





# Roots of Afrikan Writing Systems

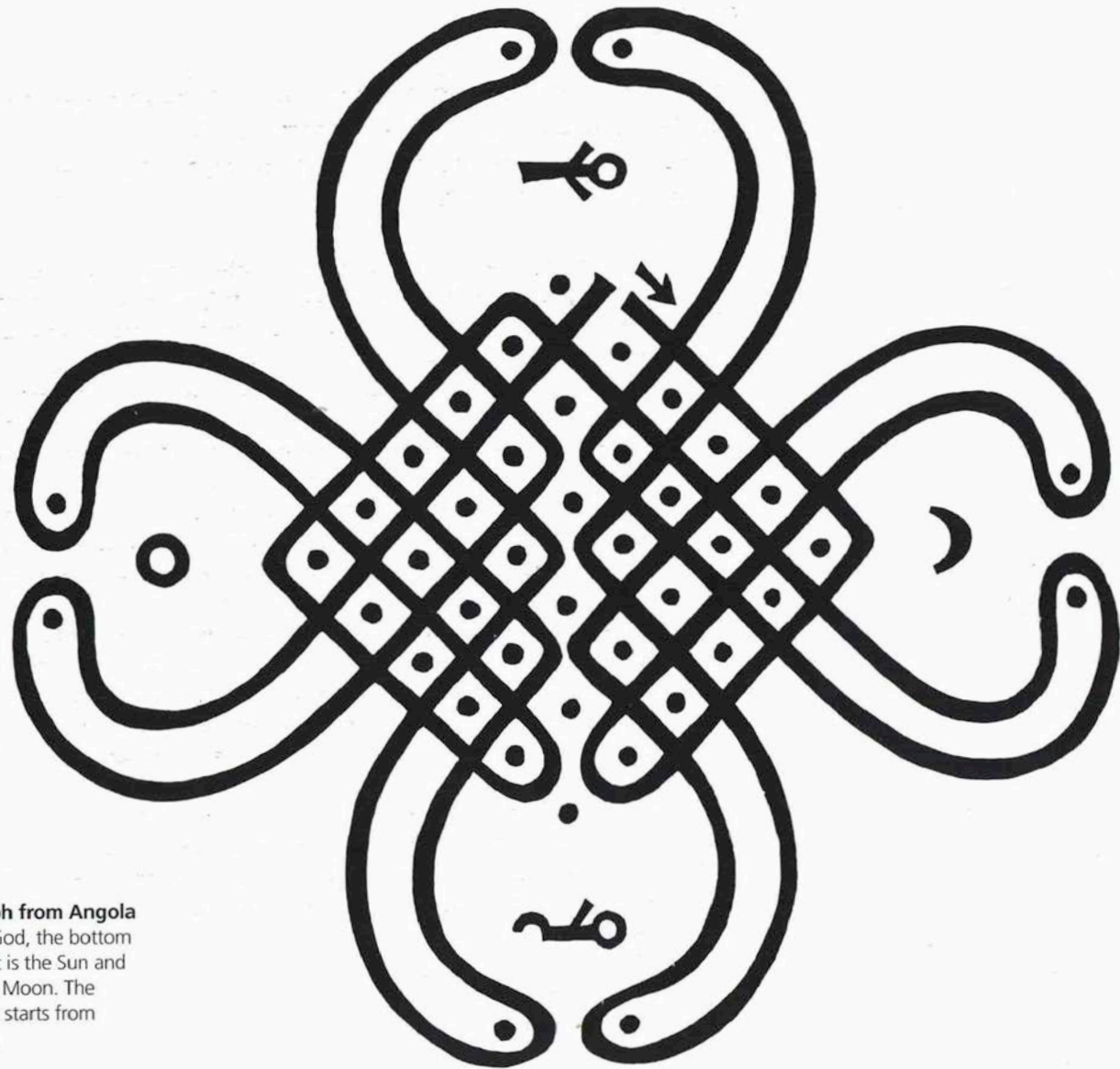


afrikan alphabets are born out of an oral story-telling tradition and have grown up in a variety of forms across the Afrikan continent and the Diaspora. Some of these communication systems were created several thousand years ago and are inextricably linked to the culture and ideas from which they came. Their purpose has been primarily to preserve a collective memory and, additionally, to create a permanent record.

