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Spelling Shinzwani

Dictionary construction and orthographic choice in the Comoro Islands

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This paper surveys the history of dictionary construction and orthographic choice in the Comoros — a former French colony in the Indian Ocean — with special reference to issues of literacy, identity, and politics. Evidence ranging from 16th century wordlists to contemporary bilingual/bidirectional dictionaries, as well as colonial, missionary, and scholarly approaches to lexicography and orthography in the Comoros, are examined and compared. While Arabic-influenced writing systems have a long history in the Comoros, the experiences of colonialism and independence in the 20th century introduced French- and phonemically-influenced systems. As the Comoros move into the 21st century, linguists and ethnographers are attempting to assist with questions of standardization, literacy, and dictionary construction. The situation remains fluid, with considerations of tradition, modernity, nationalism, and representation to be taken into account. This paper seeks to address the complex interrelationships between orthographic choice and ethnic identity in the Comoros, with special reference to the development of the first bilingual/bidirectional Shinzwani-English dictionary.

1. Introduction

The Comoro Islands are located in the western Indian Ocean, at the northern end of the Mozambique Channel, midway between Mozambique and the Malagasy Republic. The archipelago is comprised of four islands: Ngazidja (or Grande Comore), Nzwani (Anjouan), Mwali (Mohéli), and Mayotte (Maore). A referendum held in the Comoros in December 1974 led to the independence

of three of the islands — Ngazidja, Nzwani, and Mwali — from nearly a century of French colonial rule in July 1975, while Mayotte remained connected to France. Today, Ngazidja, Nzwani, and Mwali form the Federal Islamic Republic of the Comoro Islands. The Republic's continuing claim of sovereignty over Mayotte, and the recent attempted secession of Nzwani from the Republic, complicate the political picture.

Located along Indian Ocean maritime trading routes, the Comoros have absorbed a wide variety of linguistic and cultural influences — most notably from Swahili, Arabic, Hindi, Malagasy, Portuguese, English, and French. This influence has not been distributed equally among the islands, however, with the result that four different Bantu language varieties exist in the archipelago (see Ottenheimer & Ottenheimer 1976, Nurse 1989, Nurse & Hinnebusch 1993). Each island exhibits a unique blend of lexical and grammatical materials, and mutual intelligibility among them cannot be taken for granted. As Comorian linguist Mohamed Ahmed-Chamanga has pointed out: "the different [language] varieties ... are divided into two groups: shingazidja-shimwali / shinzwani-shimaore. Within each group mutual intelligibility is quasi-immediate. In contrast, a period of adjustment of some length is necessary between speakers of the different groups" (Ahmed-Chamanga, Lafon & Sibertin-Blanc 1986; translation mine). Nonetheless, today it has become politically convenient to consider all four varieties, somewhat optimistically, as "Comorian".

This paper surveys the history of dictionary construction and orthographic choice in the Comoros, with particular reference to the development of the first bilingual/bidirectional Shinzwani-English dictionary. I begin with a brief survey of outsiders' attempts to collect word lists and compile dictionaries of Comorian in general, and of Shinzwani in particular. After identifying my own linguistic work in the Comoros, which began in the 1960s, I present a history of the various orthographic systems used and/or proposed by Comorians, including Arabic, French, English, and phonemic. I conclude with a discussion of the role of the linguistic anthropologist, and of the importance of sensitivity to context and politics in questions of orthographic choice.

2. European spellings

The earliest collections of Comorian words come to us from British explorers. In the early 17th century, Payton 1613, Roe 1615, and Herbert 1626 wrote down a few words of Shimwali. (However, Herbert's list may have been copied from

Payton, rather than collected in the Comoros.) As might be expected, their transcriptions were improvised on an English orthographic base; thus Roe wrote *moschees* for /mše/ 'female' (and gave a gloss 'women').

Nearly two centuries later, in 1821–22, the Rev. William Elliott spent two years as a missionary in Mutsamudu, on the island of Nzwani. Elliott collected some 900 words of Shinzwani, along with some sample sentences, and he struggled with the Bantu grammar. He, too, used an improvised transcription system — which, no doubt, was based on his own English orthographic practices; thus he wrote *moo-sha* for /mše/ 'female'. Elliott's manuscript was stored away in the Grey Library at Capetown, South Africa, and did not attract attention again until Heepe, a German linguist, rediscovered it and published it with commentary in 1926.

