



A Divine Script From the Congo

By Ryan Chi and Alex Bellos

Mandombe is an African script used mainly in the Democratic Republic of the Congo for African languages including Lingala, Kikongo ya leta, and Swahili. It was created in 1978 by Wabeladio Payi, and is now used by up to 10,000 people. The script is a syllabary, meaning that it is made up of syllabic units, each representing a consonant and a vowel, such as “ba” or “zu.”

Here are some Kikongo ya leta words written in Mandombe, together with their transliterations in Latin letters and translations in English. Can you match the Mandombe to their transliterations?

Mandombe

- | | | | |
|--|-------|--|-------|
| A.  | _____ | L.  | _____ |
| B.  | _____ | M.  | _____ |
| C.  | _____ | N.  | _____ |
| D.  | _____ | O.  | _____ |
| E.  | _____ | P.  | _____ |
| F.  | _____ | Q.  | _____ |
| G.  | _____ | R.  | _____ |
| H.  | _____ | S.  | _____ |
| I.  | _____ | T.  | _____ |
| J.  | _____ | U.  | _____ |
| K.  | _____ | V.  | _____ |

Transliterations — English

- | | |
|-------------|-----------|
| 1. wonso | at all |
| 2. tewa | bang |
| 3. tuti | cloud |
| 4. mfumvu | cord |
| 5. ngombe | cow |
| 6. fumbuka | dead |
| 7. kutu | ear |
| 8. tiya | fire |
| 9. mfinda | forest |
| 10. mpunda | horse |
| 11. lumonso | left |
| 12. mongo | mountain |
| 13. mpuku | mouse |
| 14. mwisi | smoke |
| 15. fula | to blow |
| 16. zenga | to cut |
| 17. zuba | to hit |
| 18. simba | to hold |
| 19. yimbila | to sing |
| 20. venza | to strike |
| 21. maza | water |
| 22. nani | who |