

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

## AFRICAN SCRIPT

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**Overview** The writing scripts in use in Africa have deep historical roots, which ultimately derive from the ancient Sumerian and Egyptian writing systems which, in the early centuries C.E., made their way through proto-sinaitic and Old Canaanite into such native African scripts as Coptic and Ge'ez, in Ethiopia. On the horizon, that early in our era, lay world scripts like Arabic, which were to enter the script mix at the advent of Islam, in the seventh century C.E., or, much later, the Latin script, with the advent of Christian missionaries in the sixteenth century, C.E., and with a vengeance at the time of Colonialism, in the later 19th century. Meanwhile, throughout the history of our era on the African continent, there has been a multiplicity of language scripts competing for use among more regional African collectives: the Meroitic languages of Kush (300 B.C.E.--300 C.E.); Tiffinagh Berber scripts (from 300 B.C.E.); the Nsibidi scripts of south eastern Nigeria (400-1400 C.E.); and a variety of regional scripts, developed in many parts of Africa in the 19th and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, intended to cope with sectional needs and with tech potentials--like the Unicode keyboard to account for local orthographic peculiarities.

**Ancient Scripts** Egyptian hieroglyphics were the oldest writing system in Africa, probably coming into existence around 3200 B.C.E., thus three hundred years before the 'invention' of the cuneiform writing of Sumeria, from which Egyptian hieroglyphics seemingly derived. Egyptian hieroglyphs initially constituted a pictorial system, The system of hieroglyphic writing prevailed in Egypt until the fifth century C.E., when the need for sacred script had disappeared, and various forms of demotic Egyptian--merging toward Coptic--were encroaching on the now archaic forms of the hieroglyphic system. With Coptic, the system of Egyptian demotic writing, the vernacular stage of the stately hieroglyph adopts an alphabet which is in part based on the alphabet of Greece--and thus opens a portal connecting African scripts to the Mediterranean world.

**Dating ancient scripts in Africa** Hieroglyphs may have been the first North African writing system--and they themselves presumably were a co-version of Sumerian and a forerunner of Phoenician--but there were other scripts in use in North Africa's earliest period: some of them, like hieroglyphics, traceable to Near Eastern writing systems. Both the source and the ending dates, of these various scripts, are approximate to vague; the scripts themselves have by the present date relegated themselves to a minor role among African writing systems, but remain, like hieroglyphics, testimonies to the international interrelations of African cultural development. Three examples are:

**The script of the Ge ez language** The Ge ez language of Eritrea and Ethiopia--for which there is inscriptional evidence dating to 2000 B.C.E., and trackable through early Christian texts and liturgies into its present day usage in Ethiopia as a language of religious liturgy--was Semitic in origin.

**The Tiffinagh Berber scripts** The Tiffinagh Berber script, in use from either 300 B.C.E. or the 3d millennium B.C.E., depending on your baseline sources, and available in the North African Berber community to our day, employed an alphabet arguably stemming from Libyan-Phoenician, and traceable thus to the ancient Near East.

**The Meroitic scripts** The Meroitic scripts, in use from the 3<sup>rd</sup> cent. B.C.E. to the 5<sup>th</sup> cent. C.E., as part of the royal recording system of the Kingdom of Kush, derived from demotic hieroglyphics, thus indirectly from Greek.

### Post Classical Scripts

**Old Nubian** Old Nubian script (8<sup>th</sup> cent. C.E.-15<sup>th</sup> cent. C.E.), a variation on both Coptic and Greek orthographies, was in most recent use during the Christian Kingdom of Makuria, in Northern Sudan. The most recent written example of this script dates from 1485 C.E.

**Arabic** Far the most influential non-European language script, from postclassical Africa to our times, is Arabic. In 639 C.E. the first Muslim Arabs entered Egypt, and it is estimated that today more than 140 million Africans speak Arabic as their first language. A wide but scattered population, from within that number, uses Arabic today as their first *written* language. (Arabic script derives from Aramaic, it from Phoenician, and thus Arabic script proves to be a step brother to Hebrew, Greek, and Latin scripts, all of which also derive from Phoenician.)

## Early Modern Script

**Nsibidi** script, SE Nigeria, 14th century C.E. to present. (Arguably as ancient as 2000 B.C.E., and arguably discernible in leopard cult inscriptions up to our time.) Far the most influential Nsibidi script intervention, into African writing, dates from the Colonial period. Nsibidi is a good example of a native African script.