The mid 1800s brought more European word-list collection in the Comoros. Shinzwani word lists were gathered by Peters (some time during 1842–48, and published by Bleek 1856), by Hildebrandt 1875, by Last 1885, and by an unknown Frenchman whose 1856 collection was published by Struck 1909.

In 1893, Ormières, a linguistically inclined colonial administrator in Nzwani, collected and published a list of some 3,000 lexical items in Shinzwani. An early IPA system of transcription might have been available to him, but there is no indication that he used it. Relying on his own French-based orthography, he transcribed the word /mše/ 'female' as *mouche*. Ormières' word list was published in 1893 in France, and went out of print soon after.

The next Comorian collection of any size was made either between 1910 and 1914, or during the 1930s — there are conflicting accounts of the timing, but the latter date is more likely — by Fr. Sacleux, a French missionary residing in Zanzibar. Relying on his porter, who was from Ngazidja, Sacleux compiled a list of Shingazidja equivalents for French words. He also included some Shinzwani in this collection, having obtained samples through correspondence with M. A. M. Angot, a French planter and amateur linguist residing in Nzwani. Although Sacleux published two Swahili dictionaries (1939–41, 1949), his Shingazidja dictionary was only published posthumously (Ahmed-Chamanga & Gueunier 1979), and it went out of print almost immediately.

In 1939 M. Gex, the Superior Administrator of the Comoros, asked Angot and Fr. Fischer, a French missionary in Ngazidja, to develop a combined dictionary/grammar including all of the principal dialects of the Comoros. As Angot put it, "too great differences in the pronunciation, syntax, and conjugations forced us to renounce the uniting of Grande Comorian and Anjouanese in a single work" (1948:1; translation mine). Instead Angot published a

Shinzwani grammar (1946, 1948), and Fr. Fischer published a French-Shingazidja dictionary/grammar (1949). Interestingly, Angot's orthography departed from earlier French-based spellings with regard to the vowels. The phonological unit /wa/ was now written ⟨wa⟩ rather than ⟨oi⟩, while the vowel /u/ was written ⟨u⟩ rather than ⟨ou⟩. The voiceless fricative phoneme /š/, however, continued to be written in the French way as ⟨ch⟩, while the voiced affricate /j/ was written either as ⟨dj⟩ or ⟨g⟩. Thus /mše/ 'female' was written *mche*, and /njema/ 'good' was written *ngema*. The various spellings of /mše/ 'female' can be seen here:

(1) Roe 1615	<i>moschees</i> ('women')
Elliott 1821–22	<i>moo-sha</i>
Ormières 1893	<i>mouche</i>
Angot 1949	<i>mche</i>

3. Linguistic research in the 1960s

In the 1960s, as anthropologist Martin Ottenheimer and I began preparing for anthropological field work in the Comoro Islands, we found that most of these early works on Comorian were difficult to obtain, and in most cases impossible. We were able to obtain some materials through used-and-rare book dealers, and we were able to read (and hand-copy) some others in libraries and archives; but most of the materials on the language were almost impossible to locate. We did not obtain a copy of Angot's Shinzwani grammar, for example, until several months after we had reached Nzwani. We were therefore unable to learn any Comorian prior to our arrival in the Comoros in the early fall of 1967. To learn as much as we could, we spent several months in Moroni and Itsandra, on the island of Ngazidja, learning Shingazidja; then we settled in Domoni, on the island of Nzwani, to learn Shinzwani and to conduct a longer period of field research. On both islands we conducted our research in predominantly monolingual settings.

As there was no published dictionary of Shinzwani, we began compiling materials for one. We worked out the phonological system, established a consistent orthography, and began using it in our field notes, as well as for transcriptions of tape-recorded narratives and interviews. We used the American phonetic symbols developed by Pike 1947 for most sounds, and symbols from the International Phonetic Alphabet for others (most notably implosive and retroflex stops, and interdental and velar fricatives). We used our field notes and transcriptions to augment the rapidly growing dictionary corpus.

Transcribing by hand posed no problems. However, when we began using a small portable typewriter for the transcriptions, we had to make some modifications to our symbol set. Although we had a French typewriter with a few dead-key accents (acute, grave, circumflex ...), it did not have some others, such as the *háček* [ˇ]; nor did it have any IPA symbols. Following English and Swahili models, we began using ⟨sh⟩ for /š/, ⟨ch⟩ for /č/, and ⟨j⟩ for /j/. We chose ⟨zh⟩ for /ž/ based on the fact that it is the voiced equivalent of /š/, and ⟨z⟩ is the voiced equivalent of ⟨s⟩. We followed French practice in choosing ⟨tr⟩ and ⟨dr⟩ for retroflex /t/ and /d/, and Swahili practice in writing ⟨th⟩ and ⟨dh⟩ for /θ/ and /ð/, as well as ⟨gh⟩ for /ɣ/. We decided that the allophonic variation between [v] and [β] justified using ⟨v⟩ for both.

