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Wancho

Birth of a new script.

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Abstract: There are 36 states and union territories in our country, our currency represents 16 different scripts and there are easily more than a thousand dialects in our country. But this project is not about them, this project is about a community who never had a script and has been trying to protect their culture and stories through generations only through verbal communication. But this is not sufficient enough to preserve everything accurately, due to the lack of a script many incidents/stories of the past has been lost and can never be recalled accurately. Keeping this problem in mind Prof. Banwang Losu developed the Wancho alphabet and counting system after working on it for more than 11 years. This project deals with bringing life to these alphabets by developing a typeface for the script in two weights so that it can be used in print medium.

Key words: *Typography, Arunachal Pradesh, Wancho, Script, Tribal, Typeface, Modern*

1. Introduction

The Wanchos are one of the major indigenous tribes inhabited in the Longding district of Arunachal Pradesh. This newly created district is the divine abode of warm-hearted tribe known in the ancient history as 'Head-hunters' who have preserved their own ethos, traditional heritage, enriched culture, time tested ethical treasure of immense values and a strong social fabric. The Wanchos possess immaculate virtues like open heartedness, fellow feelings free from ego, honesty and purity of mind. They are straightforward in their outlook, fearless by nature, adventurous in spirit and pious by nature.

The Wancho land-sacred land of "rising sun" is in divine providence with various natural vegetation, lush green flora, and a wide range of fauna, high mountain peaks, picturesque landscapes, mind boggling scenic beauty, gushing rivers and unfathomable natural resources. The tribe has been dwelling in their present habitat from the time immemorial and they are believed to have migrated from China to Myanmar, and then to two places,

namely, Tsngnu and Tsangnu of Twinsang district of Nagaland. Due to some domestic disputes they had again migrated to the present habitation.

This socio-culturally rich tribe does not have a script to use/ document their language into written form. As we know that language is the organization of sound, of vocal symbols, which is very essential in human life to express/communicate, the external and internal feelings of a person to one another, and for transferring the history/information/traditional knowledge from one generation to the next generation. In this connection only the verbal communication is not sufficient to preserve its knowledge system.

As a result, so much useful information and remarkable happenings of the past have got lost or erased from the memory of the folk and it can never be recalled accurately or never at all due to the absence of a script. They might lose the original sounds, voices, words and its meaning if it is not stored in a written form. More specifically, it is not appreciable and inevitable to keep the language documented in written form using English or Hindi language because Roman and Devanagiri scripts cannot sufficiently pick up the original sounds and pronunciations of the Wancho language.

2. Initial Observation of the Script

I was provided what we can call a first draft of the Wancho script as a foundation, which we could study and understand. On the first observation the script looked very mixed and jumbled with lines going in all directions and more than one loop forming at various places in a single character. I also studied the first draft as we would study a typeface and tried to find the difficult areas and defects. It helped me understand and learn the problems I will be facing while making the typeface.

It was important to know and learn writing the script in a running hand, that way we could understand which part of the letter was essential for the legibility of the script and which could be taken out. It was also a process where we can simplify the given draft and bring it to its simple most form.

I had to practice writing these letters as to make my mind free of any hesitation of the totally new form and structure. This helped me later in writing the alphabets free hand, which helped me understand the flow of the script. Later each alphabet and numeral were written using a flat tip marker, as to give some thickness to the strokes, which were then refined and helped us understand the form and structure.

3. Understanding the Script

Till now the script has been under observation only as a phonetically arrangement, but to understand the form and structure of the script it had to be arranged according to its shape.

Upon being classified on its structure a new face of the script was revealed. Seven groups were formed out of these shapes. As discussed earlier the alphabets also had elements like loops and joints forming at different stages. On studying these elements in a more detailed way it was understood that these activities were happening at three different heights in a letter. This helped us dividing the characters in a grid. A grid was needed so to bring uniformity in the typeface.

3.1 Writing Tools

When the earliest scripts were made they had tools to write and the tools they were written from influenced the scripts. Roman script is traditionally written from a flat chisel and Devanagiri is written from a chisel tip cut preferably at an angle of 45 degrees. But the Wancho script is made in modern times, and has not been influenced by any particular tool as such. So I started looking for any kind of influence in the Wancho community where I can see any tool, which they use.

