

The Past and Present Orthographies of Sidaama (Sidaamu Afoo)

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Abstract: This paper deals with the past and present orthographies of Sidaama, a Highland East Cushitic (henceforth HEC) language spoken in south-central Ethiopia. The first orthography of Sidaama was an Ethiopic-based one and was used before 1993. This orthography was initially used for liturgical purposes by various missionaries and in particular by Catholic mission churches. A revised version of this orthography was used also after 1979 for the purpose of mass literacy campaigns. The current orthography is a Latin-based one that was adopted for the language since 1993. The new orthography overcame the problem of representing geminates and long vowels. On the other hand, it was also fraught with its own drawbacks such as inaccurate representation of the glottal stop, the glottalic segments, the problem of allophony, unnecessary insertion of *i* after *y*, selection of problematic graphemes for some phonemes, etc. In this paper, some amendments are proposed to rectify these recurrent problems of the current orthography.

Introduction

General Information about the Language and its Speakers

Sidaama is one of Highland East Cushitic (HEC) languages which also comprises among others Hadiyya, Kambaata, Gedeo, and Burji.¹ The Sidaama people refer to themselves as *Sidaama* and their language as *Sidaamu ?afoo* [lit. “the mouth of Sidaama”] or *Sidaamu k’aale* [lit. “the word of Sidaama”]. Sidaama is also a term that is widely used in linguistic publications.

According to Sidaama oral literature, their ancestral fathers are *Bushshe* and *Maldiya*. The *Bushshe* subsumes five clans while *Maldiya* comprises nine. Each clan is further subdivided into sub-clans (የሲዳማ ብሔር ታሪክና ባህል / *Yəsidama Biher Tarikinna Bahil*, “The History and Culture of the Sidaama Ethnic Group” 2011: pp. 25-41). According to Hudson (1976: 233) although Sidaama is spoken in a larger area than other related HEC languages, it does not exhibit substantial dialect differences among speakers of different areas. Nevertheless, there are two varieties of Sidaama: the *ʔaliččo* (“highland”) dialect as opposed to the *gammoojje* (“lowland”) dialect.² The difference between these two dialects is very minimal and it involves a minor phonological difference and a few lexical ones. For instance, in the *ʔaliččo* dialect there is a tendency to use □ whereas the *gammoojje* dialect prefers /t/ as in: □*agge* vs. *t’agge* ‘legend, story’.

Most Sidaama speakers live in the Sidaama administrative region.³ Nonetheless, there are small enclaves of Sidaama populations among the neighboring Oromo and Gedeo. There are also other ethnic groups such as the Amhara, Wolaytta, Oromo, Soddo Gurage, Silte, etc. who live among the Sidaama mostly in towns. The capital Hawaasa is a microcosm of various ethnic groups and hence is known as ‘little Ethiopia’. The Sidaama administrative region is

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¹ Sidaama was previously known in the literature as Sidamo. However, the name Sidaama was adopted for two reasons. First, Sidaama is an ethnonym and serves as a base for a glottonym. In addition, up to 1993, the term Sidamo was misleading because it was also the name of the province where Sidaamu Afoo and other languages were spoken.

² The word *ʔaliččo* ‘highland’ is derived from *ʔale* ‘up’.

³ Until June 2020, Sidaama was one of the zones in the Southern Nations, Nationalities and People’s Region (SNNPR).

subdivided into 36 districts with *Hawaasa* as its capital and that of SNNPR. According to the 2007 national census of Ethiopia, the number of Sidaama mother tongue speakers was 2,925,171 (Central Statistical Authority 2010: 200). Hence, according to that census Sidaama was the fifth largest language in Ethiopia after Afaan Oromoo, Amharic, Tigrinya and Somali. In bigger towns, many Sidaamas speak Amharic as a second language. Amharic serves also as a *lingua franca* for speakers of various languages.

Except for Omotic speaking Wolayttas in the west, the Sidaama share the same border with the speakers of Cushitic languages: Guji Oromo in the south and south east, Arsi Oromo in the north east and Gedeo speakers in the south. Sidaama is an evergreen area with varied and wonderful topographical features such as hills, valleys and plains. Topographically Sidaama is divided into three zones: the highlands *ḥaliččo*, the midlands, and the lowlands *gammoojje*. Most of the Sidaama are subsistence farmers, while quite few of them are pastoralists. Several of them are engaged in trade and government jobs. They cultivate *Ensete ventricosum* ‘false banana’ (*weese* in Sidaama), wheat, maize, sugar cane, coffee, *qat* (*Catha edulis*), etc. The last two are important cash crops. According to Shack (1966) the Sidaama represent an “*enset*” culture complex area like other peoples of south Ethiopia. This is because the “*enset*” plant is the main staple food and its various parts are utilized for a wide-range of purposes.

Sidaama was used for teaching for the first time in the 1980s during the Adult Literacy Campaign initiated by the then communist regime of Ethiopia. Since August 1993, it is being used as a medium of instruction for primary education and has adopted a Latin orthography. It is also used for administrative and judicial matters.

Among HEC languages, Sidaama is a fairly studied one. Published grammatical works include Cerulli (1938), Moreno (1940), Hudson (1976), Gasparini (1978), Abebe *et.al* (1985), Wedekind (1990), Kawachi (2007), Anbessa (2012 and 2014). Regarding dictionaries Gasparini (1983), Hudson (1989) and Shimelis (2007) can be cited. In addition, there are several unpublished B.A. and M.A. theses written by students of Addis Ababa and Hawassa Universities. Moreover, several articles were published by linguists who studied the language.

Sidaama has 24 consonant phonemes and gemination is phonemic as in *ada* ‘paternal aunt’ vs. □ *adda* ‘truth’. Like other HEC languages, it has five short vowels and five long counterparts. Vowel length is contrastive as in *lalo* ‘cattle’ vs. *laalo* ‘plant’. The language has a rich morphological system. Nouns and adjectives may be marked morphologically for number, gender and case. Verbs are inflected for tense/aspect, mood, person, number, and gender. Sidaama has also an extensive nominal and verbal derivations. The language is canonically head-final with an SOV word order. Adjectives, demonstratives and relative clauses precede head nouns while embedded clauses precede main clauses.

Review of Previous Studies on Sidaama Orthography

The first publication on Sidaama orthography is that of Yri (2004). The main aim of Yri’s paper was to expose the shortcomings of Sidaama orthography which is adopted since 1993 and proposing amendments in order to rectify the inaccuracies. He also published another article in 2011 which was similar to his earlier article. One of its aim was modifying the amendments he proposed in his paper of 2004. My paper is an extensive one and differs from those of Yri in several points. This article, unlike Yri’s, also analyzes the pre-1993 Ethiopic-based Sidaama orthography and fleshes out its strengths and weaknesses. In addition, I differ from Yri regarding some of the findings and the way I analyzed the facts. Moreover, I have listed each type of inaccuracy which was accompanied by a rich set of data. My paper contains around six tables while Yri (2004 and 2011) cryptically summarizes it in a single chart. Although Yri and I propose similar amendments, in some of them there are differences. For instance, based on phonological grounds and data from related HEC languages, I have argued for existence of /□/ or <’> in words which otherwise began with vowels. My discussion covers more than a page while Yri (2004) devotes few lines and says nothing about related HEC languages. In addition, while Yri recommends insertion of <’> in words which otherwise began with vowels, I do not support this on

grounds of simplification. Finally, I have tried to explain why the reforms proposed by Yri were not implemented.

Hence, the aim of this paper will be analyzing the past and present orthographies of Sidaama in a broader manner. The data sources of the research are based on various educational primers, religious books and tracts, cultural books, various magazines, etc. In addition, Sidaama language teachers those who were involved in the orthography design were consulted for explanations and clarifications.