When several young Comorians volunteered to help with the transcription of the tape recordings, we instructed them in the use of our modified phonemic orthography. Of all the symbols we chose, the English and Swahili-based ⟨sh ch zh j⟩ (which are the focus of this paper) appeared to cause the most difficulty for our young assistants. Those who had been through the French-based public school system were used to using ⟨ch⟩ for /š/, not ⟨sh⟩. Additionally, the French spelling for /č/ was either ⟨tsh⟩ or ⟨tsch⟩, but not ⟨ch⟩. Finally, in the French system the letter ⟨j⟩ represented /ʒ/, which was shared by Shinzwani and French. This meant that /j/ was written as ⟨dj⟩ by the French, and not as ⟨j⟩. The possibilities for confusion were high. Nonetheless, our young assistants found they were able to switch back and forth between their French-influenced sense of orthography and our Swahili- and English-based modified phonemic orthography. The differences are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

	/š/	/č/	/ž/	/j/
French	ch	t(s)ch	j	dj
Swahili	sh	ch	Ø	j
Ottenheimer 1966	sh	ch	zh	j

4. Dictionaries and orthographic choice

After we returned to the US, I continued to maintain the dictionary as a language-retention device, as well as for analytic purposes. I transformed my

paper slip file of 1,000 entries to a looseleaf notebook format; and as I continued translating field notes and narratives, I added more words to the notebook, inserting and recopying pages as necessary. By the early 1980s the notebook contained nearly 6,000 entries. I also had developed an English-Shinzwani index. In 1982 I brought a photocopy of the notebook to the Comoros, along with a chart of noun classes and concords that I had developed. I was stunned by the reaction. The most common comment I heard was something like, "We really do have a language (or: a grammar)!" The French told us we just spoke gibberish" (or "... we had no grammar;" or "... we didn't have a real language"). Many individuals (including some Comorian government officials) urged me to consider publishing the dictionary.

This idea raised important questions regarding orthography. Up until this point, the Shinzwani dictionary had been an "internal document", intended primarily for my own analytic purposes. The modified phonemic orthography I had developed in the 1960s was well-suited to my rather specific needs. Whether it would work as well for a general Comorian audience was unknown. I knew it had worked for my young transcribers, but I also knew that those who had been to French-based schools had encountered some initial difficulty.

There is a complex interrelationship between publication of language materials and the development of national orthographies (see Tabouret-Keller et al. 1997). In choosing an orthography for a published Shinzwani dictionary, I wanted to be sensitive to these wider linguistic, cultural, and political issues. I wanted to balance my academic concern for linguistic correctness with a practical concern for readability. I wanted to balance the political implications of developing a dictionary and orthography for just one of the linguistic varieties in the Comoros, on the one hand, with an oft-stated Comorian concern for national unification, on the other hand.

With these thoughts in mind, I returned to Kansas, secured NEH funding for the project, and acquired LEXWARE, a flexible linguistic database program which would allow me to prepare a bilingual, bidirectional dictionary for publication — and, up until the last stages of preparing camera-ready copy, would allow me to experiment with a range of orthographic possibilities. This flexibility, as it turns out, has been essential.

5. Choosing scripts, choosing spellings

Shinzwani has been written locally for hundreds of years, using Arabic script. Because every child attends Koranic school, literacy in the language among Shinzwani speakers can be documented to be above 90% (Ahmed-Chamanga & Gueunier 1977a:46), and Arabic script is often used for personal letter-writing among speakers of Shinzwani. Recognizing this widespread level of literacy, the French National Assembly passed a resolution, in October 1974, requiring that the bill to organize a referendum for independence in the Comoros should be published not only in French but also in “the most commonly employed local language” (Ahmed-Chamanga & Gueunier 1977b; translation mine). As the population of Ngazidja was larger than that of any of the other islands in the archipelago, Shingazidja was chosen as “the most commonly employed local language”. In addition, Arabic script was to be used for the publication of the referendum in Shingazidja. The documents were translated into Shingazidja (and prepared in Arabic script) by three individuals — a journalist, a member of the Comorian delegation to Paris, and a teacher at the Paris-based National Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilizations (INALCO) — in time for the referendum of December 22, 1974 (Ahmed-Chamanga & Gueunier 1977b:217). This experience encouraged the beginnings of local attempts to standardize Arabic script for Comorian. One such project (that of Kamar-Eddine) was to have been documented in an article written by Michel Lafon, which was to have been published in the 1980s; but to date the article has not appeared.

