

**WISA HANDBOOK: A
SHORT INTRODUCTION TO
THE WISA DIALECT OF
NORTH-EAST RHODESIA**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649452521

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OF
NORTH-EAST RHODESIA

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OXFORD
AT THE CLARENDON PRESS

1906

EMS

PL 8078

B4 M3

HENRY FROWDE, M.A.
PUBLISHER TO THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD
LONDON, EDINBURGH
NEW YORK AND TORONTO

PREFACE

THE Wisa (Bisa, or Visa) dialect is spoken by a somewhat scattered and broken tribe in the central region of North-East Rhodesia. Though not wanting in individual energy and intelligence, the tribe collectively has not been able latterly to maintain its ground against its more warlike neighbours, Wemba and Ngoni, backed as they were till recently by Swahili slave-raiders from the East Coast. Now that peace is established in the country, the Wisa villages spread from Lake Bangweolo and the river Luapula on the west, across the watershed of the Congo and Zambezi basins and the Luangwa river valley, to the borders of British Central Africa on the east. They are much mixed up with Senga and Nkunda villages in some of the lowland districts, and with Lala and Wemba on the western plateau. Hence there is a certain amount of local variation in Wisa vocabulary and pronunciation; and even the particular selection of words and forms from the common Bantu stock, which is most characteristic of Wisa, has much in common with its neighbours, especially Senga. But the Wisa tense-system tends clearly to connect the dialect with those of the Congo river region, rather than with the tribes eastward of the watershed.

Nothing, it seems, has been at the present date published as to the Wisa dialect, except a few lists of words. This short Introduction, without claiming anything but a relative completeness, may serve to show its strong family likeness to other Bantu dialects as well as its chief peculiarities, and also smooth the way for further study. The evidence relied on has been

mainly that of three or four Wisas of different districts, ages, and circumstances, checked by incidental verification. For the grammar the most important source has been a series of nearly thirty native stories, many of them carefully written out in full by an intelligent Wisa lad, who had managed to learn the shape and sound of English letters from a native teacher. Any one possessing a previous knowledge of another Bantu dialect will at once recognize much that is easy and familiar. In fact, Wisa grammar is of the normal Bantu type in all its chief characteristics, such as

- (1) the division of all nouns into a limited number of classes distinguished by prefixes,
- (2) the system of Concord, the class of the noun determining the form of every adjective and verb grammatically related to it, by requiring a corresponding prefix,
- (3) the forms of the principal pronouns and pronominal adjectives (demonstrative and possessive), and the paucity of adjectives in general,
- (4) the actual or potential development of the verb-root, by the use of prefixes and suffixes in a regular order, into a rich variety of verb-forms, which for the most part can be readily classed under terms familiar in the grammars of other languages, ancient and modern,
- (5) the paucity of words defining the relations of separate words and clauses (conjunctions and prepositions), characteristic of unwritten speech,—depending as it does on the sympathetic interpretation of a hearer alive to every tone, look, and gesture accompanying it,
- (6) the tense-system as the chief feature of grammatical difference between dialects,—in Wisa a remarkable *and interesting* one.

Indeed the tense-system, and a common sound difficult for a foreigner to catch and reproduce, form the two principal difficulties of a beginner in the study of Wisa.

Wisas call themselves *Wawisa*, their country *Uwisa*, and their language *Chiwisa*.

A. C. MADAN.

FORT JAMESON, NORTH-EAST RHODESIA,
March 8, 1906.

The separate alphabetical lists of nouns, verbs, &c., in Part I will supply in some degree the place of a Wisa-English supplement to the English-Wisa vocabulary in Part II.

As a help to beginners, two Wisa stories in Chapter VIII have a word-for-word translation and explanatory references.

PS. In a letter dated Aug. 25, 1906, Mr. A. C. Madan reports from Mkushi that the Lalas (who live between the Loangwa and the Kafue rivers in about 29°-30° East Longitude, 14° South Latitude, and through whose country the great railway is now passing) speak a language hardly distinguishable from Wisa, so that this handbook will have a wider range than was contemplated at the time it was written.

F. M.

Oct. 1, 1906.

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PART I
CHAPTER I

WISA AS SPOKEN AND WRITTEN

1. THE system here followed for indicating Wisa sounds by English letters is substantially that recommended by the Royal Geographical Society for the transliteration of foreign names, and used by Bishop Steere and many others who have attempted to transcribe Bantu speech for English readers.

2. As applied to Wisa, the system is briefly this :

1. Vowels, as in Italian, viz.

<i>a</i>	with the sound	<i>ar</i>	in <i>farther</i> .
<i>e</i>	"	<i>a</i>	in <i>fate</i> .
<i>i</i>	"	<i>ee</i>	in <i>feet</i> .
<i>o</i>	"	<i>or</i>	in <i>sort</i> .
<i>u</i>	"	<i>oo</i>	in <i>root</i> .

In unaccented syllables, each vowel may also represent a corresponding lighter sound, as in *pat, pet, pit, pot, put*. This is sometimes indicated by doubling the consonant which follows.

When vowels occur together, each is to be pronounced separately.

3. 2. Consonants, as in English, except that

c and *h* are only used in the combination *ch*, for the sound of *ch* in *chin*.

g is only used as in *go*, never as *j*.

s is only used as in *so*, never as *z*.

y is only used as a consonant or semi-vowel, never as in *any*.

ng' is used to represent a peculiar nasal sound, common with slight variations to many Bantu dialects and resembling the first *ng* in *singing*, the *ng* sound not passing on to the vowel following, though forming one syllable with it.