Organization of the Present Study

The paper has three chapters and is organized as follows. The first chapter is this brief introduction while the second one deals with the history of Sidaama orthography from the earliest times until 1979. It touches on various efforts of orthography development by Christian missionaries, in particular from 1933 and onwards. In the third chapter, the modified Ethiopic script that was used during the mass literacy campaigns beginning from 1979 will be presented. The fourth and final section treats a Latin-based Sidaama orthography that was devised in 1993. In both sections, challenges of each orthography will be discussed. In addition, recommendations for the improvement of the current script will be proposed. Towards the end, the major points raised in the paper are summarized.

The transcription adopted in this paper differs from the standard IPA only in the following point. Instead of the IPA V: and C: long vowels and geminates are represented by doubling the vowel or the consonant.⁴

The Phonemic Inventory of Sidaama

In order to comprehend well the various Sidaama orthographies, it would be imperative first to introduce the consonantal and vowel inventory of the language.

Consonants

The consonant inventory of Sidaama contains 24 phonemes which are arranged according to their place and manner of articulation.

Table 1. Consonant Phonemes of Sidaama

		Labial	Alveolar	Palato-alveolar	Velar	Glottal
Stops	Voiceless		t	č	k	ʔ
	Voiced	b	d	j	g	
	Ejective	p'	t'	č'	k'	
	Implosive		d̥			
Fricatives	Voiceless	f	s	š		h
Nasals		m	n	ɲ		
Liquids	Lateral		l			
	Flap		r			
Glides		w		y		

⁴ The following abbreviations are used in this paper:

1	first person	F	feminine	NOM	nominative	SG	singular / singulative
2	second person	GEN	genitive	NMZ	nominalizer	< >	encloses a grapheme
3	third person	IMPERF	imperfective	PASS	passive	→	becomes
COP2	vv-t copula	INF	infinitive	PERF	perfective		
CNV	converb	M	masculine			PL	plural

(Adapted from Anbessa 2014: 17)⁵

The consonants /p/, /v/, /z/, /ɣ/, and /s'/ which are found only in loanwords are excluded. These are loanwords mostly of European origin that have made their way via Amharic as in: **paarte** 'party' (Eng.), **viidiyo** 'video' (Eng.), **zufane** 'throne' (Amh.), **televi**□ine 'television' (Eng.), etc. All consonants may occur either as short (simplex) or long (geminate).

Vowels

Sidaama has a five-vowel system. However, since vowel length is contrastive there are five long counterparts, too.

Table 2. Vowel Phonemes of Sidaama

		Front	Central	Back
High	short	i		u
	long	ii		uu
Mid	short	e		o
	long	ee		oo
Low	short		a	
	long		aa	

(Adapted from Anbessa 2014: 18)

Vowel phonemes occur both in word-medial or word-final positions.

The Pre-1979 Sidaama Orthography

All cases of pre-1979 Sidaama language development are related to activities of Christian missionaries. Before the arrival of various Christian denominations, the Sidaama had their own ethno-religious practices. For instance, they believed in existence of God - *Magano* People were expected to follow *halale* 'truth', the accepted moral beliefs. Veneration of the ancestral father called *akaako* was also part of the practice (የሲዳማ ብሔር ታሪክና ባህል /*Yasidama Biher Tarikinna Bahill*, "The History and Culture of the Sidaama Ethnic Group" 2003 E.C.: pp. 222-224).

After the incorporation of Sidaama into the Ethiopian empire in 1891, several missions and churches were established in the area.⁶ The first one was the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahdo Church (EOTC) that built churches in various towns and settler encampments. However, it appears that the effort exerted by EOTC either to teach or to convert the local population was insignificant. Regarding this fact Egeland (2016: 38) writes, "The EOTC did not conduct active evangelism towards the Sidama, who adhered to Sidama ethno-religious practices".

According to Tolo (1998: 108), "The first foreign missionaries appeared among the Sidama people in the spring 1928". Egeland (2016: 40) claims that the first foreign religious congregation that was established in 1928 was the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM). Assisted by native speaker consultants, they were the first to translate the Gospel of Mark into Sidaama.

⁵ The above chart differs from Anbessa (2014: 17) in that palatal is now labeled palato-alveolar.

⁶ There is also a legend that Sidama was integrated to the Ethiopian Empire during the time of Zere'a Yaacob, whom the Sidama call "Saraqo".

The Gospel was written in Ethiopic script and was published in 1933 by the British and Foreign Bible Society marking the first instance of a written text in Sidaama.

According to Egeland (2016: 41) the brief Italian conquest (1935–1941) resulted in expulsion of foreign missionaries and the closing down of churches. Instead, the Italians established Pontificio Istituto Missioni Estere (PIME), “Pontifical Institute of Foreign Mission”. This period saw also the publication of *Manuale di Sidamo* (1940) by Moreno. After the defeat of the Italians, Emperor Haile Sellasie I allowed missionaries to work in non-EOTC areas beginning from 1944. After 1948, various missions of Scandinavian origin (Norwegian Lutheran, Seventh-day Adventist, Swedish Philadelphia, Finnish Free Foreign Mission) were established (Egeland 2016: 37). The preaching, prayers and religious songs were conducted in Amharic because of the heterogeneous nature of the population in the towns.

The year 1964 saw the re-establishment of the Roman Catholic Mission order known as Comboni (Egeland *ibid.*). The Italian Catholic missionaries built schools and clinics in Hawaasa and several rural areas. In addition, compared to other Christian denominations they contributed a lot towards the development of the Sidaama language. First, they made all the necessary efforts to learn Sidaama so that they could communicate with the indigenous people. Hence, quite from the beginning all religious sermons were held in Sidaama. In addition, they conducted linguistic and anthropological researches on the language and hence can be considered trail-blazers in this respect.⁷

The Catholics invested more time and energy in learning Sidaama and conducting research primarily for liturgical and evangelization purposes. Gradually but surely such an effort led to Sidaama to become a written language. In addition, the four Gospels and various religious tracts were translated into Sidaama using the Ethiopic script. The two books which can be cited in this respect are: Dominic (1973/1981) ሁጫቶ መጣፋቲ [huč’č’atto mat’aafati] ‘The Book of Prayer’ and Dominic (1974/1982) ሞቲቺንክ የሱስ ክርስቶስ ከራንቾ ወንገል ‘The Holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ’.

- | | | | | | |
|-----|--|--------------|--------------|----------|---------|
| (1) | ሁጫቶ | መጣፋቲ | | | |
| | huč’č’atto-te | mat’aafaa-ti | | | |
| | prayer-GEN.F | book-COP2 | | | |
| | ‘It is a book of prayer’ | | | | |
| (2) | ሞቲቺንክ | የሱስ | ክርስቶስ | ከራንቾ | ወንገል |
| | mootičč-inke | yesus | kirstos-i | keerančo | wongale |
| | lord-1PL.GEN | Jesus | Christ-GEN.M | peaceful | Gospel |
| | ‘The Holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ’ | | | | |

In addition to Italian Catholics, other Christian denominations too produced religious works in Sidaama using the Ethiopic Script. For instance, the Ethiopian Evangelical Church of Mekane Yesus (EECMY) of the South Ethiopia Synod published several tracts in Sidaama. Most of them were translated and compiled by Fisseha Senkato and two of them are *Sidaamau Faarsa* ‘Sidaama Religious Songs’ (1980) and a reader entitled *Mittimate Guma* ‘the Fruit of Unity’ (1978).⁸

⁷ Gasparini’s Sidamo-English dictionary (1983), grammatical mimeographs of Gasparini (1977) and Macani (1990), Dominic’s (1989) and Lonfernini’s (1971) anthropological publications, etc. can be cited as main examples.

⁸ Kjell Magne Yri, personal communication.

Both gemination and vowel length are phonemic in Sidaama (Anbessa 2014: 17-18). However, the Ethiopic script cannot indicate these critical differences as opposed to Latin-based script as illustrated below (where –a marks the infinitive).