## 19th century Scripts

**The period of colonialization** While the ancient Greeks and Romans invaded and explored Northern Africa, it was not until the 15th century C.E. that the national powers of Western Europe--first among them the Portuguese--began to move a heavy foot onto the African continent, their interests from the beginning both military/acquisitive and missionary. Continuing with the Portuguese missionary impact, it was to be two centuries before the western powers--Germany, France, England, Italy, Belgium, Portugal--made their powerful economic moves against the vulnerable African continent--the Scramble for Africa, 1881-1914--and thus intervened into the whole texture of a culture, right down to the ways in which that culture inscribed its spoken languages. It is not that cultured Africans were not already fully acculturated, long before The Scramble for Africa, to the use of the languages written with a Roman script--think of the Carthaginians of Saint Augustine's times and milieu. The deepest impact, of the colonialization of cultures and writing systems, was the bringing together, of much of the African continent, into a more homogeneous and mutually intelligible unit.

## 20<sup>th</sup> century scripts

**Innovations in scripts** The twentieth century has seen many innovations in African writing scripts. To list some of them--Osonanya (for Somalian), Mwangwego (for Malawian), Bamun pictographic writing (for Cameroonian), Adlam (Fula in Guinea), Akagu (Igbo), Bassa (Liberia), Bété (Ivory Coast), Kpelle (Liberia), N'ko (Guinea). Vao (Liberia)--is to suggest how ardently Africans are in search of ways appropriate to their differing phonetic systems. With post-independence nationalist self-consciousness, in Africa, has come a keen desire to own one's unique language-representational system.

**Issues and implications: the magnitude of African writing system experiments** In her study, 'Competing scripts: the introduction of the Roman alphabet in Africa,' Helma Pasche surveys a broad range of scripts, that have occupied African attention for several millenia in the continent's search for a single coherent writing system. She surveys the historical setting, for this discussion, then (pp. 79-101) goes into 'new African scripts,' opening our eyes to the issue of orthography as a political choice. The historical setting will prove a far more thorough review, than we gave above, of the numerous writing system experiments with which African history is studded. Pasche will leave us with a large external canvas of writing systems, but she will leave our curiosities unsatisfied, in many dimensions.

**The issue of script choice in Africa** Pasche leaves us wondering why the African continent has generated so many systems, but has over a long time period not established even wide spread consensus over orthographic usage. She leaves us full of curiosity for the purely graphic energy of these writing traditions--cf. *knock your sox off* illustrations in *Afrikan Alphabets* by Saki Mafundikwa--but struck by the disconnect among diverse systems, as though they had popped up on their own, without being any kind of interrelated responses to common problems.

**Issues and implications: writing systems as expressions of historical choice** To understand an historical survey--say of the development of writing systems--requires not only to learn the network of interrelations, among those systems, but also to grasp the drives that promoted them. Why did *those* systems get proposed, or, as in the case of the Roman writing systems imposed by the Colonial powers, what use did Africans make of the system-heavy intrusions they hosted from the West? Two recent essays--see readings, below, for A. Savage and C. Wyrod--aerate these queries, which probe the current state of African writing system perspectives. In 'Writing Tuareg,' A. Savage shares with us a dilemma faced, in referendum, by the nomadic sub-Saharan Tuaregs. How did they want their oral language, previously *purely* oral, to be written? They had three choices: Roman script, that Tiffinagh (mentioned above,) which had a distant kinship to Tuareg speech, or Arabic--of common use in the region. There's an answer to these questions, but that's not what matters; what matters is that the group had a *choice of system. Systems are products of choices.*

## Readings

Dalby, David, 'A Survey of the indigenous scripts of Liberia and Sierra Leone: Vai, Mende, Kpelle, and Bassa,' *African Language Studies*, 1967, 8: 1-51.

Davidson, Basil, *The African Past*, Harmondsworth, 1964.

Mafundikwa, Saki, *Afrikan Alphabets: The story of writing in Africa*, West New York, 2004.

Pasche, Helma, 'Competing scripts: the introduction of the Roman alphabet in Africa,' *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 191 (2008), pp. 65-110.

Savage, Andrew, 'Writing Tuareg: the three script options,' *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 192 (2008), pp. 5-14.

Wyrod, Christopher, 'A social orthography of identity, the N'ko literacy movement in West Africa,' *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 192 (2008), pp. 27-44.

## Discussion questions

Do you see any unity among the widespread African efforts to create a workable writing system? Why did the Colonial powers prevail, with their imposition of the Roman alphabet?

There are many new efforts afoot, to create writing systems for regional groups in Africa. To what do you attribute these movements? Is the Roman alphabet destined to be replaced, or modified?

What made it possible for the writing system of the Ancient Egyptians to prevail for three millennia? How did their system change over time?

The internet is now playing a role in the formation of new writing systems in Africa. Of what special use do you think the net can be, in this development?

What role have African writing systems played as sacred script, elements in religious liturgy or practice?

How do writing systems form? Who invents them? Is the invention of them similar to the invention of works of art?