In this section pictographs and symbols – used in pictographic rock art, scarification, knotted strings, tally sticks, and symbol writing – are considered together as forerunners of writing in Afrika. They form the roots, both directly and indirectly, of Afrikan writing systems.

The commonly held belief is that most graphic symbols in Afrikan societies are merely decorative. In fact, in Afrikan culture, symbols fill an important communication role. There are stories to be found in the rock art of the San people in southern Afrika; the carvings on the calabashes of the Kikuyu of Kenya. There is information stored in tally sticks like the Ishango Bone from The Congo, the knotted strings of Nigerian Aroko, and the scarification found in many Afrikan societies. The meaning attributed to these symbols and artifacts qualifies as proto-writing, or forerunners of writing. Most of these symbol systems are several thousand years old, suggesting that Afrika has a much older tradition of writing than some have recognized.

This chapter on the forerunners of writing systems demonstrates the transition of graphic characters from symbolic reminders to the phonetic codes of spoken language. Tifinagh, for example, once geometric directional symbols painted on rocks to guide nomadic peoples, is today a phonetic alphabet of commerce.



**Jokwe pictograph from Angola**  
 The top figure is God, the bottom is Man, on the left is the Sun and on the right is the Moon. The labyrinth-like path starts from and leads to God.

## Pictographs

The complex pictograph shown opposite was found among the Jokwe people of Angola. It tells the story of the beginning of the world.

Here is one version of that "story" conveyed using a Western alphabet system and more than 300 words.

Once upon a time the Sun went to pay his respects to God. He walked for many days until he found the path that led to God. Upon presenting himself to God, he was given a cock and instructed to return the next morning before he set off on his long journey back. Sun slept soundly all night and was awakened by the cock, which crowed loudly. He then went to see God, who said, "I heard the cock crow, the one I gave you for supper. You may keep him, but you must return every morning." This is why the sun encircles the earth and appears every morning.

The Moon also went to visit God and was given a cock – who also woke him up in the morning. God said to him, "I see that you also did not eat the cock I gave you for supper. Well done, but come back and see me every twenty-eight days."

Man went to see God too, and was also given a cock. Tired and hungry after his long trip, he ate half the cock and left the rest for his return trip. When he finally woke up, the sun was already high in the sky. He quickly ate the remainder of the cock and hurried to see God. God smiled at him and said, "What about the cock I gave you yesterday? I did not hear him crow this morning."

The man got scared and stammered, "I was hungry . . . and ate him."

"It's all right," said God, "but listen: you know that Sun and Moon have been here, but neither of them killed the cock I gave them. That is why they will never die. You killed yours and so you must die as he did, but at your death you must return here." And so it is.

**Barkcloths, painted**

Foragers, Ituri Forest  
Democratic Republic of Congo  
20th century  
lengths 23 and 32 inches  
(58.4 and 81.2cm)

Bark cloth is made of tree bark that has been pounded flat by the menfolk of foraging peoples from the Ituri Forest in the the northeast of The Congo. (I call it Afrikan paper.) The women use a natural fiber brush to paint the cloth with abstract and rhythmic patterns using an ink made from the juice of the gardenia plant. It is thought that the flowing designs – similar to the motifs painted on their bodies – relate to forest flora and fauna. It is also thought that, in the context of rituals, the designs encode a forest idiom which echoes a unique polyphonic praise sung only by the forest dwellers. Abstractly, it is a form of written communication.

Collection of Dr. Marshall W. and Caroline Mount  
The African Art Museum of the SMA Fathers,  
Tenafly, NJ  
Photo: Tapiwa Muronda



**Ntshakishwepi**

**Embroidered Prestige Wrapper**  
wood, pigment  
161.25 x 72 x 10 inches  
(409.6 x 182.9 x 25.4 cm)

*Ntshakishwepi* (Kuba cloth) are raffia weavings sewn into a large wraparound cloth with black embroidered patterns spaced irregularly. The individual elements of the patterns, squares, rectangles, angles, circles, ellipses – though not arranged in harmony with each other, still form a harmonious whole. *Ntshakishwepi* are used for daily wear, but very long examples with spectacular patterns that “move” across the length of the fabric are prestige or dance skirts wrapped many times around the hips. The Kuba also make and use raffia skirts for men.

