30 of the 39 women respondents. Seven women chose B, one C and one D. At least three factors are operative here; firstly, the respect in which all Vai hold learning is very powerful. secondly, this was certainly being reinforced by a desire to be polite to us, as representatives of the university world; and thirdly, one would expect some of the enthusiasm of literate people for learning to be passed on to other members of their households.

"Which of the following reasons should carry the most weight in determining the honour that a man receives?

1. Coming from an important family
2. Having a lot of money
3. Having a high education."

46% of people chose "coming from an important family", 4% chose "having a lot of money"; and 50% chose "having a high education". The "important family" was chosen by 55% of women, 35% of men and 39% of the literates; most of the Vai-only literates are included here. On the other hand, most of the multiple-literates chose a "high education".

The final attitudinal question on Part I that is of significance here is Question 65, which asks for a list of the biggest problems facing "the town where you live".

The difficulty of travelling to and from Gᵉᵉ is uppermost in most people's mind, followed by the need for a government school and then a clinic. Movement is in fact very difficult: after heavy rain the track is dangerous to impassable, particularly the final descent into Gᵉᵉ - and the bridges are unstable - so that few vehicles can be relied on to come to Gᵉᵉ unless one makes a special and more expensive "charter" agreement with the driver. It is interesting that the comments about "lack of better understanding" all come from Arabic-literates or their households - the only woman here being the wife of one of the Arabic-only literates.



Kpɛndɛkɔ, Teewɔ Chiefdom, he enrolled in the Qur'anic school run by a Mende scholar who was a brother of one of Bɔima's father's wives; because, he said, "I saw everyone rushing into it, so I wanted to gain experience in it, too." He ascribes this desire to God's encouragement, but it may also have to do with the fact that his younger brother Ismaila was currently studying at a Qur'anic school in Sierra Leone. Everyone else was sent to Qur'anic school between the ages of 7 and 11 (8 years old is the commonest - 5 of the men went at that age), save for Alihaji Bɔakai Sherif who went at 5. Usually parents sent the boys, although in two cases a grandfather did (one paternal and one maternal) and in a further case a maternal second cousin (MMBS) who was also a paternal cousin of some kind to the father was responsible. Often the child did not want to go; six of the ten men who were sent said either "at that time I was not big enough and did not know the difference of wants and not wants" or "I never wanted to learn it because it was too hard - but I was forced to." The other four went gladly - "Because my father said I should go and learn it" or "because it is beneficial in Heaven." Alihaji Sherif declared that he was very keen to go; - "when your father born you and you find out he went to school, then you want to go to school too" - (his father, whom he never saw, was a Muslim scholar living and teaching in Sierra Leone). In contrast to acquiring Vai script literacy, where there is very little pressure on anyone to learn, it is not surprising that the somewhat compulsory recruitment to Qur'anic schools kindles some unwillingness on the part of the pupils; indeed, I was even told by Mɔle Bise, one of my translators, that in the old days the meaning of the Qur'an was never explained to students lest they run off from the teacher, who depended on their farm labour! Certainly a young boy of 7 or 8 in a strange town - for one often goes away to Qur'anic school - is likely to be homesick for a while. I talked to a number of men who recalled they had run away from Qur'anic school, only to be beaten by father

can read any history or geography books and learn how the country is located". Adulai's first remark is untranslatable in such a neat elliptic form. It is a phrase the Vai are fond of using to describe the proper result of any form of education or training. To "know the differences" between people or in the country is to be able, not only to recognise what or who is worthy of respect and what is not, but also to have some insight into social relations and the workings of both the urban and rural worlds. In standard English we might describe a person who has this quality as "a wise man or woman".

himself to read and write English well from 2nd grade standard onwards, but also to read the Qur'an from scratch, which he did by taking passages to various Arabic literates to read out loud, noting the sounds down in Vai script and thus learning the script. He says he would like to learn to translate Arabic as well, if he could find four or five years in which to concentrate on studying.

In order to check on the frequencies of usage given, respondents were asked when they last wrote and read something in English. All had written at least one letter and read something in the fortnight previous to the interview; Boakai Haamɔ had read an official letter from the government to his father. Boakai and Adulai seem to read somewhat less frequently than the other two, both of whom had been reading the night before their interview - Bise a story-book and M.G. the First Chapter of the Gospel of St. Mark.

Except for the odd funeral record and being asked to read, translate and write English letters, the young men do not participate in town business, although literate people are in great demand as clerks. Mɔmɔ Sandemani has himself done this and seen people writing English in court case records, or letters to government officials and for various notices about the town. He gives one example of the latter (note how similar this is in style to notices in the Vai script - also in content):-

"Notice attention to all gentlemans. We are the members of the Cape Mount Invisible Eleven. I hereby requesting to all members of this football team, we have received a challenge from Sierra Leone. We all members are hereby by order to pay two-two dollars for the coming games. If any members fail to pay this money you will be charged to pay five dollars".