- | | | | | | | |
|-----|----------|------------|----|--------|-----------------|----|
| (3) | a. kis-a | ‘to touch’ | b. | kiis-a | ‘to compensate’ | ከሳ |
| (4) | a. gow-a | ‘to sew’ | b. | gowwa | ‘foolish’ | ጎዋ |

The ingenious solution of the Catholic missionaries was writing Sidaama words in Ethiopic script by leaving vowel length and gemination contrast to the discretion of native speakers. This strategy worked finely because native speakers of Sidaama of that period, particularly those who were educated in Missionary schools, knew how to pronounce the words of Sidaama written in Ethiopic script based on the context i.e. they knew when a consonant in a given word is either single or geminate and when a vowel is either short or long. Another factor which played a role may be the fact that primary level education was held in Amharic and hence those that went through the then school system were familiar with the Ethiopic script. A verse from Matthew’s Gospel illustrates the ease of reading and comprehending.⁹

(5)

ጎካ	ዋሮ፣	የሱሲ፣	ዮሐንስ	ጠማቃማራ፣
Hakka	waro,	Yesuus-i	Yohaannis-inni	t’ammaq-am-a-ra
that	time	Jesus-nom	Johannes-by	baptize-pass-inf-to
ጋሊሎ-ኒ	ዮርዳኖስ	ዋይዋ	ዳይ።	
Galiil-u-nni	Yordaanos-i	way-wa ¹⁰	day-í	
Galilee-gen.m-from	Jordan-gen.m	water-to	come-3m.sg.perf	

‘At that time Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan river to be baptized by John’.

(Mt 3: 13 , ሞቴዎስ የሱስ ክርስቶስ ከራንቾ ወንጌል - The Holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ)

Orthography Development after 1979

The other important milestone in the orthographic history of Sidaama was the “Ethiopian National Literacy Campaign” which was launched in 1979 by the Provisional Military Administrative Council (known as the *Därg*) and that continued until 1991. The 1979 campaign was actually an extension of the 1975 campaign entitled the “National Work Campaign for Development through Cooperation”.¹¹ However, during the 1974 campaign, literacy was conducted in five languages and Sidaama was not amongst them. The main aim of the campaigns was elimination of illiteracy. In the 1979 literacy campaign, around 15 languages that accounted for 90% of the Ethiopian population were selected and Sidaama was one of them. These 15 languages were reduced into writing using the Ethiopic script (Hailu 1993). At the initial stage, the teaching was conducted in local languages. However, according to Cohen (2000: 90), “...it proved impossible to find teachers and indeed teaching materials for many of the local languages, and often rural populations expressed a desire to learn Amharic as opposed to their local language”.

⁹ The author of this paper was educated in a Catholic primary school in the 1970s and was able to read religious manuscripts of Sidaama written in the Ethiopic script.

¹⁰ Although properly *waa* is ‘water’ in this context it can also designate a river.

¹¹ Although the campaign was announced in October 1974 it was actually launched in December 1975.

Teaching primers and other materials were prepared in Sidaama for the adult education program. One of the books is entitled ፍደሌና ጭይሺሻ ሮሳ *fidale-nna č'oy-šiiš-a ros-a* [letter-and speak-CAUS2-INF learn-INF] ‘learning *fidal* and reading’. The consonants of the Ethiopic-based Sidaama orthography are the following ones and are based on the above literacy primer entitled ፍደሌና ጭይሺሻ ሮሳ (1977/1984).

Table 3. The Consonants of the Ethiopic-Based Sidaama Orthography

Ethiopic	ሀ	ለ	ም	ስ	ር	ሽ	ቅ	ብ
IPA	h	l	m	s	r	ʃ	kʷ	b
Ethiopic	ተ	ቸ	እ	ን	ጎ	ከ	ው	ይ
IPA	t	tʃ	ʔ	n	ɲ	k	w	y
Ethiopic	ድ	ጅ	ግ	ጥ	ጭ	ጵ	ፍ	
IPA	d	dʒ	g	tʰ	tʃʰ	pʰ	f	

The alveolar implosive of Sidaama i.e. /d/ and the four glottal-sonorant clusters (also known as a “glottalised continuants”) do not have equivalent graphemes in Ethiopic script. Hence, a strikethrough was placed across the relevant Ethiopic letter in order to represent /d/ and the four glottal-sonorant consonant clusters, as illustrated below.

Table 4. /d/ and the Glottal-Sonorant Clusters in Ethiopic Script

Ethiopic	ፍ	ጅ	ም	ን	ር
IPA	d	ʔl	ʔm	ʔn	ʔr

There is no explanation why ፍ /ʔy/ was left out although it has the same status as the above four glottal-sonorant clusters.¹² A special Ethiopic grapheme was created for glottal-sonorant clusters because during that time a cluster was viewed as if it is a single phoneme. However, such a view was inaccurate since these are sequences of two consonants: a glottal stop followed by a sonorant. In the current Latin-based script, this view is adopted and hence they are treated as sequences of two consonants. For instance, regarding the sequence /ʎ/ the following is claimed in Indiriyas *et.al.* (2007:23), “*Konninni ka’nohunni, /ʎ/ mitte qoonqo ikkitukkinni lame qoonqo hoodishshati...Therefore, /ʎ/ is not a single segment but rather a sequence of two segments...*” [translation and italics are mine]. The *fidäl* grid adopted for Sidaama orthography has the following structure and it is prepared by the author.

Table 5. A Sample *fidäl* Grid for Sidaama Orthography¹³

Order	1 st	2 nd	3 rd	4 th	5 th	6 th	7 th
Ethiopic	Cä ብ	Cu ቡ	Ci ቢ	Ca ባ	Ce ቤ	Cə ብ	Co ቦ
Sidaama	Ca ባ	Cu/Cuu ቡ	Cii ቢ	Ca ባ	Ce/Cee ቤ	C/Ci ብ/ቢ	Co/Coo ቦ

¹² A glottal-sonorant cluster (also known as a “glottalised continuant”) is not a single segment but is rather a sequence of two segments: a glottal plosive followed by one of the five sonorants. Hence, designing an Ethiopic grapheme for each glottal-sonorant cluster was inaccurate from the outset. The modified Ethiopic graphemes give the impression that a glottal-sonorant cluster must be viewed as a single segment and that is not true.

¹³ The above *fidäl* grid was adopted not only for writing educational primers but was also adopted by Ethiopian Bible Society in order to write Cushitic languages.

The difference in representation of Sidaama by Ethiopic letters arises because of the difference in the number of vowels. Amharic has seven vowels while Sidaama has ten: five short and five corresponding long vowels. This holds true also for other Cushitic languages. As noted by Appleyard (2012: 202) a phonological feature which is common to many Cushitic languages is a five vowel system (/i, e, a, o, u/) whereby length is phonemic or contrastive. The difference in the vowel structure between Amharic on one hand and Cushitic and Omotic languages on the other was one of the main challenges of the Ethiopic script. Regarding this fact Cohen (2000: 9) writes, “The Ethiopic script was an unsuitable vehicle for these languages. It failed, for example, to allow for the greater number of vowel sounds that are present in Cushitic and Omotic languages, and to mark gemination,”.

The above *fidäl* grid that was adopted for Sidaama had a number of problems. The most challenging ones were the 1st and the 6th Ethiopic orders which represented Sidaama **Ca** and **Ci**, respectively instead of the expected **Cä** and **Cə** of Ethiopic. Hence, one who was educated based on Ethiopic script cannot easily adjust himself/herself to this new representation. The other hurdle was an instance of under-representation. This is an instance whereby an orthography uses fewer graphemes than there are phonemes or syllables. Thus, three of the Ethiopic characters were employed to represent a Sidaama CV or CVV i.e. a consonant that was immediately followed either by a short or long vowel. These are the 2nd,

5th and 7th orders. This emanated because an Ethiopic script does not have symbols for vocalic length. Nevertheless, these three Ethiopic orders were manageable for Sidaama readers because they represented similar vowels except for length. Hence, an educated Sidaama speaker could either shorten or lengthen the vowel depending on the context of a given word. Here are some illustrative examples.