The African Art Museum of the SMA Fathers,  
Tenafly, NJ  
Photo: Tapiwa Muronda



## Symbols

Every culture has symbols. In the United States today, every citizen has a social security number, which gives complete access to all kinds of data on individuals – their mother's name, credit status, etc. This number is far more important than the person's name in establishing who they are. In most countries today, products are imprinted with a bar code, the Universal Product Code symbol, which tells how much a product – whether a sponge or a stove – costs, where, when, and by whom it was made. These twenty-first-century symbols are replacing writing in a digital world, just as writing replaced pictorial symbols in the first two millennia of world civilization. As the world turns digital, as computers take over our lives more and more, writing is converted into code; for example, ASCII – American Standard Code for Information Interchange – a set of numbers used for digital storage and transmission. The spoken word is not exempt from this translation into non-verbal representation: SMS – Short Message Service – sends text messages to and from mobile telephones through the Global System for Mobiles (GSM). With over 600 million GSM users in Afrika, Europe, and Asia, billions of SMS messages are sent worldwide. That figure will grow exponentially once the United States fully adopts GSM in a few years.

The U.S. government developed the internet for military purposes. But those opposed to military conflict are also able to use this technology for peaceful uses that include the transmission of the spoken word (SMS) and the sharing of information (World Wide Web) to spread information globally in ways never thought possible before. And it is not just high technology that is embracing the use of symbols. In public spaces, restrooms are marked with male and female figures; at intersections letters spelling out **WALK** on traffic lights have been replaced with universal ideograms of a human figure frozen in mid-step, and the **DON'T WALK** sign is a red hand held up in a forbidding gesture.

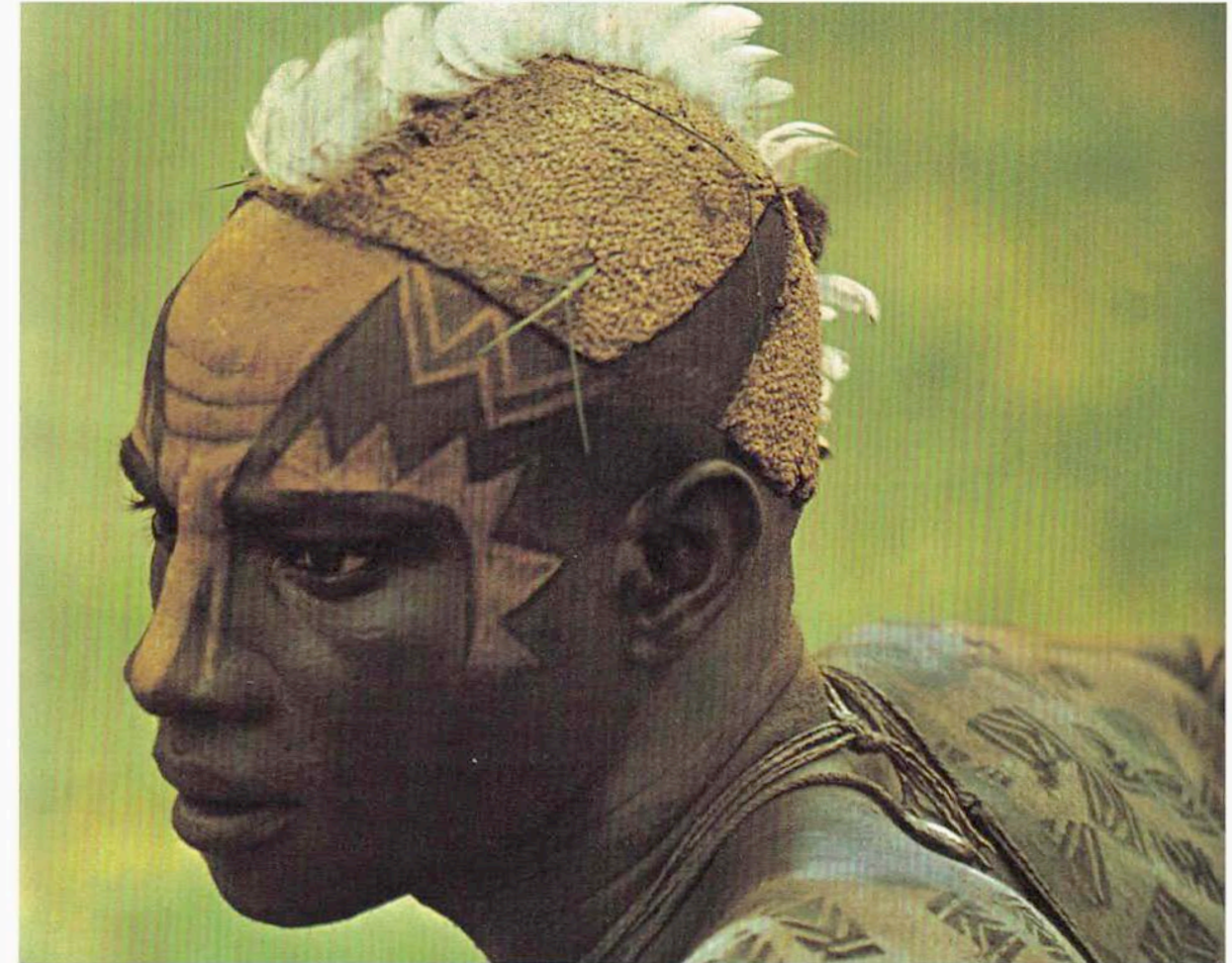
Afrikans utilized symbols rather than words in their personal identification since the dawn of time in body painting and scarification or cicatrisation. Body painting among the Nuba in Sudan has an aesthetic, but it follows precise rules and indicates status. In many societies there are different face painting