The Uses of American-English Literacy

All the English literates read well, they all correspond with friends and relatives regularly. Adulai writes two letters a week to relatives in Teew Chiefdom and Nimba County, and to friends in some of the larger towns of Liberia - he writes more than he used to in the past, since "now I'm back in the interior I'm suffering for clothes or money". He even wrote to an official to ask for a job, but without success. The other two young men write 2-3 letters a month, which again was more than they used to - Bise because he says he was ashamed to write while he was still learning English, and Boakai because he has more friends to write to now. In contrast, Momo Sandemani writes less, since many of his friends have died or he's lost contact with them;- even so, he sometimes writes two or three letters a month - sometimes none at all; in the old days, he says, his correspondence was at least twice as voluminous.

All four keep records in English - such as the occurrence of births and deaths in the family and the dates and amounts of credits and debts. In addition, Momo Sandemani keeps all his lists for ordering goods from Monrovia - while I was talking to him, he came across a list he'd kept since 1964. Adulai keeps financial records for his father. One of his father's sisters, while she lived, supported his education, and he has records of the money that his aunt gave his father for him. Recently Adulai took down his first record of the contributions received in the special ceremony after a funeral celebration (which are always recorded, usually in Vai script, see below) because, he explained, "in our family anyone who knows book small gets put to work writing and reading things". Boakai Haamo has stored all his school lessons, textbooks and also letters from friends, in addition to which he notes down important events as they occur - the death of the President of Liberia, for instance, - and keeps all these records in a file.

1962 (he is now 25 years old). He began at the age of eight, on his own initiative;- "first of all my father didn't want me to go, but I saw my friends going so I took it upon myself to go. When my father saw me going, he said, "Okay, go". So in that sense he sent me. My brother Boakai went to school with me". Two elder "brothers" (paternal cousins), had already been to school and knew English well at that time. Bise's education was interrupted by having to work and he finally left to become a rice farmer because "my father took me from school - someone has to stay with him because he's old and the other children have left". Younger brother Boakai, who's now 19, began at Goo School at six or seven, this time with the encouragement of his father, and has attended schools at Bomi Hills, Mano River and Robertsport, the latter from eighth to tenth grades, being supported by one of the his elder sisters. The latter cannot afford to help Boakai any more, so he has returned to his father to help him farm, in the hope of later support. He intends to complete High School and college, if he can find financial support. The other student who wishes to continue with his education is Adulai Sɛmbɛ, son of Boima Sɛmbɛ, the town Imami. He too sent himself to school, at the age of 12 (he's now 21), though not against his father's wishes;- "I met all my friends going to school when I came here, so I wanted to go too". His elder brother Boima, a taxi-driver, pays his fees and expenses, and Boakai moves around with Boima, sometimes spending only a few months of the year in school, which explains why he's had to repeat several grades. He has now completed 7th grade and hopes to go back to school in Monrovia, though he doesn't think he can go any further because of financial difficulties. All three young men have been to elder brothers, cousins or friends for help when they got stuck with their learning.

Getting an education is difficult for a young person from the country; what do they think school has done for them so far? Adulai says it helps you by "knowing friends who are the sons of important men and they can help you"; Bise says it taught him English, which allows him to write to his friends, while Boakai looks forward to a government job when he completes his schooling. Of the

of replies reflected this concern.

I would emphasize that nowhere was it suggested by anyone that any category of person should be excluded from going to school under any circumstances. I am thinking of girls here - and the operative phrase is the latter. In fact, none even said that girls should not go to school. This will be discussed later on in regard to general attitudes towards learning, but I would point out now that there is considerable eagerness to educate those who are willing, whoever they are, in the American-English and Arabic schools and also in the Vai script. These questions merely asked who should have priority in the allocation of resources for the first one.

out of 27 the parents did not know which school their child was attending and in eight cases which grade the child was in. I have the feeling that this information was not regarded as particularly important, and not that this lack of information demonstrated a lack of interest. It should be remembered that parents do not see their school-children frequently, especially if the latter are in school somewhere far off.

We asked everyone about their plans and hopes for their children's schooling. This time the questions were arranged on the questionnaire in the order that made them most explicit, - that is , "How much schooling do you want your children to get?" followed by "How much schooling do you think they will get?"

I should point out that fourteen people have no children and therefore their answers fall within the category - "no answer/DNA (does not apply)". Yet this category contains more replies than these, among which literates are heavily represented. If one adds in the replies to the effect that "my children are not in school", a large proportion of people (46%) have not answered the question, which was emphasised as a request for an hypothetical statement. The pragmatism of the Vai people is reflected here, in that unlikely hypotheses are not considered worth giving an opinion on;-most people know that their children will not go to school and so the discussion for them is considered useless. Yet considering that only 17 people in our survey have children who are or have been in school, it is interesting that other people gave an opinion on something that didn't directly concern them.

The answers show two clear stages, of which graduating from high school is the most important, with 25 out of 39 replies; and completing college is the second with 8 votes. Literate and non-literate people seem equally well represented in both categories.

