

A Divine Script From the Congo

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SOLUTIONS

A. 1 Our way in is the three-syllable words. There
B. 8 are three of them: E, S, and T, which must
C. 13 be *fumbuka*, *lumonso*, and *yimbila*, in some
D. 9 order. Remember that the language is built on
E. 6 consonant-vowel combinations, so the three
F. 2 syllable words can be divided as *fu-mbu-ka*, *lu-*
G. 18 *mo-nso*, and *yi-mbi-la*. Notice that the syllables
H. 3 *-fu*, *-mo*, *-nso*, and *-la* appear in other words: *fula*,
I. 5 *mongo*, and *wonso*. After scanning the shapes,
J. 7 we can see that E shares its first syllable with K,
K. 15 and that S shares its final syllable with K, so it is
L. 14 likely that K is *fula*, E is *fumbuka*, and S is *yimbila*.
M. 16 Thus T is *lumonso*, the last of the three-syllable
N. 17 words. Since the final syllable of T matches the
O. 4 final syllable of A, A must be *wonso*. And since
P. 22 the middle syllable of T is the first syllable of Q,
Q. 12 then Q is *mongo*. The *-ngo* also appears in *ngombe*,
R. 21 so I must be *ngombe*, since it is the only one that
S. 19 starts with the last syllable of Q. That's seven
T. 11 words solved, but this code-breaking technique
U. 10 only takes us so far.
V. 20

The next step is to look for clues in the shapes themselves, especially the ones that we know from above. Certain elements of syllables reappear, such as a figure that looks like a boxy “M,” which is associated with the vowel sound “u,” as in *fumbuka*, where it appears twice. Similarly, a rectangle is associated with the “o” vowel, and a cut ribbon shape (a quadrilateral with a pointy corner) with an “a” sound. Interestingly, there is only one word where both syllables have this cut ribbon shape—R—and only one word with an “a” in each syllable, R must be *maza*. Notice that the cut ribbon shape is not in the same position, and in some of the other words it is pointing in a different direction. These variations don't impact the vowel sound it imparts.

Six of the remaining words have a “u”: *tuti*, *mfumvu*, *kutu*, *mpunda*, *mpuku*, and *zuba*, and, as expected, six transliterations with the boxy “M” shape (though some have it upside down). Two of these words share the beginning *-mpu*, so they must be C and U. Since *ku* also appears in another word, we can deduce that C is *mpuku* and U is *mpunda*, J is *kutu*. O is *mfumvu*, since it has two “u” sounds. Of the two remaining words in this group, *tuti* and *zuba*, one has a repeating shape in both syllables. One can assume that that shape relates to the “t” sound, making H as *tuti* and N as *zuba*.

Our count of solved words is now up to 14, leaving eight to go: *tewa*, *tiya*, *mfinda*, *mwisi*, *zenga*, *simba*, *venza*, and *nani*. From the second syllable of *tuti*, we deduce that B must be *tiya*. From the second syllable of *mpunda*, we see that D must be *mfinda*. From looking at repeated elements, the *-si* in *mwisi* and *simba* means they must be L and G. The position of the “a” syllable, the cut ribbon shape, means P is *nani*.

This leaves only three “e” words: *venza*, *tewa*, and *zenga*, which must be F, M, and V, in some order. F contains the shape we associate with “t” from *tuti*, so we can be pretty confident that that one is *tewa*. We can do a similar comparison to relate *-ngo* to *-nga*. The second symbol of M looks like the *-ngo* from *mongo* but with the “o” (a rectangle) replaced by an “a” (the cut ribbon) so we finally see that V must be *venga*.

For more information on how the symbols are combined to create syllables, see en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mandombe_script.