### Non-representative body and facial design, stamped body design

Face and body painting in Southeastern Nuba, Kordofan province, Sudan, follows precise social rules, and the decorations serve as a status indicator.

Photograph © by James C. Faris from *Nuba Personal Art*. Duckworth, London, 1972

styles and colors for different functions. Similarly, in the Congo societies practice scarification by treating gashes with caustic plant juices to form blisters, which when healed, form raised scars, known as keloids. The shapes and designs can carry permanent symbolism, much as tattoos do in other cultures. Throughout Afrika, personal art serves to mark age, rank, status, or membership in a group.





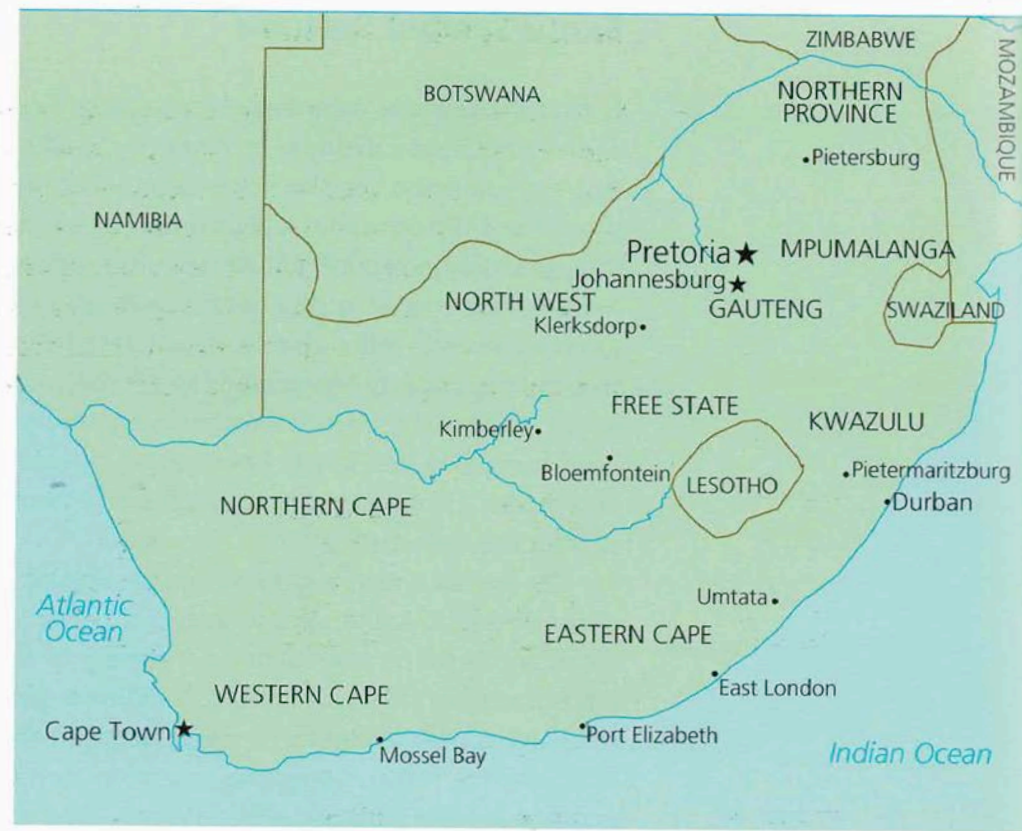
## Bantu Symbol Systems

Prehistoric peoples recorded events using very basic symbols to remind them of the past. These pictorial reminders, called pictographs or pictographic writing, developed to the next stage: ideographs. Ideographs are made by simplifying pictographs. A pictograph of a typical man is further streamlined into, perhaps, a vertical ellipse with four appendages. Although it identified a man, it bore none of the details that tell anything about the man. As the symbols became more and more abstract, as the picture component gave way to a pure symbol, the languages had to be taught rather than intuited. That is when humans discovered another great thing about language: it could be used for power and secret knowledge, private messages. At first language was meant to build up communication between people; but then it was used to shut the uninitiated out.

The Bantu symbols give no suggestion of how a word or idea should be pronounced. It is a language to be read silently, not read aloud. Conveying ideas in this silent way takes on a variety of forms. Temporary messages are burned on calabash gourds. Sentiments of love are woven in message mats using beads. Ideas of a more permanent nature, and especially those intended for future generations, are engraved on drums, pottery, and the walls of dwelling places. After a newly-wed couple have built their house, the mother of the husband, or any of his friends, may decorate the house with blessing symbols. This custom is still practiced in Zimbabwe and Mozambique. The Ma-Pochs and Ndebele of South Afrika decorate their dwellings most elaborately with all kinds of prayers, proverbs, and occult sayings.