A prediction of what will happen, which is more problematic than reporting one's desires whether they should be fulfilled

their 60's and 70's, two men stated that their fathers had attended school. Now, the latter would be the generation born before 1875 at the latest, - roughly contemporary with the appearance of missionary education at Cape Mount. Aama Zodua, who is 65 years old, says his father completed High School and served as a Lieutenant in the Liberian Army. The other man, Momo Sandemani, is well-known to us already; his father B.Y. Sandemani, a Vai of Kiahon clan, attended St. John's Mission and the Grammar School in Freetown, Sierra Leone, entering the legal profession and rising from District Commissioner to Minister of the Interior under Presidents King and Barclay in the '20's and '30's. Of the 60's/70's age group itself, two men have been to school: M.G. Sandemani went to school in Bendu and Monrovia until 2nd Grade, but continued reading and writing on his own, while Vaanii Zodua attended a private school in Buchanan, completing 4th Grade after one and a half years. Both dropped school for lack of money. In addition, Chief Batakai Haam is said by his sons to have attended St. John's Mission until 2nd or 3rd Grade, but he himself says his plans to go to school in Robertsport were interrupted by the outbreak of the Second World War, when he enlisted as a seaman on a coastal freighter, and were postponed indefinitely on his return.

Among those who are in their 50's, Momo Sambola reported that his father had been to school; he could not remember the details but he did give his father's occupation as "farmer and tribal clerk", which suggests that the father wrote official correspondence for the chiefs of Teewo, where Momo was born. Momo himself did not go to school. Save for those who are sons or daughters of the above, no younger person reported that their parents had been to school, except Momo Sei Zodua who said that his mother, a Gola woman of Zodua clan, did go, but he does not know where, or how far. Momo Sei, who is 48, did not himself go.



(b) The pupil is shown the names of objects or persons. In some sense you could say that the  $B_{III} \&_{III} \overline{\Pi}_{III} \overline{E}_{III}$  strategy is of this kind. Besides the simple expedient of spelling the name of the word -  $\&_{II} \approx_{II} \gamma$  (Siaka)  $\mathcal{H} \mathcal{K}$  (manja chief)

$\diamond \gamma$  (kpolo-book, script)  $E \gamma$  (kolb-rice),

there is as in (a) a formal method of instruction:

$\diamond \gamma E_{III}$  (kpolo to me - this is the name book)

$\diamond \gamma \gamma \mathcal{H} E \mathcal{H}$  (Bakai to me - his name is Bakai)

(Bakai to me - that is the name Bakai)

$\diamond \gamma \mathcal{H} \mathcal{H} \mathcal{H} E \mathcal{H}$  (Bakai Bofi to me - his name is Bakai)

(Bofi / that is the name Bakai Bofi)

(c) The pupil is shown how to combine (a) or (b) into sentences. To the extent that his strategy never occurs unless it is preceded by (a) or (b), it is not independent.

(d) The pupil is given a letter or story and has the values of the characters explained as they occur in it. He then rehearses the text until (if it is a very long story) he knows the script. The strategy can be independent, but when subsequent to (a), (b) or (c) it often consists of showing the pupil letters or stories to accustom him or her to Vai script narrative.

It will be noted that these stages refer primarily to reading. I should point out that writing practice - characters, sentences or letters/stories - depending on the level of skill reached by

script at hand, it is surprising that as many as half the respondents did not seek advice outside the teacher-pupil relationship. It can best be explained by the private nature of that relationship.

Fittingly, learning Vai script occurs anywhere and everywhere there are Vai literates willing to teach and pupils, not necessarily Vai, willing to learn. The curious location of Vaanii Zedua's lessons, a European house in Bassa country, is not an untypical incident, for I both know of people of other ethnic groups (Mende, De, Gola, Bassa and others) who have learnt Vai script, and know Vai literates who have taught such people. Generally, of course, the locations are Vai country or the Vai communities in the larger towns and the capital. The time taken to learn the Vai script was reported as anything between 10 days and two years, but usually one to three months; here, "learn" can be defined as becoming able to function as a literate, in the sense of being able to read or write sufficiently well for the day-to-day purposes of your own life. Often pupils will leave at a stage of rudimentary functional skills and practice up on their own.

#### Teaching Strategies.

In keeping with the generally heterogeneous nature of Vai script affairs which has so far been discovered, teachers choose from a number of methods of instruction, combining some or all of them in a bewildering variety of ways. To simplify the description of these complexities, I list what appear to me to

would "see people writing and take what they were writing and ask different people what the characters were." It is most striking how transmission of the Vai script occurred in such a way as not to transform the background context- be it living or working together- into a formal learning situation. A definite accent lies on teacher(s) and pupil(s) living and working together; for example, Kaamɔ Kafi began to learn when he went to work at a sawmill in the high forest of Vai Kɔnɛ, where a fellow sawyer was able to read and write Vai script- "All of us were living together... every time he received letters he read and answered them, so I too got encouraged and decided to ask him to teach me." Over several months, as they worked together, they would have a session, "sometimes five minutes when we met, because we never used to stay too long talking about it." Vaanii Zodua began the Vai script when he took up service as an assistant steward in an Englishman's house in Fishtown, Grand Bassa County, and the Chief Steward, a Vai literate, took it upon himself to teach Vaani. Boima Sɔmbɛ learnt at the Qur'anic school; Bendu Zodua in her own home from her husband; Bai Bombo Senwa from a sister's husband living with him in his mother's house. Even where the pupil asked someone to instruct him or her, the learning activity never intrudes upon the daily round- lessons lasted 5, 10, or 15 minutes, sometimes up to an hour, often in the evenings. And not every day- Vaanii Zodua, for instance, would return to Gɔɔ from Monrovia and instruct his younger brother in the script; Boima Sɔmbɛ had his lesson once a week on a Wednesday when the Qur'anic school was not in session.

