

Universal Multiple-Octet Coded Character Set
International Organization for Standardization
Organisation internationale de normalisation
Международная организация по стандартизации

Doc Type: Working Group Document

Title: Clarification on the identity and use of three N’Ko letters

Source: Michael Everson, Mamady Doumbouya, Baba Mamadi Diané, Karamo Kaba Jammeh

Status: Individual Contribution

Date: 2005-08-26

N2949 suggests that the encoding of three of the proposed N’ko letters “conflicts with the character-glyph model”, and suggests that the three characters are both “not useful” and “risky”. We hold a different view. The characters in question are what we prefer to call NKO LETTER JONA JA, NKO LETTER JONA CHA, and NKO LETTER JONA RA (see N2973 by Mamady Doumbouya and the Irish ballot comment on FPDAM2).

The replacement of the JONA letters was imposed by the creator of the script, Solomana Kante, in order to solve rendering problems: the JONA letters did not combine properly with the diacritical marks of the system. (“Rendering” here refers to handwritten text; computer rendering did not exist at the time.) The reform did not reflect the kind of “natural” historical continuity and development that the authors of N2949 seem to believe holds for N’Ko as for other, more ancient scripts. The abolition of the three JONA letters Ꝛ JA, ꝛ CHA, and Ꝝ RA and the introduction of the four letters which replaced them (ꝝ JA, Ꝟ CHA, ꝟ RA, Ꝡ RRA) is an historical *discontinuity*, and it is this which users of N’Ko require to be able to represent. In fact, it should be mentioned that some of Kante’s students rejected his reform, and continued to write with the JONA letters. The choice of letter remains exactly that, a question of user choice. The encoding as proposed answers this requirement, as does the N’Ko keyboard, which allows inputting of both the JONA letters and the “standard” ones.

N2949 tries to explain that the difference here is similar to that of “obsolete forms such as Uncial and Fraktur”. We think that this is simply a mistake. Gaelic (not to say “Uncial”) and Fraktur fonts are *global* substitutions which are applied to the entire font, not to just a few letters of the writing system. **Such fonts are used regularly for decorative purposes.** The appropriate analogy is that to LATIN SMALL LETTER S and LATIN SMALL LETTER LONG S. Roman, Gaelic, and Fraktur fonts alike have shapes for both letters. **This is a character distinction, not a font distinction.** The JONA letters are not decorative variants, and we consider the suggestion that for a given font, two versions of it should exist, identical in all respects but for the shape of three of the letters, to be impractical and inconvenient at best. Users who type “Congrefs” in a Google search may return a different result than those who type “Congress”. The same would apply for texts encoded in N’Ko. We are aware of this behaviour and it is the kind of behaviour that we expect. We accept that ꝛꝛꝛ and ꝛꝛꝛ are the same word, just as *Congress* and *Congrefs* are. And we accept that their encoding is—and should be—different. Most people will write ꝛꝛꝛ, just as most people write *Congress*.

Finally, we assure WG2 that these conclusions are not only the opinion of these four N’Ko experts, Michael Everson (WG2 delegate for Ireland), Mamady Doumbouya (President, N’Ko Institute of America), Baba Mamadi Diané (Professor of N’Ko and publisher), and Karamo Kaba Jammeh (N’Ko author and publisher), but reflect a consensus in the larger N’Ko community.