- (6) a. ቶና *duna* ‘to spill’
 b. ዱና *duuna* ‘to pile up’
 (7) a. ቆላ *k’ola* ‘to answer’
 b. ቆላ *k’oola* ‘wing’

From the author’s personal experience, it would have been better to leave out the Ethiopic 1st order (which only causes confusion) and stick to the remaining six orders. In addition, the 6th order should have been selected to represent not the confusing **Ci** but rather a single Sidaama consonant which appears as a first member of a consonant cluster, for instance ን /n/ as in ኪንፎ *kinfo* ‘stone’. The vowel duration dilemma should have been left to the Sidaama reader who can deduce it easily from his native linguistic competence.

The challenge of the Ethiopic-based Sidaama orthography is illustrated below by a number of examples taken from a primer entitled “ፍደሌና ጮይሺሻ ሮሳ” *fidale-nna č’oy-šiiš-a ros-a* ‘learning *fidel* and reading’, 1973 E.C. Numbers in parentheses refer to the page numbers in the primer.

Table 6. Some Examples from “ፍደሌና ጮይሺሻ ሮሳ” *fidale-nna č’oy-šiiš-a ros-a*

Sidaama Words in Ethiopic	Correct Forms in Ethiopic	IPA Form	Gloss
በደላ (7)	ባዳላ	Badala	‘maize’
ፈረሾ (14)	ፋራሾ	faraffo	‘horse’
ለመላ (9)	ላማላ	lamala	‘seven’
ከከከ (2)	ኪኪኪ	kikkisi	‘He touched repeatedly’
ጥንቅ (11)	ጢንቅ	t’ink’i	‘He collected.’
ልጥሰ (7)	ሊጢሲ	lit’isi	‘cause to sink’

In addition to the problems associated with the Ethiopic 1st and 6th order, a careful examination of the aforementioned primer reveals many inconsistencies regarding the consonant and vowel value of Sidaama letters. For instance, a cursory glance of page 1 shows more than 20 errors of representation. Consider the examples below where **-a** marks the infinitive.

Table 7. Examples of Inconsistent Forms from “ፍደሌና ጮይሺሻ ሮሳ”

Proposed Representation	Actual Representation	IPA Form	Gloss
ኢብ	ኢቢ	iibbi	‘it became hot’
ኩላ	ኩላ	kul-a	‘to tell’
ኪሻ	ኪሻ	keeff-a	‘to be late’
መካ	መና	manna	‘people’
ዎመ	ዎማ	woma	‘chief’
ቤብ	ብባ	beebba	‘injustice’

In addition to educational primers, an important work that was published based on the Ethiopic script during that period was the Sidaama New Testament (1990) *ሃሮ ጎንዶሮ haaro gondooro* ‘New Covenant’ (from *haaro* ‘new’ and *gondooro* ‘covenant’). An example is presented from the heading of chapter 2 of the Gospel of Matthew.

(8)

አሪሾ	ፋልተኖ	ውድን	አዎንቶ	ደጉ	ገረ
<i>ʔarriŋfo</i>	<i>ful-tanno</i>	<i>wid-i-nni</i>	<i>ʔayaanto</i>	<i>dag-gú</i>	<i>gara</i>
sun	come out-3f.sg.imperf	direction-gen-from	wise men	come-3m.perf	way
‘How the wise men/astrologers arrived from the east’					

If a Sidaama speaker glances at the above heading only two of the words i.e. አሪሾ [ʔarriŋfo] ‘sun’ and አዎንቶ [ʔayaanto] ‘wise men/astrologers’ match the Ethiopic characters and hence can be read easily. For the rest four words, the speaker has to memorize the complicated matching rules between Ethiopic graphemes and Sidaama syllables and segments. This means for most of the words within a sentence one must pause in order to decipher the pronunciation rule and consequently this greatly reduces the speed of the reading.¹⁴

In addition to religious tracts and literacy materials two sizable translations can be cited. The first is the afore-mentioned Sidaama New Testament entitled *ሃሮ ጎንዶሮ Haaro Gondooro* ‘New Covenant’ which was published in 1990. The second one is the 1987 constitution of The People’s Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (PDRE) that was translated into several languages based on Ethiopic script and Sidaama was one of them. The body that was responsible for the translation was the then Institute for the Study of Ethiopian Nationalities that the Derg established in March 1983. A two-man team was formed for this purpose and one of them was the author of this paper. During that period, we were told to stick to the *fidäl* grid under Table 3 during the translation. When a third of the translation was completed, there was a trial reading of the text that proved to be very difficult and involved a pause and re-reading of almost every sentence because of the afore-mentioned inaccurate correspondence of Ethiopic characters and their Sidaama equivalents. Based on this difficulty, the author proposed to the persons in charge

¹⁴ If given a chance, it would have been better to write the above heading in Ethiopic script as follows: አሪሾ ፋልተኖ ዊዲኒ አዎንቶ ዳጉ ጋራ. This heading could have been easily read and understood by educated Sidaama speakers.

to permit us to leave out the 1st Ethiopic order and modify the representation of the 6th order. However, the plea was ignored and hence he slowly left the project.

The use of the Ethiopic script in order to write Sidaama and other Ethiopian languages was not a problem by itself.¹⁵ The evidence is the ability of elites of that period who were educated in Missionary schools in reading easily religious materials that were written in Ethiopic script¹⁶. In addition, there are Cushitic languages such as Awngi, Xamtanga, and K'abeena (until recently) which are using the Ethiopic writing system (Zelalem 2012: 41) since 1994. Hence, the root cause of the problem was the inaccurate representation of Sidaama syllables by that of Ethiopic characters.

The Post 1993 Orthography

The most dynamic development in Sidaama was witnessed after 1993. This is because the then Transitional Government of Ethiopia permitted the use of native languages for primary education and other purposes.¹⁷ Thus, the following actions were taken.

- (i) On Nechase 10, 1985 E.C. (August 16, 1993) Sidaama was declared the language of instruction in elementary schools and the language of administration and jurisdiction in Sidaama zone.
- (ii) The name Sidaama was adopted as an ethnonym and *Sidaamu Afoo* as a glottonym instead of the misleading Sidamo.
- (iii) A Sidaama language committee that was composed of Addis Ababa University graduates and local teachers devised an orthography which was based on Latin script.

Devising an Orthography

In the summer of 1992, the Sidaama language team adopted a Latin script for the language. This was based on the right bestowed upon ethnic groups to develop and use their language. According to Yohannes Latamo (personal communication), the Latin-based Sidaama orthography was based on that of Afaan Oromoo without a slightest digression. Since Sidaama and Afaan Oromoo belong to the East Cushitic branch, they share similar phonemes. However, that does not mean one has to copy and paste all the graphemes proposed for Afaan Oromoo. Less complex alternative graphemes could have been adopted. In addition, the Sidaama language team did not possess the requisite knowledge of Sidaama phonology and this created many inaccuracies from the outset that are not corrected even after a lapse of 27 years. After the adoption of the orthography, books for elementary education and a guidance booklet for primary teachers were prepared under the supervision of the Curriculum Department of the Ministry of Education.

After the adoption of a Latin-based script and publication of educational primers, Sidaama began to be used as a language of instruction for primary education of first cycle (grade 1-4). Since 1994, it also began to be used in various governmental offices and for jurisdiction. Many literacy materials and various books were published. The lexicon was considerably expanded

¹⁵ This fact holds true if one chooses a purely linguistic approach for designing an orthography leaving aside political and other considerations.

¹⁶ The most probable reason is the primary education of the elites of that era that was based on Ethiopic script.