Credo Mutwa, a Zulu from South Afrika, is the grandson of a medicine man. As an adult, Mutwa underwent the "Ceremony of Purification" in order to begin training as a medicine man. He assumed the post of Custodian of Sacred Tribal Relics upon his grandfather's death. In the course of reclaiming his Afrikan heritage, Mutwa has given much thought to the form in which cultural information is passed along from generation to generation.

**Bantu Symbol Systems** are used in areas of South Afrika. The Ma-Poch and Ndebele peoples of South Afrika decorate their dwellings most elaborately with all kinds of prayers, proverbs, and occult sayings using the symbols.



In Afrika, medicine men like Mutwa's ancestors used language both to impart information to a new generation and to keep that same information out of the hands of ordinary people. They created symbols only fellow practitioners understood. In other groups, similar secret languages were used for communication in secret societies; for example, the Ejagham of southern Nigeria and northern Cameroon created Nsibidi for their exclusive use. This was based on social ties rather than a shared body of wisdom.

## Bantu Symbol Writing

In South Afrika, the Bantu symbol-language is not taught to the common people. Yet Mutwa estimates thirty percent of the Bantu people could write in this language. Apart from medicine men and the elders and the wise ones, it is mostly women who still employ it. Bantu symbol-language is not a language like Arabic or Swahili. Each symbol does not represent a single character or letter; instead, each expresses a whole word or, more often, a complete idea, much like Chinese and Japanese symbols. The characters are arranged in sequence to communicate a fact: Man+sees+Lion. Lion+eats+ox.



male symbols



youth

warrior with shield

chief

brain

mind



female symbols

virgin

baby girl

married woman

mother-in-law

old woman



bride



beautiful visitor



queen



goddess of creation, mother, source



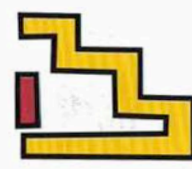
chieftainess



planter, skillful person



vagabond, useless person



marriage, unity, love



birth (figurative and actual)