Shinzwani has more phonemes than Arabic, and certain adjustments are generally made by Comorians as they apply Arabic script to writing their language(s). For example, just two Arabic graphemes are used for the four sounds under discussion in this paper. The Arabic letter *shin* is used for both /š/ and /č/; and the Arabic letter *jiim* is used for both /ž/ and /j/.

Today there are still no fixed conventions for using Arabic script for Comorian. Individual writers must decide on their own which characters to use for which sounds. The following example, in a tape-recorded folktale transcribed by a Shinzwani speaker, shows *jiim* used for both /ž/ and /j/:

- (2) Arabic script: مع امجب اب تجر
 Phonemic transcription: /mahe amjibu amba kaʒua/
 ‘His mother answered him that she didn’t know.’

Some French colonial planters and government officials had used French to write personal and place names; their influence can be seen, for example, in the spelling of place names on maps of the Comoros. For the most part, however, French spelling was not widely used by Wanzwani. French does not fit Shingwani much better than Arabic, although it does have separate letter combinations for /š č ž j/.

The Comoros declared their independence from France in July of 1974, under the leadership of Ahmed Abdallah. Within a month the newly independent state was overthrown in a coup led by Ali Soilihi. Soon after this, a few young Comorian intellectuals suggested that the Comoros needed a new Latin-based orthography — one that would be more like Swahili than like French. (Abdushakur Aboud p.c., Ahmed-Chamanga 1976, Lafon & Sibertin-Blanc 1976). Such a move would symbolize liberation from French colonial influence. French spelling might be appropriate for French, they argued, but the Comoros should have their own orthography, and it should resemble that used in other independent African nations. As Ahmed-Chamanga said, "Being a matter of a practical proposal, and not a theoretical study, we will begin with standard Swahili, a language very close to the different Comorian language varieties, and with which they have direct relationships. We will also adopt new conventions for phonemes not represented ... in Swahili" (Ahmed-Chamanga 1976; translation mine).

Two different orthographies were proposed: one by Ali Soilihi and one by Ahmed-Chamanga. Both looked a bit like what I had taught the Wanzwani students to use in the 1960s. In both, /š/ was to be spelled with ⟨sh⟩ as in Swahili, rather than with ⟨ch⟩ as in French. In Ali Soilihi's system, however, /j/ would be spelled with ⟨j⟩ (as in Swahili); but /č/ would be spelled with ⟨c⟩, rather than with the Swahili ⟨ch⟩. In Ahmed-Chamanga's system, by contrast, /č/ would be written ⟨ch⟩ as in Swahili; but the voiced variants would follow French orthographic practice, so that /ž/ would continue to be spelled with ⟨j⟩, and /j/ would be spelled with the French combination ⟨dj⟩; see Table 2.

The two orthographies are an interesting mix of Swahili and French orthographic influences. It is not clear why Ali Soilihi adopted Swahili ⟨sh⟩ and ⟨j⟩, but rejected Swahili ⟨ch⟩ and introduced ⟨c⟩ instead. Nor is it clear why Ahmed-Chamanga adopted Swahili ⟨sh⟩ and ⟨ch⟩, but rejected Swahili ⟨j⟩ in favor of French ⟨dj⟩. In any case, both orthographies appear to have fallen into disuse after Ali Soilihi was deposed (by Ahmed Abdallah) in 1978. Perhaps they were too new — or too different. Arabic script continued to be widely used by Comorians for writing Comorian; and those individuals who had been educated

Table 2

	/ʃ/	/č/	/ž/	/j/
French	ch	t(s)ch	j	dj
Swahili	sh	ch	— ^a	j
Ottenheimer 1966	sh	ch	zh	j
Ali Soilihi 1976	sh	c	— ^b	j
Ahmed-Chamanga 1976	sh	ch	j	dj

^a Sound not existent in Swahili; ^b Symbol unknown.

in French-style schools reverted to French-based orthographic choices whenever it was necessary to use Latin characters for Comorian. Today some individuals recall using ⟨c⟩ for /č/, but no one seems to recall whether there was a symbol for /ž/ in Ali Soilihi's system.