¹⁷ This was enshrined in the constitution of 1995 under article 39.2 as follows:

“Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has the right to speak, to write and to develop its own language; to express, to develop and to promote its culture; and to preserve its history”.

by the incorporation of neologisms that consequently led to a publication of a tri-lingual Sidaama-Amharic-English Dictionary (Shimelis 2007). Performing arts that included drama and theatre were produced in the language and radio broadcasts commenced. A three hour per week TV program began in 2016 and quite recently, Sidaama Media Network (SMN) started a daily broadcast. Since 2014 a B.A. in linguistics in Sidaamu Afoo was launched at Hawassa University.

The Structure of a Latin-Based Sidaama Script

The Latin-based script is a phonemic one and consists of 33 symbols known as *fidalla* ‘letters’ (the singular form is *fidale* from Amh. ፊደል [*fidäl*] ‘letter’) of which 26 are single letters while the remaining seven are digraphs.

Table 8. Sidaama Orthography and its Phonemic Equivalent

Grapheme	Phoneme	Grapheme	Phoneme
a	a	r	r
b	b	s	r
c	ƒ	t	t
d	d	u	u
e	e	v	v
f	f	w	w
g	g	x	t'
h	h	y	y
i	i	z	z
j	dʒ	ch	ƒ
k	k	dh	d'
l	l	ny	ɲ
m	m	ph	p'
n	n	sh	ʃ
o	o	ts	s'
p	p	zh	ʒ
q	k'		

(Adapted from *Sidama-Amharic-English Dictionary*, 2007 E.C., p. iv)

The above chart should have contained 34 graphemes and not 33. This is because

it excludes the glottal stop ʔ (whose graphemic equivalent is <'>) which is an important consonantal segment in Sidaama. It seems that /ʔ/ was omitted because of an inaccurate analysis of Sidaama phonology. Five of the phonemes which appear under Table 8 are not considered Sidaama phonemes because they are exclusively found in loanwords. These are: /p/, /v/, /s'/, /z/, and /ʒ/. As can be seen in the above table, single sounds are mostly represented by single graphemes. The exceptions are the palato-alveolars /ƒ/, /ʃ/, /ʒ/, and /ɲ/ the ejectives /p' and /s' plus the implosive /d' which are represented by digraphs. Gemination of segments is indicated by doubling of the corresponding graphemes. For instance, *ƒƒ* = <chch> while *ɲɲ* = <nyny>. Vowel representation is straightforward. There are five short vowels and their long counterparts are simply indicated by doubling the vowel. All consonants and vowels can be written either in small letters (*shiiammaadda fidalla*) or in capital ones (*jajjabba fidalla*).¹⁸

¹⁸ The basic forms of these words are *šiima* ‘small’, *jaba* ‘big’, and *fidale* ‘letter’. The words *šiiammaadda* ‘small ones’, *jajjabba* ‘big ones’, and *fidalla* ‘letters’ are plural forms.

Strengths of the Current Sidaama Orthography

Based on various criteria that are used to measure the standard of orthographies the Latin-based Sidaama orthography is a fairly accurate one. According to Wedekind and Charlotte (1999: 9) a good orthography is a one that meets the following three principles: the phonological principle (one sound represented by one symbol), acceptability and harmonization (using graphemes common to neighboring languages avoiding the need to re-learn), and practicality (choosing easily available graphemes that are easy to use and teach).

The current Sidaama orthography is fairly a sound orthography since it meets all the three principles. For instance, it satisfies the phonological principle and is easier to learn since usually there is a match between a phoneme and a grapheme that represents it. Hence, it can be termed as a *shallow orthography* owing to a higher degree of correspondence between a phoneme and a grapheme. Nevertheless, sometimes the correspondence is not an exact one as will be discussed under §4.4. It meets the acceptability and harmonization principle since it employs similar graphemes that are used by neighboring Cushitic languages. Sidaama orthography also fulfills the practicality principle since almost all the graphemes are readily available on computer keyboards and are easy to use and this in turn facilitates reading and writing.

According to Agbo (2013: 2-3) traditional orthographies, as opposed to modern ones, suffer two major types of inconsistencies. The first is known as many-to-one- correspondence or over-representation whereby a single phoneme is represented by a number of graphemes. For instance, in English /f/ can be represented in addition to <f> by the digraphs <ph> and <gh> as in *phone* and *laugh*. The opposite of this is a one-to-many correspondence or under-representation whereby a monograph i.e. a single grapheme represents more than one phoneme. Thus, the English grapheme <c> can represent /č/, /k/ or /s/ as in *chair*, *call*, and *century*, respectively. Under-representation is a challenge to readers because they are forced to memorize the phonemic equivalent of a given grapheme when it co-occurs with other graphemes. The current Sidaama orthography does not suffer both types of inconsistencies making it easier to learn.

Challenges of the Current Sidaama Orthography

As has been mentioned under §4.1, the current Sidaama orthography was simply copied from Afaan Oromoo orthography as it is without even a rudimentary amendment. There were also errors that were introduced by Sidaama language team and were not amended even after the orthography was used for a lengthy period of time.¹⁹

Being a native speaker of a language alone will not guarantee the designing of good orthography. It would be much better if the native speaker is also a linguist since he will have a better understanding of the language system. Corroborating this claim Wedekind (1997:3) writes:

All sounds of a language are part of a "system". And like other systems - physics, or biology or chemistry - language "systems" also have their mechanisms, "rules" and "laws". It is for this reason that people who wish

¹⁹ During my trip to Ethiopia in 1994, I have recommended to Yohannes (and his colleagues) to amend at least some of the errors observed in the orthography that was adopted a year earlier. During that occasion, I even used the following Sidaama proverb that illustrates the importance of nipping a problem in the bud: □*afale galturo niga assiddanno* 'If a liver is left overnight it will grow veins'. Yri in his articles of (2004) and (2011) aired similar complaints. However, both our pleas fell on deaf ears and no amendments were made until now.

to handle such a "system" need to have a clear understanding of its mechanisms, "rules", and "laws". To plan chemical processes without a clear understanding the chemistry involved would be dangerous. To plan orthographies without a clear understanding of the phonology involved would be irresponsible.

Hence, according to this author, one of the shortcomings of the present Sidaama orthography probably emanated because a linguist (with a good degree of competence) was not involved in the project from the very outset. For instance, in the current Sidaama orthography a single <'> represents a geminate glottal stop while <'> represents a single glottal stop. In addition, <dh> represents both a single alveolar implosive i.e. /d/ and a geminate i.e. /dd/. However, /d/ whose orthographic equivalent is <dh> occurs as simplex in word-initial position only. The /d/ in word-medial position is usually geminate.²⁰ Hence based on the above fact a word such as *badhe* 'back' is inaccurate and must be written as *badhdhe*. This fact amply illustrates that designing an orthography of a language without understanding its phonological operations can lead to serious errors.

Even if a linguist is involved in the designing of an orthography, sometimes the political atmosphere can interfere in the process and may hamper the output as was discussed under §3. Likewise, after several years some members of the Sidaama language team were already aware of some of the inaccuracies in the orthography. However, it seems that they did not try to rectify the errors because the highly centralized political environment of the time discouraged criticism and orthographical amendments. After realizing the deficiency of the script, Yri (2004) discusses the problem areas and proposes a number of remedial strategies for the orthography. Yri (2011) is a short article that summarizes the earlier inaccuracies and proposes alternative corrections to his (2004) proposal. It is based on the orthography section of a brief Sidaama grammar entitled *Sidaamu afii jirte* (2007) 'Wealth of the Sidaama Language'.²¹ Again, his reforms were not adopted. The author wonders if Yri took into account the prevailing political environment of that period.

After this informative introduction, it is time to raise in detail the deficiencies of the 1993 orthography.