Becoming Literate in the Vai Script.

There are 18 literates in the Vai script in G̃ɔ̃ɔ̃ , including Paramount Chief Lahai Siim̃ɔ̃ Zodua, who has always used clerks for his literate activities, although he once learnt the script himself. Exactly half of the group are also literate in Arabic to various degrees, yet despite the fact that eight of the nine learnt their Vai script well after they had left Qur'anic school, the ages at which respondents began to learn Vai script shows a similar distribution for Vai-only and Vai-Arabic literates;- from 9 to 33 years and from 9 to 46 years respectively, with a concentration on the late 'teens/early 20's (10 out of 18 respondents).

In contrast to Qur'anic education, where all the pupils are "sent," like it or not, no one was forced to learn Vai script. In fact, only in seven cases was any pressure exerted on the person to learn, and this was always described as "encouragement." A close relative usually did the encouraging;- Muana Zodua was urged to learn by his elder brother Vaanii, Bendu Zodua by her husband Vaanii Kiazolu, Fole S̃ɔ̃mb̃ɔ̃ by his sister Maima, and so on. Boima S̃ɔ̃mb̃ɔ̃ recalls that he learnt at a Qur'anic school while only nine years old, at the encouragement of a fellow pupil and friend who was the same age as himself. In one instance alone could it be said that the encouragement was such that it could not be refused; M̃ɔ̃m̃ɔ̃ Sandemani says that in 1928 his mother's brother M̃ɔ̃m̃ɔ̃du Daama Zodua told him he wanted help in running his business, a carpentry business which was conducted entirely in the Vai script; Momodu Daama, whose English name was Mr. Cooper, had been to St. John's Mission at Robertsport at a time when the Vai script was being taught there. All seven were taught by the people who first encouraged them. Another respondent was simply "told about" the Vai script by an old man in his town, as a result of which he "got encouraged to learn it." The ten men remaining came to

the funerals, which last occur with disturbing frequency within the orbit of your acquaintances and friends. I was present at some of these ceremonies and was impressed with the pride of place given to that part of worship or celebration which consisted of reading or writing- and not only in the Arabic script. One funeral feast is described in my discussion of Vai script literacy in Gohn, while a celebration of the Birth of Muhammad and of secular events such as Independence Day are to be found in the section of my field notes concerning Diya. .

I believe, though I have no firm data to support this view, that practically every adult Muslim, man and woman, knows the essential prayers and professions of daily worship;- al Shahadah (the profession of faith), surat al Fatihah (the opening chapter of the Qur'an), Tashahhud and Qunut (both Qur'anic texts commonly used as prayers). To begin, I know of no adult, save for a few Christians- and even some of them were able to do this- who could not recite surat al Fatihah. Young people do not generally worship in the mosque, since they are not expected to be mature enough to engage in meaningful worship, although those that do show keenness are encouraged to go. In a way it is somewhat like marriage, in that young people are not prevented from wandering freely in a period of "foolishness." A lot of young people who had spent some time in American/English schools told me that they would eventually become Muslims when they "settled down" in early middle age;- at the moment many of them profess various mixtures of Islam, Christianity, and humanistic scepticism. Positive support for the assertion of a basic general knowledge of the texts is provided by the fact that eight of the nine Vai-only or English-only literates who are Muslims said that they had learnt a number of prayers, either by reciting orally after an Arabic literate, or by writing down the sound sequences in Vai

the right road, and records of funeral contributions whenever there's a death in the family. Also court cases- whenever it involves me and it's important. Or if someone sues any of my children or relatives."

As can be seen, Arabic literates' use of their skills is intricately tied up with their practice of Islam. How do they view the benefits, or otherwise, of becoming literate in Arabic? All the men, except two, felt it had been of help to them- and even one of the two said he was sure it would help him in the future. The sole, definite, "no" came from a younger man who studied only enough to recite the Qur'an; and he gave no reason for his answer. The affirmative answers listed a wide variety of benefits. Alihaji Boakai explained: "To be alone is only for God- it is not good for a human being to be alone. Through knowing the Qur'an I have all these students, which is a help. They work for me on the farm." He further illustrated the benefits of literacy in general by succinctly observing to me: "If you weren't educated, I wouldn't have come to sit with you today"! Boima Sɛmbɛ, the town Imami, said that as a result of his Qur'anic education the town had appointed him to that position when he arrived here, while four others mentioned the advantage of being able to write protective charms for themselves and others, in the latter case the fee being the benefit. The remaining literates asserted that it allows them to better say their prayers, and also to teach Qur'anic passages to non-literate fellow townspeople, who may or may not be charged for this service. It might be supposed that the ability to recite the Qur'an in the original, without comprehending its meaning, is of little "benefit" to a person in his or her religion, yet this view ignores that the Qur'an is believed to be the Word of God as it was originally revealed to Muhammad

services done by Arabic literates provide a considerable income for them, for the more advanced tasks, especially the instruction of pupils in the full mysteries of Muslim doctoring, command extremely high fees. It is likely that only three of four men on Goh can perform some of these tasks, and almost certain that Alihaji himself is the only man qualified to teach the skills of Muslim doctoring. I do not know if he actually does, since I never asked him;- the subject, like that of the Poro and Sande societies, is one where the information is either offered spontaneously or not sought at all.