6. Negotiating standards

Soon after my 1982 visit to the Comoros, the Comorian government commissioned a linguistic study designed to develop an official Latin-based orthography for Comorian, intended to "increase literacy" in the Comoros. The resulting orthography, published by Moinaecha Cheikh 1986a, b, maintained the English-Swahili style ⟨sh⟩ for /ʃ/, as had been proposed in the 1976 orthographies; however, it reverted to the more French-based ⟨tsh⟩ for /č/. The voiced phonemes /ž/ and /j/ also continued to use French spellings (as in Chamanga 1976). Although Moinaecha Cheikh's goal had been to emphasize the underlying unity between the different language varieties in the Comoros, in fact her orthography reflected Shingazidja better than Shinzwani. She proposed using the letter ⟨j⟩ for /ž/ — a sound which is present in Shinzwani, but not functional in Shingazidja. However, the rest of her symbols reflected an emphasis on the sounds and patterns of Shingazidja, such as ⟨pv⟩ for both /β/ and [v]. (The orthographically simpler ⟨v⟩ would have been sufficient for Shinzwani.)

It is therefore probably no surprise that her orthography was widely adopted for Shingazidja, but not for Shinzwani. It was used in the French-Shingazidja dictionary of Lafon 1991a, b, which was published a few years later; and it is used today in the Comorian-language version (largely Shingazidja) of *Al Watwan*, the nation's major newspaper, published in Moroni.

The rejection of Moinaecha Cheikh's orthography by Wanzwani may also reflect the deeper ethnic, historical, and political divide that continues to exist between Shinzwani and Shingazidja speakers. Although it may not have been his intent, Ahmed-Chamanga unwittingly seems to have contributed to widening this underlying rift when he introduced, also in 1986, a proposal of his own which argued for a multi-layered approach to orthographic choice in the Comoros (Ahmed-Chamanga, Lafon & Sibertin-Blanc 1986). One could, he reasoned, develop a common set of characters for those sounds which were the same in the two language groups, and different sets of unique but non-overlapping characters for sounds which were unique to each different language variety. Thus /č/ could be written ⟨ch⟩ in Shinzwani, and ⟨tsh⟩ in Shingazidja, with no resulting confusion; see Table 3. Likewise, one could write ⟨pv⟩ for /β/ in Shingazidja; but in Shinzwani, where the equivalent sound was sometimes [v] and sometimes [β], and the difference was not phonemic, ⟨v⟩ would suffice and be less confusing.

Table 3

	/š/	/č/	/ž/	/j/
Ahmed-Chamanga 1976	sh	ch	j	dj
Cheikh 1986	sh	tsh	j	dj
Ahmed-Chamanga 1986	sh	ch/tsh	j	dj

From a linguistic standpoint, this made sense, and this is what many Wanzwani have adopted when they write Shinzwani using Latin characters. Nonetheless, in 1992 Ahmed-Chamanga published a Shinzwani-French dictionary in which he used ⟨tsh⟩ rather than ⟨ch⟩ for /č/. Perhaps the increasing fragility of the Comorian ideal of unity, linguistically as well as politically, contributed to this decision. (However, he did not adopt the Shingazidja ⟨pv⟩.) Various spellings of /š č ž j/ through time are shown in Table 4.

Table 4

	/ʃ/	/tʃ/	/ʒ/	/j/
Arabic	ش	ش	ج	ج
French	ch	t(s)ch	j	dj
Swahili	sh	ch	Ø	j
Ottenheimer 1966	sh	ch	zh	j
Ali Soilihi 1976	sh	c	?	j
Ahmed-Chamanga 1976	sh	ch	j	dj
Cheikh 1986	sh	tsh	j	dj
Ahmed-Chamanga 1986	sh	ch/tsh	j	dj
Ahmed-Chamanga 1992	sh	tsh	j	dj
Peace Corps 1994	sh	ch	j	dj