(i) In the present Sidaama orthography a single <'> represents a geminate glottal stop while <'> represents a single glottal stop. Such kind of representation is not only wrong but also runs counter to accepted and logical phonological representations. Regarding this inaccurate analysis, Yri (2004: 5) writes,

I still think the ways of representing or not representing the glottal stop intervocalically is the most unfortunate feature of the Latin script orthography of Sidaama. ... the relationship shown is outright confusing, inconsistent, and wrong. It is confusing because it shows as long what is in reality short, and vice versa, inconsistent because in most other cases simplex consonants are written as such and geminated are written as two equal graphemes,...

²⁰ A simplex /d/ can occur word-medially. However, a weakening rule will automatically change an intervocalic /d/ into [r] at a phonetic level. This means [r] is an allophone of /d/. For instance, /had-a/ → [ha'ra] 'to go' (from /had-/ 'go' and /-a/ 'infinitive'). Nevertheless, in Sidaama orthography a word such as /hadā/ 'to go' must be written as *hadha* and not *ha'ra*. This is because the orthography is a phonemic one and hence the graphemes represent phonemes and not their allophones.

²¹ The concise grammar book is written in Sidaama and most of it is based on my doctoral dissertation (Sileshi Worqneh, personal communication).

In order to illustrate inaccuracies which are encountered in various printed materials two books were randomly selected for the current research. The first one is entitled *SIDAAMU AFOO Rosaanote Maxaaafa, Umi Kifile*,²² 2006 E.C. (henceforth SARMUK) 'Sidaama Language book for 1st Grade students' and *Sidaamu-Amaaarunna-Inglizete Qaalla Borraasincho*²³, 2007 (henceforth SAIQB) 'Sidama-Amharic-English Dictionary'.

The examples below are taken from SARMUK and the pages are indicated within parentheses.

(a) *A single glottal stop instead of a geminate one*

In the examples below /ba'-/ 'was lost', /e'-/ 'enter', and /-tú/ '3FSG./3 PL.PERF.'. When /-tú/ is suffixed to stem-final segments, /t/ is totally assimilated to stem-final obstruents.

- (9) a. *ba'-u instead of ba'-ú 'She was /They were lost' (p.31)
 b. *e'-u instead of e'-ú 'She/They entered' (p.32)'

The following sentential fragment from SARMUK on p. 69 is also another illustration.

- (10) *Qamal-cho kanchafare la'-e...*
 Monkey-SGV locusts see-3F.SG/3PL.CNV
 'The monkey, having seen locusts,...'

In sentence (10), the converb should have been written /la'- 'e/ i.e. with a geminate glottal stop instead of a single one. This is because the *t* of the 3F./PL.SG.CNV i.e. /-te/ regressively assimilates to the stem final ' of *la'* 'see' resulting in '' i.e. a geminated glottal stop.

(b) *A geminate glottal stop instead of a single one*

- (11) (i) *me''e* instead of *me'e* 'goats' (SARMUK p.45)
 (ii) *ri''i* instead of *ri'i* 'He was hidden.' (SARMUK p.46).

(c) *Omission of the glottal stop where it is warranted, in particular between two non-identical vowels*

Illustrative examples for this purpose are taken from SAIQB and the pages are indicated within parentheses.

- (i) A word such as *ea* 'to enter' (SAIQB p. 119) instead of *e'a* and *meine* 'mushroom' (SAIQB p. 364) which should have been written *me'ine*. This incorrect analysis also resulted in a violation of accepted phonological realities of HEC languages. For instance, diphthongs are very rare while triphthongs are unheard of. However, because of such erroneous analysis one

²² The glossing of the 1st grade Sidaama language book is provided below.

<i>Sidaam-u</i>	<i>Afoo,</i>	<i>Ros-aano-te</i>	<i>Maxaaafa,</i>	<i>Um-i</i>	<i>Kifile</i>	
Sidaama-GEN.M	mouth	learn-NMZ-GEN.F	book	head-GEN.M	class	

'Sidaama language book for 1st grade students'

²³The glossing of the trilingual Sidaama-Amharic-English Dictionary is as follows.

<i>Sidaam-u</i>	<i>Amaar-u-nna</i>	<i>Inglize-te</i>	<i>Qaalla</i>	<i>Borraasincho</i>
Sidaama-GEN.M	Amharic-GEN.M-and	English-GEN.F	words	dictionary

'Sidaama-Amharic- English Dictionary'

even encounters a triphthong as in *daae* ‘a welcoming word’ ((SAIQB p. 99)) and *rooe* ‘hippopotamus’ (SAIQB p. 493) instead of the expected *daa’e* and *roo’e*.

It is because of this unjustified omission of a glottal stop Yri (2004: 45-46) criticizes the decision as follows:

“In the official orthography it is omitted between non-identical vowels if it is simplex <meichcho> = /meʔicco/ “goat”. It is difficult to understand the reason for this decision, and it seems to me to be arbitrary. Obviously, one saves a little bit of space, and succeeds in writing a few words a little shorter, but why the glottal stop? [...] The /ʔ/ is a fully-fledged consonant with all the ‘human rights’ of any consonant.”

(ii) The segment *dh* - /d/ mostly occurs as a geminate. This means in the current script /d/ should have been written as <dhdh>. However, it is always written as <dh> i.e. as a single segment while it is actually a geminate. A cursory glance at SARMUK provides the following erroneous forms.

Table 9. Incorrect Occurrence of *dh* Words

<u>Incorrect form</u>	<u>Correct form</u>	<u>Phonemic form</u>	<u>Gloss</u>	<u>Source</u>
badhe	badhdhe	baɸde	‘back’	p. 103
hadhanno	hadhdhanno	haɸɸanno ²⁴	‘she goes’	p. 104
dhudhuufa	dhudhdhuufa	ɸuudɸufa	‘python’	p. 104

(iii) Similarly, the segment <ph> - /p/ and <ny> - /n/ always occur geminate while <ch> - /tʃ/ occurs mostly as a geminate (save for clusters where it occurs as a second member). Again, in textbooks the above three are written as simplex although actually they are geminate.²⁵ For instance, an examination of SARMUK contains misrepresentations beginning from the inside first page.

Table 10. Incorrect Occurrence of *ph* and *ny*

<u>Incorrect form</u>	<u>Correct form</u>	<u>Phonemic form</u>	<u>Gloss</u>	<u>Source</u>
qoropho	qorophpho	kʔoropʔo	‘care’	inside page
ganya	ganynya	ganna	‘mare’	p. 117
dinye	dinynye	dipne	‘appointment’	p. 117
dagucho	daguchcho	dagutʃfo	‘cedar’	p. 49
haqqicho	haqqichcho	hakʔkʔitʃfo	‘tree’	p. 108

What is puzzling is other palato-alveolar phonemes such as <j> /dʒ/, <c> /tʃ/ and <sh> /ʃ/ in most cases were written correctly when they occur as geminate.

(iv) Failure to capture systematic sound alternations is another major shortcoming of the current orthography. In Sidaama, there is a weakening rule whereby intervocalic /b/, /d/, and /k/ become [w], [r], and [h], respectively. This means [w], [r], and [h] are phonologically conditioned variants of /b/, /d/, and /k/, respectively. The examples below illustrate this where

	<i>-a/</i>	<i>is</i>	<i>an</i>	<i>infinitive</i>	<i>marker.</i>
(12) a.	/gib-/	‘refuse’	/gib-a/ →	[giwa]	‘to refuse’
b.	/had-/	‘go’	/had-a/ →	[ha’ra]	‘to go’
c.	/duk-/	‘carry’	/duk-a/ →	[duha]	‘to carry’

²⁴ Whereby /had-/ ‘go’ and /-tanno/ ‘3F.SG./3PL.IMPERF’. The total assimilation of the suffix-initial /t/ mentioned on page operates here too whereby the sequence *dt* becomes *dd*.