Three Arabic literates engage in correspondence. Boakai Zodua writes an Arabic letter every few months, always to friends and relatives, and receives the odd letter or two a year in return. Boima Sandemani occasionally writes Arabic letters, but his main correspondence is in Vai script; of his respondents only his brother-in-law Seku Kabidu replies in Arabic. Obviously, correspondents usually write in the script they have in common; or if they have more than one script in common, in the one which suits their purposes best. This would explain why Alihaji Sherif writes in Arabic to relatives- for those members of the Sherif clan whom I know all know both Arabic and Vai scripts. Alihaji's correspondence extends outside of Cape Mount County- and almost certainly is with some non-Vai people. It is interesting that he has also written and received letters to and from people he did not actually know- a rare occurrence in rural correspondence; for instance, he says, "someone wrote to me and asked to buy something off me he'd heard I had." I have the impression, from the private correspondence I have seen, that two Qur'anic scholars might correspond on day-to-day matters in Vai script, but on religious subjects in Arabic. This would make eminent sense, as translating day-to-day business into a language, one's knowledge

until his 50 students completed the Qur'an. He moved in succession to Monrovia, Ahmadu Town on the Bomi Hills road, and to Boje, spending 10 years in each spot, and eventually came to GJG four years ago at the insistence of his former students living here. It is difficult to parallel the close and affectionate relationship that springs up between teacher and pupils over the years of instruction, save in the Hindu and Buddhist religions. Certainly the instance here is by no means isolated in Islamic education.

In fact, the skills involved in teaching are not merely those concerned with knowledge of the Qur'an, for Alihaji also expounds on Muslim law and belief, which he gives out generally, not only to his own students. Apart from these uses of literacy, Alihaji is widely known as a "muslim doctor." One cannot be entirely precise about the activities of this profession, but Alihaji's own definition is a good starting point;- "By Muslim doctor is simply meant 'wise man'- you set people on the right road and teach them." Advice and help in a moral or religious sense certainly play a part, yet the practitioner is often called upon to use his skills to discover certain facts about the world, or to influence the workings of it- or, as we might say, to practice divination and magic. For instance, a Muslim doctor might be asked to find out where a long-lost relative is now living, and to summon him back to his family; or to help someone's business enterprise or farm to prosper; or to help someone get a job. In the old days, as the many versions of a well-known story about Zolu Duma testify, he might help to ensure the favourable outcome of war and to protect warriors from injury in battle. The means by which these tasks are achieved lie through the consultation and manipulation of Qur'anic and mystical texts and is, in its more difficult manifestations, the province of expert Arabic literati.



sacrifice, then he could continue alone. Boima Kroma pointed out that, although you can go back home to your parents when you've worked right through the Qur'an, "you'll never see the end of the Arabic script, for there are always more books to read after the Qur'an."

Even when finished and on their own, most people return to consult either their former teacher from time to time, or, if he doesn't live nearby anymore, to the local experts in the Qur'an. Qur'anic learning does not simply end when you leave Qur'anic school.

Respondents were also asked how they would tell whether a stranger were well-versed in the Qur'an. Six would judge by his accuracy in reading and explaining the meaning of passages, while others cited the amount of time he spent daily reading the Qur'an; or how far he went in the study. Or the way in which he conducts religious ceremonies such as Ramadan or the Birth of Muhammad. One man said he would judge by the way the man spoke to another learned Qur'anic scholar.

brings us his board; Alihaji recites from memory, still trying to find the place in his Qur'an. And so on for most of the other students who recite their texts phrase by phrase after him in turn. Then the two older and more advanced students go to teach the younger ones from their boards. Some of the youngest ones haven't been here a year and are still learning the letters."

Such, I gather, is the routine for two hours five days a week, excepting Wednesdays and Thursdays. During the afternoon the pupils help Alihaji on his farm and Alihaji's wives with the housework- notably in fetching water and firewood. It is clear, both from questionnaire answers and my own observations, that a lot of the students' apparent "free time" is devoted to rehearsing the lessons given the day before, so that the number of hours devoted to study each day may well total four, five or more.

At least seven of the 15 to 16 pupils are from families whose male head is literate in Arabic;- and the total figure may well be more than that since some of the remaining fathers live in other villages, while others are Gɔ) men living in Monrovia. Whether these men are literate in Arabic I do not know, yet I doubt if non-literates are less interested in sending their children to Qur'anic school- for almost every adult man and woman shows sufficient interest in Islam to learn by ear the essential prayers of daily worship.