In 1995, with the situation still in flux, I brought a bound, computer-printed, copy of my Shinzwani-English dictionary to the Comoros for a field test. I was particularly concerned to know how Wanzwani were now reading and writing /ʃ ʧ ʒ j/. By now, nearly all Wanzwani in their 20s have completed at least eight years in local French-style schools, many have completed lycée, and some have studied (or are currently studying) abroad. Working with a range of individuals from young schoolchildren to forty- and fifty-year-old adults, and from housewives to fishermen to schoolteachers, I reviewed the four sounds in terms of their phonetic and graphic interrelationships. I drew phonetic charts, explained the voiced/voiceless and fricative/affricate distinctions, and compared the phonetic, French, and English symbols for the sounds. The discussions were interesting. Most people responded by saying that it really didn't matter, since they were used to reading so many different languages and spellings. If I would just indicate somewhere what symbols were to stand for what sounds, they would adjust as necessary. Pushed to think about what they would really want to see and use, and how they would really want to have the language look on the printed page, most individuals decided that although they liked the English/Swahili ⟨sh⟩ for /ʃ/ and ⟨ch⟩ for /tʃ/, they also preferred the French ⟨j⟩ for /ʒ/ and ⟨dj⟩ for /j/. This is an interesting mix, as it resembles Ahmed-Chamanga's earlier orthography (1986) more than his later one (1992).

I decided to ask some English speakers for reactions as well, so I polled a few of the Peace Corps volunteers in the Comoros, and — later on — some American students in Kansas. As might be expected, the discussions were a bit different. By 1994 one of the Peace Corps workers had developed a small Shingazidja-English dictionary; he was using the English/Swahili ⟨sh⟩ and ⟨ch⟩

for the voiceless pair of sounds, and the French ⟨j⟩ and ⟨dj⟩ for the voiced pair. (It is interesting that ⟨j⟩ was specified at all, since the sound [ʒ] is used in Shinzwani but not in Shingazidja, which was the target language of the Peace Corps Dictionary.) In spite of this, the Peace Corps workers, as well as the American students in Kansas, preferred using ⟨j⟩ for /j/; they felt that using ⟨dj⟩ for the sound was unnecessarily cluttered. However, the combination ⟨zh⟩ for /ʒ/ was unfamiliar and confusing to them. As a result, they, like the Wanzwani, ended up settling on Chamanga's 1986 orthography as providing the clearest set of choices. For some of them, knowledge that the Comoros had been a French colony affected their choice. "If you know you are dealing with a French-influenced country, you kind of expect to see some French spelling", said one student. Finally, I put out a query to any and all Comorians and former Peace Corps volunteers who were subscribed to an English-speaking Comorian listserve, recently established by Comorians in the United States. With the exception of one individual who recalled having learned Ali Soilihi's 1976 Swahili-based orthography, and who still preferred using ⟨j⟩ for /j/, everyone who responded endorsed the use of English/Swahili ⟨sh⟩ and ⟨ch⟩ for /ʃ ʧ/, and French ⟨j⟩ and ⟨dj⟩ for /ʒ ʒj/.

7. Wider implications

In summer 1997 the island of Nzwani seceded from the Federal Islamic Republic of the Comoro Islands. As of this writing, a peaceful resolution to this highly charged political situation has not been found. Clearly, with the current political situation in the Comoros, much more is at stake than a simple spelling choice. In this case, as perhaps in many more cases around the world than we are aware, the choice of orthography for a dictionary — and the publication of that dictionary — have political implications that go beyond straightforward linguistic choice. If, for example, I follow contemporary Nzwani preference (and Ahmed-Chamanga 1986), then the Shinzwani-English dictionary will help to emphasize the underlying differences between Shinzwani and Shingazidja. If, on the other hand, I follow Ahmed-Chamanga 1992 (and ignore contemporary practice), then the dictionary could help to emphasize the underlying similarities between the language varieties known as Comorian.

Working with Wanzwani speakers on the Shinzwani-English dictionary provides important insights into orthography and the politics of representation. The complex interplay of orthography, identity, and choice in this small African

nation are instructive. An understanding of the dynamics involved can provide us with a model for understanding similar choices on a broader scale; and it can also help us to design and to predict the success of culturally and politically sensitive literacy programs.

8. Conclusion

Responsible linguists and linguistic anthropologists must fully understand these variables and their potential role in the process. Linguistic data will always need to be transcribed with as much accuracy as the ear permits, and good phonetic data will always be essential to good phonemic analysis. Getting from phonemic to graphemic representation, however, is not as straightforward as it might seem. Orthographic representation must go beyond linguistic analysis to take a much wider set of concerns into account — including history, cultural concerns, and the politics of national and ethnic identity. As Powers has written (1990:497), “any attempt [to impose linguistic rigor on native languages] should be seen as another form of patronization as well as linguistic hegemony ... The politics of orthography is not a theoretical idea, it is a reality, one which must be understood and assessed by all those involved with native languages.” The decisions we make as linguists and linguistic anthropologists, in representing individuals and their languages, have far-reaching implications. Understanding these implications is essential.

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