²⁵ The geminate forms of *ph* - /p/, *ch* - /tʃ/, and *ny* /n/ are mostly written in their correct forms in the trilingual Sidaama-Amharic-English dictionary (SAIQB).

The current Sidaama orthography is a phonemic one and should reflect this fact. This means an allophone should be represented by a phoneme to which it belongs. Thus, words such as [giwa] ‘to refuse’, [ha’ra] ‘to go’, and [duha] ‘to carry’ should be written in Sidaama orthography as *giba*, *hadha*, and *duka*, respectively. However, this is not observed in the orthography as the following examples gleaned from *SIDAAMU AFOO Rosaanote Maxaaafa, Layinki Kifile*, 2006 E.C. (henceforth SARMLK) ‘Sidaama Language book for 2nd Grade students’ illustrate.

Table 11. Incorrect Representation of *b*, *dh*, and *k*

Incorrect form	Correct form	phonemic form	Gloss	Source
niwaawe ²⁶	nibaabe	/nibaabe/	‘reading’	p. 1
hayishshira	haishshidha	/haiʃʃida/	‘to wash oneself’	p. 14
lolahe	lolake	/lolake/	‘flood’	p. 9

The examples under the first column are written in their phonetic forms i.e. as [w], [’r], and [h] and not in their phonemic ones. However, this is inaccurate since Sidaama orthography is a phonemic one. Hence, the expected forms under the first column are the graphemes *b*, *dh*, and *k* that represent the phonemes /b/, /d/, and /k/, respectively. It appears that the Sidaama language team is probably not aware about the lenition rule of Sidaama and the difference between phonemes and their phonologically conditioned variants i.e. allophones. Regarding this failure Yri (2004: 47) writes, “Why would a second grade student think that <law-> in <lawanno> "he resembles" and <lab-> in <labbanno> "she resembles" is the same unit, even knowing that they have the same lexical meaning? By writing this unit in two different ways, one conceals the relation between the two”.

(v) As has been mentioned earlier, one of the shortcomings of the present orthography is the treatment of /ʔ/ i.e. the glottal stop which is represented orthographically by <’> i.e. an apostrophe. This consonant was represented accurately in glottalized sonorant clusters such as /ʔm/, /ʔn/, /ʔl/, etc. where it is the first member. However, in other positions it ‘suffered’ a faulty representation. Thus, a single glottal stop was written as if it is a geminate (see examples under 7 and 8) while a geminate glottal stop was written as if it is a single segment (see examples under 9). In addition, an intervocalic glottal stop was not inserted where it was warranted.

Furthermore, no word initial glottal stop was recognized and this resulted in words that began with a vowel. However, in researches conducted in related HEC languages in the last two decades a word-initial glottal stop was recognized. Regarding Alaaba Schneider-Blum (2007: 27) writes, “There are no headless syllables in Alaaba. Since the glottal stop is considered phonemic (see below), it also has to be written as the onset consonant”. Likewise regarding K’abeena Crass ((2005: 34) claims “*Im Onset steht immer ein Konsonant*” (“There is always a consonant in the onset”). The same fact holds true for Kambaata. Thus, according to Yvonne (2008: 41), “The onset of every Kambaata syllable is occupied by a consonant (...). The language allows neither empty syllable onsets...”. A word-initial glottal stop was also recognized in Sidaama in works of Yri (2004) and Anbessa (2014; 2019).

There are justifications for positing a word-initial glottal stop for words that would have otherwise begun with vowels. According to Hyman (1988: 113), “Phonologists are especially familiar with rules that insert glottal stop...between vowels or before a word – or phrase-initial vowel. In such cases it can be argued that a glottal stop has the prosodic function of providing a minimal onset to a syllable that would otherwise not have an onset”.

²⁶ The word *niwaawe* is a loanword from the Amharic *nibab*.

Continuing his argument Hyman (1988, *ibid*) writes "...it is generally assumed that initial (or prevocalic) glottal stop insertion has to do with syllable structure, and ultimately, with the phonetic motivation for having an onset in every syllable".

Based on the above facts, from a phonological point of view, Sidaama does not allow onsetless syllables. Hence, a word-initial glottal stop must be posited for words that would have otherwise begun with vowels as in *ʔille* 'eye', *ʔegenno* 'knowledge', *ʔama* 'mother', etc. For sake of simplicity, an apostrophe is selected for orthographic representations while /ʔ/ is reserved for linguistic literature. Hence the above three words can be written orthographically as 'ille 'eye', 'egenno 'knowledge', 'ama 'mother', respectively. Postulation of a word-initial glottal stop for words which otherwise begin with a vowel is a convincing one on phonological grounds. Nevertheless, I support the convention of not inserting an apostrophe word-initially in Sidaama orthography for the purpose of simplification. A similar solution was proposed by Treis (2008: 79) for Kambaata, a related HEC language. It must be noted that there is no perfect writing system in the world and each suffers a certain defect built into it. Hence, the decision not to write a word-initial glottal stop must be viewed in the same light.

A glottal stop in Sidaama can occur in word-initial and intervocalic positions. In addition, it occurs in clusters. However, as opposed to other obstruents, it occurs as a first member of a cluster where it is immediately followed by a sonorant as in *maʔna* 'bed' while other obstruents occur as a second member of a cluster as in *hando* 'ox'.

(vi) Insertion of *i* after *y* without any phonetic motivation was one of the shortcomings of the present orthography. Examples are from SARMUK.

Table 12. Examples for Unwarranted Insertion of *y*

Incorrect form	Correct form	Suggested final form	Gloss	Source
bayicho	baychcho	baiccho	'place'	
ayidde	aydde	aidde	'family'	p.10
sayisa	saysa	saisa	'to pass'	
hayixe	hayxe	haixe	'barley'	p.75

Even if the unmotivated *i* is removed, as can be seen under column two, the first two words result in a cluster of three consonants which violates the two-consonant constraint of HEC languages. Hence, in such and similar other cases, an *ai* diphthong is proposed which prevents a CCC cluster. This is what is argued in Anbessa (2019) and in Yri (2004).

(vii) In some instances, single segments appear instead of geminates, geminates instead of single segments, and short vowels instead of long ones. (11) *finnisa* 'pimple' SAIQB p. 128 (instead of *finniissa*)
Even the name of the regional capital, the lake, and the southern university suffers this mistake and is erroneously written as *Hawassa*. However, its correct form must be *Hawaasa* which is properly written as *Hawâsa* by Gasparini (1983: 152).²⁷

Proposed Solutions

The following solutions are proposed for some of the challenges observed in the present Sidaama orthography.

²⁷ In Gasparini's Sidamo-English Dictionary (1983) and other works on Sidaama, the circumflex that is placed over vowels indicates vocalic length.

(i) A difference between non-geminate (simplex) and geminate glottal stops must be represented correctly. In addition, any intervocalic glottal stop should be acknowledged.

(ii) The segment /d/ usually occurs in a geminated form. Hence, the orthography must reflect this fact and the correct geminate grapheme i.e. <dhdh> must be used in words such as *badhdhe* ‘back’ and *hadhdho* ‘bile’ and not the grapheme for simplex i.e. <dh>.

(iii) The segments <ph> - /p’/ and <ny> - /ɲ/ always occur geminate word medially while <ch> - /tʃ/ occurs mostly as a geminate (save for clusters where as a second member it occurs as simplex). However, in the present Sidaama orthography the above three graphemes are written as simplex although they are geminate. Hence, this error must be rectified and the three phonemes i.e. /p’/, /tʃ/, and /ɲ/ must be written as <phph>, <chch>, and <nyny> word medially.

(iv) The current Sidaama orthography is a phonemic one. This means allophones must be represented by their respective phonemes. For instance, it was shown that [w], [’r], and [h] are allophones i.e. phonologically conditioned variants of /b/, /d/, and /k/, intervocalically. Hence the phonemic orthography must reflect this fact and the graphemes that should appear are , <dh>, and <k>, respectively and not <w>, <’r>, and <h> which are their variants.