Wancho have been always known for their tribal tattoos. So that was the first thing I looked for. Their tattoos are made with a pointed tool and it is mono linear in nature. Even the first draft was mono linear in nature. As the script was developed in modern time, it was very unlikely that it would be influenced by the flat chisel type writing tool.



Figure.1 Wancho woman showing her tattoo. Every tattoo holds a special meaning and importance in the society, and is taken with pride.

3.2 Phonetics and Structural Relation

In the search of finding more meaning out of this script, I started looking at the phonetics and the structural relation between the alphabets. Generally, in scripts like Roman and

Devanagiri there are structural relations between the alphabets which are phonetically progressing. For example, the letter ष and ष as the sound progresses, the structure also evolves according to that. And in English, M and N would be an example to discuss in the similar situation.

Looking at these cases I thought if looking at the Wancho script for similar clues. It could be helpful in deciding the letterform and finding more relation between the letterforms, which were looking very random to me at the moment. This would have also helped me in finding how the script was structured, phonetically, hence making it more uniform and bringing it in a well-structured model.

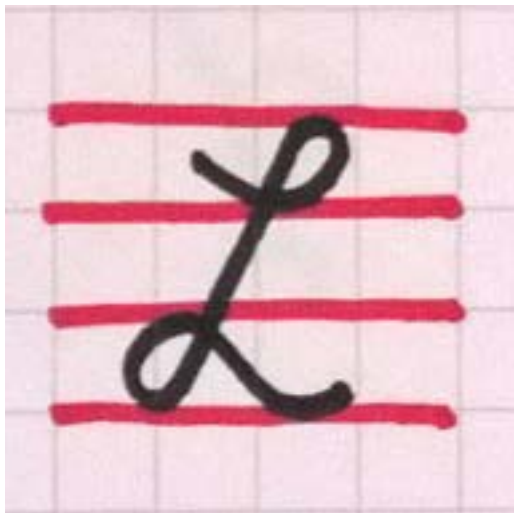


Figure.1 Wancho character divided in three sections according to the actions happening in the structure.

4. Field Visit

During the period of this project, I also visited Arunachal Pradesh and more precisely Khonsa, the district headquarters of the Wancho Tribe. It was a twenty days trip during which I stayed at six different places in Arunachal Pradesh. During this trip a lot of new discoveries were made and many beliefs were broken. Arunachal now is moving towards a modern times. The young are moving out of the state, commercialization is spreading and people are looking forward for more industries to come to their state as it provides more jobs. Migrating workers are also have been staying in Arunachal for many generations now. A cultural exchange can be seen in a number of things, between the locals and the migrants such as their language. Both the groups can fluently speak in each others language.

The time when I started the trip was also the starting of the general elections in Arunachal but in spite of it hardly any promotional posters were seen and all the local shops had their boards written using Hindi. On further looking into this, it was realized that there is

no local script of Arunachal. There are more than eight major tribes with each having their own language. Every tribe still uses their own language while speaking, but while interacting inter-tribe Hindi becomes the bridge.

On meeting Prof. Banging Losu we discussed the letterforms more in details. Findings and queries were discussed. The origin story of each alphabet was also discussed, where I understood that the letterforms were derived from human body postures, utensils, weapons and from the local flora and fauna. It helped in understand the structure of the letters much more than earlier and the basic skeleton of the script was also prepared.

5. Design Process

The final phase of designing the characters would begin once I come back to Ahmedabad.

5.1 Character Ratio

The height of the alphabets was also re-worked upon. The height of the alphabet is known as the X-height. The ratio of the x-height to the stroke width of the alphabet determines the overall broadness of the character.