Most literates (10 out of 12) feel that learning Arabic was difficult. The initial understanding and memorization of the alphabet was often cited, especially the difficulty that any letter can be written in three different ways, according to its position in a word (initial, medial, or final);- or can have numerous different sound values, depending on the vowel marks added to it. The

(i) the presence of a large number of girls in the classes.

(ii) the influence of mothers in the children's Islamic education- since it was often the mother who had first taught the child Arabic script and a few prayers, as well as being the enthusiast who makes sure the child goes to Qur'anic school at all.

Yet, despite the obvious differences in background of the teachers and pupils in London and Liberia, I was struck by the immense similarity in the Qur'anic instruction. It would be interesting to compare how the new Liberian Qur'anic schools compare with those of the schools I visited in London.

To return to the Qur'anic school in Gɔɔ, Alihaji Boakai kindly invited me to witness his school in session. The following is an abstract (edited) of that occasion:<sup>6</sup>

"Saturday June 1st. Meant to get up at 5.30 a.m. to visit Alihaji at his Qur'anic school. Needless to say, I missed 5.30 but was ready at 7.30 when Alihaji called and said he was about to start teaching. Surprised, I said I thought I was late, but he explained that the students get up at 5.30 and read over their lessons until 7.30 or 8.00- when he begins teaching. The school is held in the mud-and-wattle palaver house beside his house at the north end of the town. It's open on four sides, though the entrance is away from the road. Around the walls are stacked the boards inscribed by Alihaji with Qur'anic texts. All the chapters are different, and some texts have lists of single letters written below them, presumably for the beginners.

the influence of Islam among the Vai- especially if the time-scale involved is large. Indeed, Benjamin Anderson, a black American explorer who made his way from Monrovia to Musadu (now Moussadougou in Guinea) in the mid-19th century found Muslims active at "Bessa's Town" (now GBZSE in Teewo Chiefdom) and Vai widely spoken in both Bopulu and Musadu, both then centres of Muslim learning. It would be surprising if there were no earlier evidence for the presence of Islamic learning among the Vai.

Whilst in England in 1974 I did some work on Qur'anic education in the mosques of London and found a somewhat different emphasis in the teaching- not surprisingly, since all the teachers were graduates of Egyptian or English universities. The result was rather like a combination of classes in religious knowledge and Arabic language. But the study of the Qur'an and the study of the language do not quite go hand in hand;- the Qur'an is one of the most difficult works of religious poetry ever written, and the early, if not immediate introduction of beginners to it accounts for many of the problems in Qur'anic education. It is easy to point out the chasm between the demands of the text and the elementary grammar and vocabulary which is being taught at the same time. As I then wrote-

"It is important that the aims of the class should be seen in perspective. The children are not simply learning to read the Qur'an- they are being initiated into the full mysteries of Islam. Thus, despite the division into three types of lesson (which took place in one school)- into reading the Qur'an, prayer, and question-and-answer - what goes on is very much the same. The accent is on slow

expertise).

Of the remaining three Arabic literates, Bɔakai Zodua and Bɔima Sandemani both can translate the Qur'an and write letters in Arabic (they took 10 to 15 years to learn to do so), as they have read more widely than the Qur'an. Bɔakai has studied hymns and prayers, and Bɔima the following books- zabolu ("explains about the religion"), kasinat ul la salah ("explains about God") and lakhdaré ("explains how to pray"). Finally, Alihaji Sherif, who keeps records and writes his own stories in Arabic, learnt to read and write Arabic in a matter of 14 months! In his first two months he was taught the alphabet and how to read the whole Qur'an [class (ii)]; then he progressed directly to class (iv).

"Fode Bamba (his brother and second Qur'anic teacher) taught me to translate the Qur'an. He told me the meaning word-by-word and I memorized it- the whole Qur'an. When I'd finished I could read and understand a piece of Arabic I never saw before. I also read sabo al mansani (a book on Muslim law), lakhdaré (which tells you how to pray), and ris'allah (a law book). I was explained the meaning of the Qur'an and read all the books in one year."

In contrast, Bɔima Sɛmbɛ spent 18 months learning how to join up the letters of the Arabic alphabet before he began on the Qur'an; while Bɔima Kroma's teacher proceeded directly from the letters of the alphabet into "reading" the Qur'an, without showing him either the vowel marks or how the letters should be joined together!

Overall, I have the impression that the strategy of Qur'anic education is changing, probably in response to the challenge of the "western" school education. Many teachers now

any Qur'anic passage presented, without being able to translate it into your own language. You may be able to "explain" what it means (i.e. paraphrase a translation or a summary of a translation given you by the teacher) or you may not.

(ii) You are able not only to read out the Arabic of any Qur'anic passage, but also able to recite the Arabic from memory without a text- possibly the whole Qur'an. Again, you may be able to "explain" what it means and you may not.

(iii) You are able to "read" the Arabic of any Qur'anic text and recite it from memory; also to recite a translation of the whole Qur'an. Thus, you are able to produce a "translation" of any passage. In addition, you may have studied one or more of the commentaries on the Qur'an in a similar way.

In (i), (ii) and (iii) you have no systematic idea of the syntax and semantics of the Arabic language. As far as writing goes, in these stages you will be able to produce Arabic copied only from memory or directly from texts. Apart from a few religious phrases such as allahu akbar! or exclamations like inshallah you cannot speak Arabic.