(v) Although the proposed solutions for geminate <dh>, <ph>, and <ny> are okay, it is still possible to simplify these graphemes. Hence, regarding geminate palato-alveolars and the glottalic segments it is preferable to duplicate the first letter of the digraph and then add *h* as the third letter. Regarding *ɲɲ* (i.e. <nyny>) it is advisable to duplicate *n* and then add *y* as the third grapheme.

Table 13. Proposed Simplification for Geminate Palato-alveolars and Glottalic Segments

	Current grapheme	Proposed simplified grapheme	Illustrative examples	Gloss
a.	phph	pph	loppho	‘growth’
b.	dhdh	ddh	baddhe	‘back’
c.	chch	cch	teccho	‘today’
d.	shsh	ssh	hassha	‘night’
e.	nyny	nny	dinnye	‘appointment’

(vi) The insertion of *i* after *y*, as in *ayidde* ‘family’ SARUK (p. 10), without any phonetic motivation should be avoided.

(vii) There is also an optional recommendation for the improvement of the current orthography and this has to do with the five glottalic phonemes. Currently the grapheme <x> represents the alveolar ejective /t’/. This is a perplexing decision since there is no relation at all between the grapheme and the consonant it represents.²⁸ In addition, <x> can be pronounced either as [ks] or [z] in English and this can interfere when one learns English. The other one is <c> which represents the palato-alveolar ejective /tʃ’/. Although there is a semblance of relationship between <c> and /tʃ’/ the representation is a partial one. The next grapheme which should be considered is <ph> which represents /p’/. The grapheme <ph> which is pronounced as [f] in English can interfere in the correct pronunciation of English words. The last two phonemes to be considered are <dh> /d/ and <q> /k’/.

²⁸ As has been mentioned under 4.1 the Latin-based Sidaama orthography was based on that of Afaan Oromoo whereby *x* represents /t’/. This appears to be based on the phonological principle (“one sound one symbol”). The only phoneme left was /t’/ while the Latin letter left unassigned was *x* leading to marriage of convenience.

Hence, in order to conform to graphemes commonly used by linguists working on Cushitic languages, the following changes are recommended.²⁹ The proposed changes reflect the relation between sounds and symbols and do not involve special symbols that are difficult to find on computer keyboards.

Table 14. Proposed Graphemes for Glottalic Segments

	Current grapheme	Proposed grapheme
(1)	ph	p'
(2)	dh	d'
(3)	x	t'
(4)	c	c'
(5)	q	k'

Note that <q> which represents the velar ejective /k'/ can be excluded from above table. Since <q> represents /k'/ in Ethio-Semitic languages, it may be a wide decision to adopt the same for Cushitic languages, too. However, if one seeks a uniform representation for all glottalic phonemes then opting for <k'> instead of <q> sounds logical since it achieves a pattern congruity for all of them.³⁰ There is also a beneficial outfall of the above proposal. Up to now /tʃ/ was represented by <c>. Now since the proposed grapheme is <c'>, the grapheme <c> can be reassigned to represent /tʃ/ instead of <ch>. This solution will satisfy the “one symbol for one sound” principle and consequently reduces at least by one the number of digraphs in the language. Finally, as espoused by Yri (2004: 52), adopting an apostrophe as a diacritic for glottalic segments is advantageous in that it tackles the problems of transfer when Sidaama speakers learn English.

(b) If the above proposal is acceptable it would be then preferable to write geminate glottalic segments without the first apostrophe i.e. <tt'> instead of <t't'>. This is similar to simplification of geminate palato-alveolar graphemes which was proposed earlier.

Although the above reform for glottalic sounds was proposed by Yri (2011) and me, it would be essential to raise one of the key principles when designing an orthography. This has to do with a socio-linguistic principle that involves *acceptability* and *harmonization*. The proposed reform must be acceptable to the language speakers (students, teachers, office users, etc.) and not by few armchair linguists. Regarding this fact Wedekind and Charlotte (1999: 2) write, “If many people (not only a few intellectuals) have expressed strong feelings about certain letters, then these feelings must be respected”. This means if reforms are proposed, then first of all their suitability must be tested in the field.

The other feature is *harmonization* that encourages adopting graphemes used by neighboring languages since this facilitates a transition from one language to the other. For instance, a Sidaama speaker who wants to read and write in Afaan Oromoo will not be forced to re-learn new symbols and vice versa.

²⁹ This will satisfy the “*harmonization*” principle whereby learning a related language can be easier because they share similar graphemes.

³⁰ Yri (2011: 9) proposed a similar solution for the glottalic sounds. However in his earlier paper (2004: xy) he proposed the grapheme *h* to represent the glottalic feature and hence the graphemes proposed by him were *ph*, *th*, *dh*, *ch*, and *kh* for the phonemes /p'/, /t'/, /d'/, /č'/, and /k'/, respectively.

(c) It is advisable to continue to use the digraphs <sh>, <zh>, and <ny> (of the present orthography) for the three palato-alveolars i.e. *ʃ*, *ʒ*, and *ɲ*, respectively. The main justification is the availability of the digraphs on all keyboards.

(d) No need of reform regarding the glottalized sonorants <'m>, <'n>, <'l>, <'r>, and <'y> which are fine for glottal-sonorant clusters.

(e) According to Kawachi (2007: 63 -64), “Sidaama is actually a pitch-accent language, where prominence is indicated by high pitch, rather than stress. The location of high pitch in a word is predictable, and high pitch is not associated with the duration of a vowel”. Pitch accent is grammatical in Sidaama and distinguishes (among others) between:

- the 3rd M.SG. PERF from 2nd M.SG IMP as in *kubb-í* ‘he jumped’ vs. *kubb-i* ‘jump!’ (2nd M.SG)
- genitive and nominative cases as in *hándu* ‘ox’ (NOM) versus *handú* ‘ox’ (GEN).

Pitch-accent is not marked in the current Latin-based orthography whether it is predictable or not. Yri (2004: 51) does not support this and writes, “The only changes suggested with vowels is, is to mark stress/HL [*sic.*] when it occurs in the non-predictable positions”. Then he gives a couple of examples on p.52 and one of them is *huccidhí* ‘he prayed’. However, as opposed to Yri, I support the stand of the orthography designers in not marking pitch-accent. First of all not marking it will simplify the orthography. Secondly, pitch-accent is usually predictable and instances where it is contrastive can be resolved by relying on the context.

Conclusion and Summary

In this paper, the past and present orthographies of Sidaama were discussed. The former orthography was based on Ethiopic script and was in occasional use before 1991. This orthography began to be used in the 1960s by Italian Catholic missions and other Christian denominations for liturgical purposes. The same orthography was used from 1979 and onwards for the purpose of mass literacy campaigns. However, the codification measure failed because of a faulty perception and decision regarding the association between sounds and symbols in general and the Ethiopic characters representing Sidaama in particular.

Current orthography refers to a Latin-based orthography that was adopted for the language since 1993. This orthography overcame the problem of representing geminates and long vowels. On the other hand, it was also fraught with its own drawbacks such as inaccurate representation of /ʔ/ and /d/, a faulty representation of glottalic segments, the unwarranted insertion of *i* following *y*, etc. Reform of the present script is long overdue and a plea for its modification seems to have fallen on deaf ears. In this paper, different amendments are proposed to rectify these recurrent orthographical problems of Sidaama. Yri (2004: 53) correctly raises the issues of finance and re-learning difficulty that an orthographic reform entails. However, since the current Sidaama orthography is relatively younger and may be continued to be used in the future, it would be wiser to begin the process sooner rather than later. Only time will tell if the Sidaama language team will heed the precious advice and strive to improve the current orthography. The task can prove fruitful if other stakeholders (teachers, students, parents, etc.) too are involved in the process of the amendments.

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