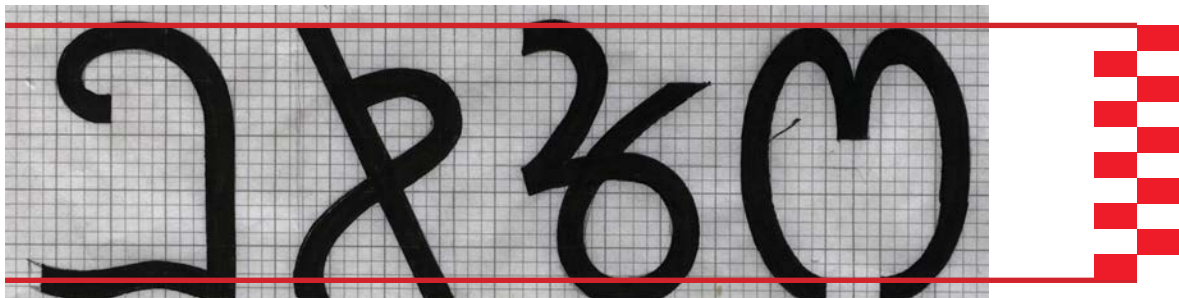


Figure.2 1:10 (Stroke width: Glyph height)

At this proportion the alphabets were comfortable in their space without making the characters look compressed and making the future usages in terms of more style based on this proportion possible.

5.2 Angle of the Diagonal Stroke

Test of the characters at different slant angles. This was done to see how much the diagonal lines could be tilted without making them look too wide or too condensed.