(iv) You can "read" and translate the whole Qur'an into your native language, since you have been taught Arabic as a language.

(v) Your Arabic is strong enough to read commentaries on the Qur'an- law books, text-books on how to pray and so on... Advanced students not only write personal letters in Arabic but are also fluent in modern written and spoken Arabic.

Within "classes" (i) and (ii) there are recognized stages



discussed in the final section.

As with the other literate traditions, respondents were asked at what level the student should be able to know enough to finish learning from the teacher and continue on his own. This question did not apply to the two people who taught themselves, or to Chief Lahai who didn't finish learning it - and two of the others said the student should know about 30 characters; while one man said that pupil should know "what the teacher teaches ". Twelve of the 18 Vai literates proposed a functional criterion, that, when the pupil could write, read and answer letters from various people and places without mistakes, then he or she would be deemed to have learned the Vai script. At the same time, we asked how you could judge whether a person is learned in the script, and received an overwhelming majority of answers (14 out of 18) proposing this criterion again. One of these people also said that you could tell by a man's reputation for the learning. Another criterion was put forward by two men, that a learned man would "be able to read letters that others can't because they're too difficult; he can also read more characters than anyone else". The final two respondents suggested that it reflected in the way one spoke the language - in that Vai script literates are said not to use English phrases or words when they speak Vai.

When the pupil has finished studying the Vai script with the teacher, learning is not over, for it is quite common to consult



the actual script is not hard." Chief Lahai explained that he himself had not finished learning because "we had no chance to learn as we were working - we used to carry people in a canoe to Monrovia for 4¢ - there was no bridge at Vaitown then." Obviously, to the extent that the Vai script learning is subordinate to other activities, it has to suffer when those activities take up all the time available.

What kind of qualities are considered to make a "good student" of the script? Obedience heads the list, cleverness came second. Mm Sandemani remarked here - "if God gave you a brain you can learn it! Other qualities suggested were paying attention, seriousness, effort, perseverance and punctuality.

Finally, we asked for estimates of how long it should take a very good student and a very bad student to acquire literacy in the script. As in the Arabic and English learning, answers depend greatly on a person's own experience of how quickly he or she could learn; for the "very good student" (not defined in any way!) answers varied between one to two weeks and one to two years, with nine answers in the range one to three months. This provides considerable support for the comments made above on the extraordinary ease with which literacy can be acquired in the Vai script, even if, perhaps especially if, one begins as a non-literate.

#### Using the Vai script

By far the most frequent use of the Vai script has to do with writing and reading letters. 15 of the 18 G, Vai literates write, and all 18 read letters regularly (NB - the three who do not write

months without getting to know most of the County officials, from the Superintendent downwards, including the local police and customs officials. And as for those people with whom you have no official business, your acquaintance with them is by definition a personal matter.

Of the five men who correspond beyond the range of relatives and friends, Mɔmɔ Sandemani writes letters in connection with his work as a tailor - and presumably also in his carpentry business, in which he contracts to build houses for clients. The other four men engage or have engaged in official business; Muana Zodua as former Town Chief; Lahai Siimɔ as former Paramount Chief (still an important figure, though he holds no official post in the reorganized Gawula Chiefdom); Vaanii Zodua as clerk to Chief Lahai; and Bɔakai Haamɔ as former Town Chief and present General Town Chief for the former Vai Kɔnɔ area. The bulk of the correspondence and official documents are in Vai script; for only where business is transacted between the town and officials at or above District Commissioner level is English used. This division coincides with the distinction between those officials who are elected by the local people (chiefs, including the Paramount Chief) and those appointed by the government, namely the Superintendent and his District Commissioner (although both sets are usually of Vai or Gola origin).

I shall discuss town business here as well, since it forms one end of the scale of official and community business. In this regard Chief Lahai explained at length the uses of the different scripts:

"The Vai script is used for town business principally to list contributions whenever the town is making a collec-

this person will be the local schoolteacher, a brother or one of their own children who has been to American-English school. As far as I know, men tend to perform these functions, simply because there are very few women literates in any script living up-country.

Town business does not begin and end with political considerations alone - but includes all affairs of communal concern. Gɔŋ's Town Clerk is Kaamɔ Kafi, whose duty it is to "take down records if anything is happening in the town." This may include records of meetings, elections, lists of contributors to the many collections for funerals, marriage-gifts or communal funds, lists of people who turn up for communal work projects - such as building or repairing roads and bridges - and those who don't (so that the latter may be fined for not attending). In addition, Gɔŋ has an official collector of funeral donations; his brother is the man who usually informs neighbouring towns by letter of a death in Gɔŋ. Three or four other people said they sometimes make their own records of funeral contributions, and others of court cases which interested or involved them. Vaanii Zodua keeps his own unofficial town records, and he was asked by Chief Lahai to inform neighbouring towns of the latter's son's death, whereupon he immediately wrote letters to eleven different towns. In general, any competent Vai script literate will be asked to help in town activities, and indeed ten of the eighteen respondents reported that they had so helped. Some of the jobs done were quite specialised; - Bɔima Sɛmbɛ runs a Muslim religious club in the area, which is building a new hall in Gɔŋ; Aama Zodua writes the rules

to write a great deal as they were learning the script, in order to gain experience in it. Some informants said that in the old days many towns used to have an official messenger who delivered messages orally to other places; an observation which fits in well with the general opinion among skilled literates that Vai script literates were few and far between in the old days.