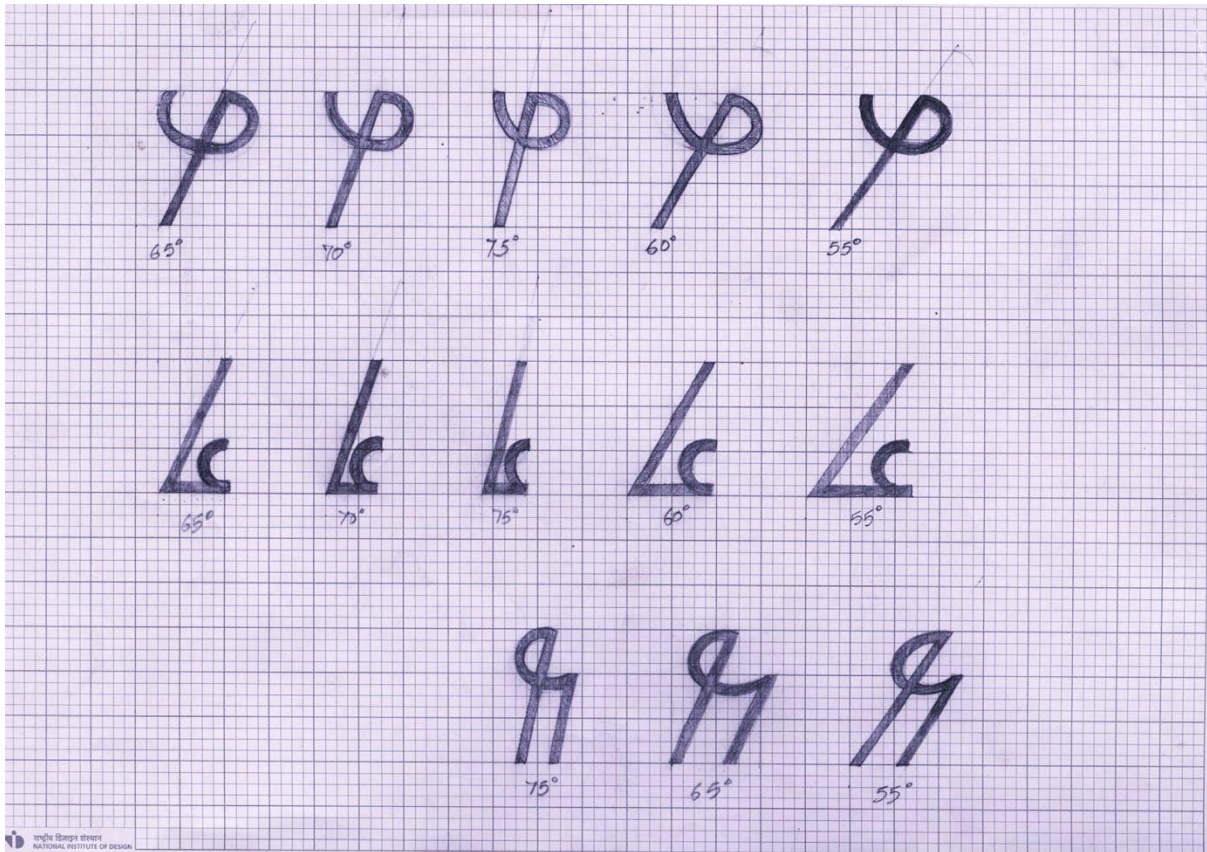


Figure.3 Chart showing different angles of diagonal strokes, which were tested.

5.3 Direction of the Stroke

To understand how the weight of the stroke will change with the curve and at the corners and the loops it is very important to know the flow of the stroke. It will also help decide the terminal of the letters.

5.4 Designing the Final Character Set

Once the skeletons were re-designed, they went through several stages of refinements. Focus was kept on keeping the curves of the alphabets at a similar curvature. Then all the drawings were scanned and printed at smaller sizes to check how the alphabets were acting in a small size and if any more changes needed to be made before the digitization of the characters could begin. After the letters were drawn by hand and refined on a grid, they were scanned and taken for digitization. Adobe Illustrator was used to do the initial digitization. There were several stages of refinement included in this part as well, as there were many errors that cannot be seen or cannot be dealt with while working by hand and some of the human errors that could not be avoided.

Initially, when the scanned letters were brought to the digital software, and traced the results were not satisfactory. As the human errors were transferred to the digital form and

could be seen with much more details and the vector forms being crisper in nature, the errors were magnified in them.

Geometric shapes and forms were then used to refine the letterform in the second stage of refinement. The geometric forms gave the alphabets a similar curvature and made the lines uniform. But it also made the stroke width mono linear. But as the alphabets turns and reflects from a joint the weight of the stroke becomes slightly thicker or thinner at points which is a part of visual correction, which was done at a later stage of refinement.

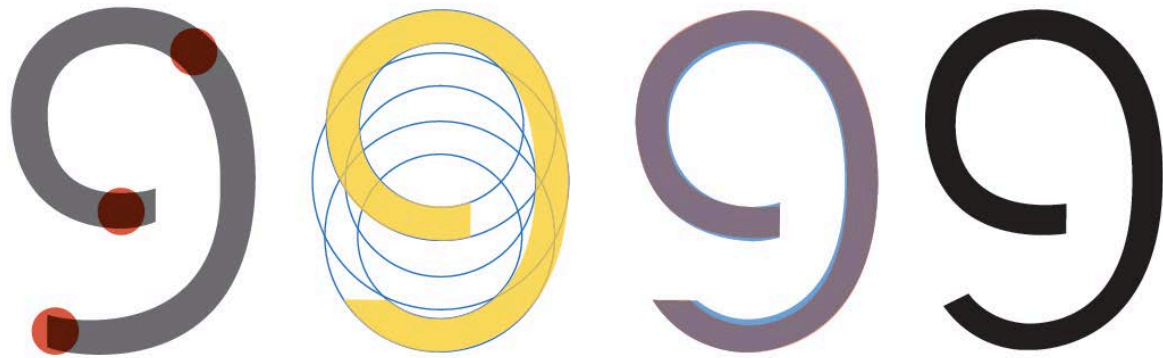


Figure.4 Different stages of digital refinement.

6. Conclusions

After working on for almost a year, the Wancho script was successfully converted to a typeface with two weights. The typeface will be used in school books. The subject will be introduced in schools as a third language. It will be the first time the people of this tribe will learn to write their language for the first time. This was a vital factor affecting the design of the typeface, as when people are learning to write a script for the first time ever, it was very important that the typeface is introduced in its more basic form and structure. As every language has evolved with time, there are very high possibility that even this script will evolve with time, although it will take a very long time. But in the present time this script needs to survive, as the whole generation is trying its best to go out of their native land and move to bigger cities it is going to be a hard struggle for the script to survive. But with a typeface provided, the first step has been taken.

References

Banwang Losu (2013) Wancho Script, Introduction