Besides official matters, the Vai script is widely used in various skilled trades. Three of the carpenters in Gɔɔ take down measurements for their tasks, record credits and debts, and at least one - Mɔmɔ Sandemani - keeps contracts in the Vai script, presumably for the bigger jobs like building houses, and he also records the wages he pays his workers. Three other people said they had used Vai script in drawing up plans for buildings. Bɔima John Manobala records orders and money credited or owed him from his weaving business. He makes country cloth from five or six patterns, one or two of which bear a Vai script legend:

zuana tamu kula mɛla mɔya wele a ɔ kun a liya sɛ. (Roughly, "If you want I can make a cloth for you.") In addition, three people keep records of their farming activities, noting the amount of rice they sow and harvest, how much money they sell rice for, and what dates the various farming tasks are performed. One of the tasks of the Paramount Chief is to make annual returns to the County administration of the amount of rice sold from his area, which was about 4,000 lbs from Gɔɔ, Kanga and Fali last year; but these returns

syllabic structure and is not written down, for the Vai script, being near-phonetic, allows one to record the sounds with considerable accuracy and consistency. Jaya Massaquoi learnt Bassa by listening to a friend speak and writing down the sound sequences in the Vai script. Jaya said it helped him to learn faster and to get the sounds of the language better. Vaanii Zodua learnt Loma in a similar way, and he has a charming story to tell about this. I was asking him whether he had learnt anything through the Vai script which he would not have learned otherwise -

"Yes. I learnt Loma. I was in Lofa County and I met a lady. I wanted to make love to her, but I didn't speak any Loma. So she pointed out different things to me and said the words for them - I wrote them down (in Vai script) and learned them. So she accepted me as her lover - because I learnt it all so quickly!"

This was in 1928, when Vaanii was 24, working as an assistant to an American, who was surveying the Liberia-Guinea border for the Liberian Boundary Commission. He travelled the length of Liberia, as far as Cape Palmas with this man and has another story which illustrates the extraordinary diversity of uses to which the Vai script can be put:

"When I was working for the surveyor, I used to send his clothes to be washed and I'd write the items down one-by-one in the Vai script. Ben saw this one day and asked me to write my name on a piece of paper. He then wrote a letter to the bank, sending a copy of my Vai script signature, and sent me to

Jaya Massaquoi will go to Vaanii Zodua when there is an important letter which he wants written clearly. Interestingly, Bendu Zodua asks her own daughter in Monrovia to help with the Vai script - presumably the latter was taught by her father, Bendu's former husband. Not everyone is available to help in this way, even if they can; Bendu Zodua again, who does read well, explained that "No one knew I could read it, because I felt I didn't know it well enough to publicise that fact". As the only woman literate in G<sup>o</sup>, she is in a particularly difficult situation, since at least some men feel that women have no business knowing the script; if other women had known the script, it would have been easier for her to practise her literate skills publicly.

Only five people who know Vai script reported that they did not go to others for help in writing and reading in other literacies. Not surprisingly - for all five were Vai and Arabic literates. All the others availed themselves of English literates' skills—even M<sub>o</sub>m Sandemani (though only for important official letters in his case). They usually asked a son, a brother or a daughter who had been to school. Two or three people asked Arabic literates to make charms for them or read out Qur'anic prayers for them to memorize, while M<sub>o</sub>m Sandemani asked an Arabic literate of his acquaintance to write some letters for him. Surely one reason why literates in Vai country are so willing to help non-literates must be because they themselves require others' skills.

Finally, do respondents think that knowing Vai script has been of benefit to them? Out of 16 replies, four people said no and

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Von Gnielinski, (1972), passim. Much of the general introduction has been written from the material collected in his excellent work on Liberia.
- <sup>2</sup>Zoo - meaning "owner of the Sande bush" ("Head of the Sande Society" according to Wheeler).
- <sup>3</sup>These are estimated ages. The estimation technique is described in the Questionnaire.
- <sup>4</sup>Personal communication to Project directors, 6th. April 1974.
- <sup>5</sup>See field notes February-April 1974.
- <sup>6</sup>Field notes 1974, pp 15-17.
- <sup>7</sup>Jaya Massaquoi, Part III Arabic of the Questionnaire.
- <sup>8</sup>The term is no more precise in Vai than it is in English; mainu people refers to all patrilineal relatives up to second cousin, and immediate in-laws. It can also be used to denote all patrilan members, even where the relationship is not traceable in detail.
- <sup>9</sup>Momodu Massaquoi was a famous Vai scholar, a pupil and teacher at St. John's Mission, who was Liberian Consul in Germany during the 1930's. While he was there he taught Vai script to interested scholars - actually at the University of Hamburg.
- <sup>10</sup>Field notes 1976, p. 26.

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