home



fire, lust, love, passion



unity



break-up, divorce



war, hostility



divine guidance



greatness



sunlight



sunrise, birth



sunset, old age



future



pleasure, joy



obedience



wisdom, silence



conversation



gossip



pollution



madness







ox



cattle



buck



lion



elephant



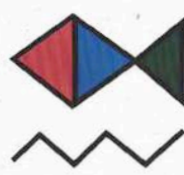
dog



hyena, greed



turtle,  
keeper of tribal secrets



fertility



bird of light eating serpent  
truth



insect, bee, diligence



bird, speed, all haste



river, tranquility



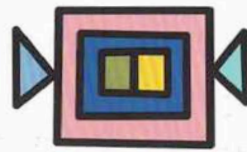
see



eat



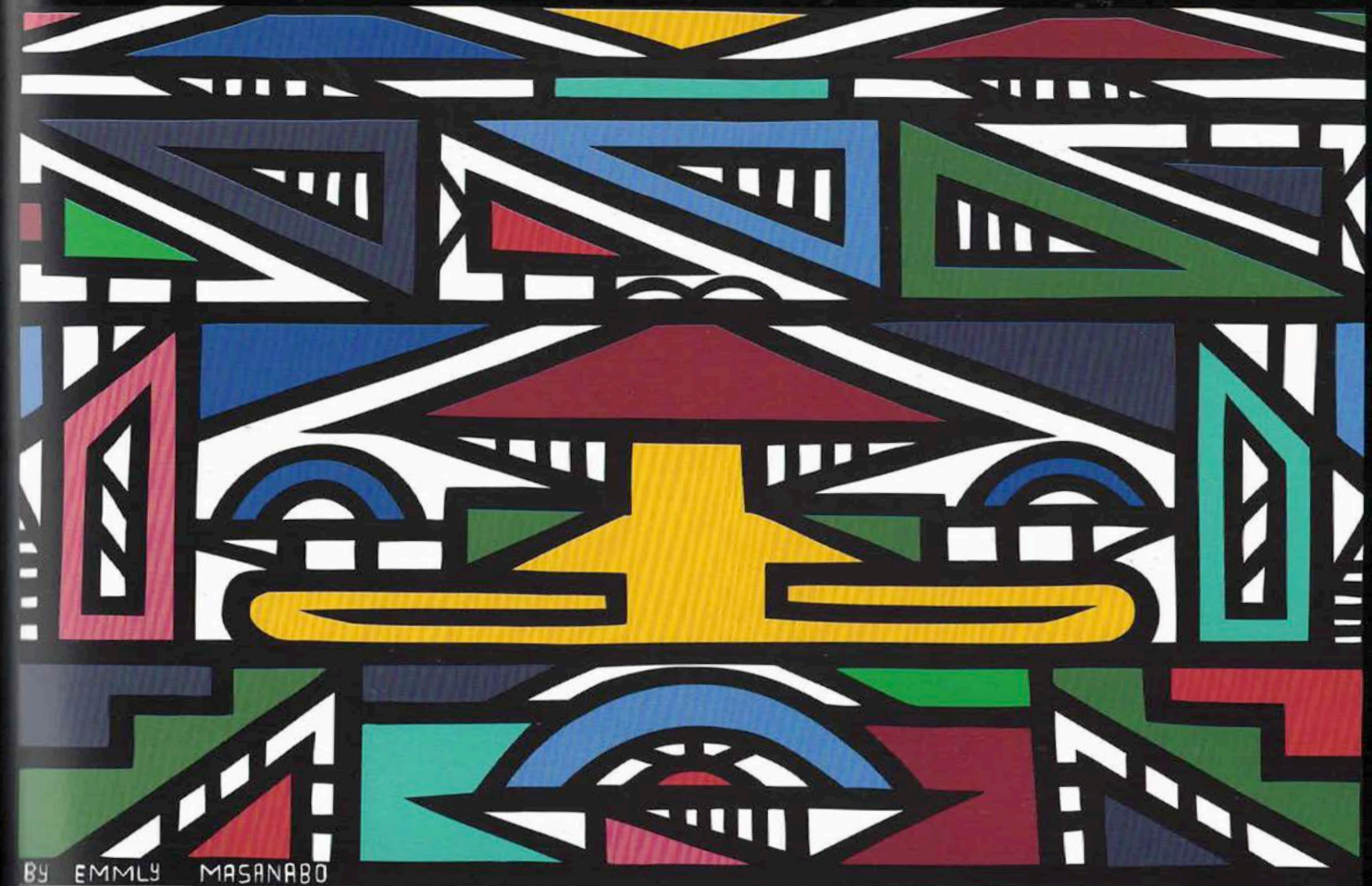
hut



home



home of in-laws



BY EMMLY MASANABO

### Ndebele Painters

In South Afrika, the Ndebele women house painters of *Kwa Ndebele* province have attracted international attention. Esther Mahlangu was commissioned by BMW to paint an Art Car. She is the first woman artist to be commissioned by the auto maker to contribute to this series that includes top artists from around the world. British Airways, in a corporate identity campaign from 1997 to 2000, used designs by twin sisters, Emmly and Martha Masanabo, on the tailfins of some its Boeing 747s.

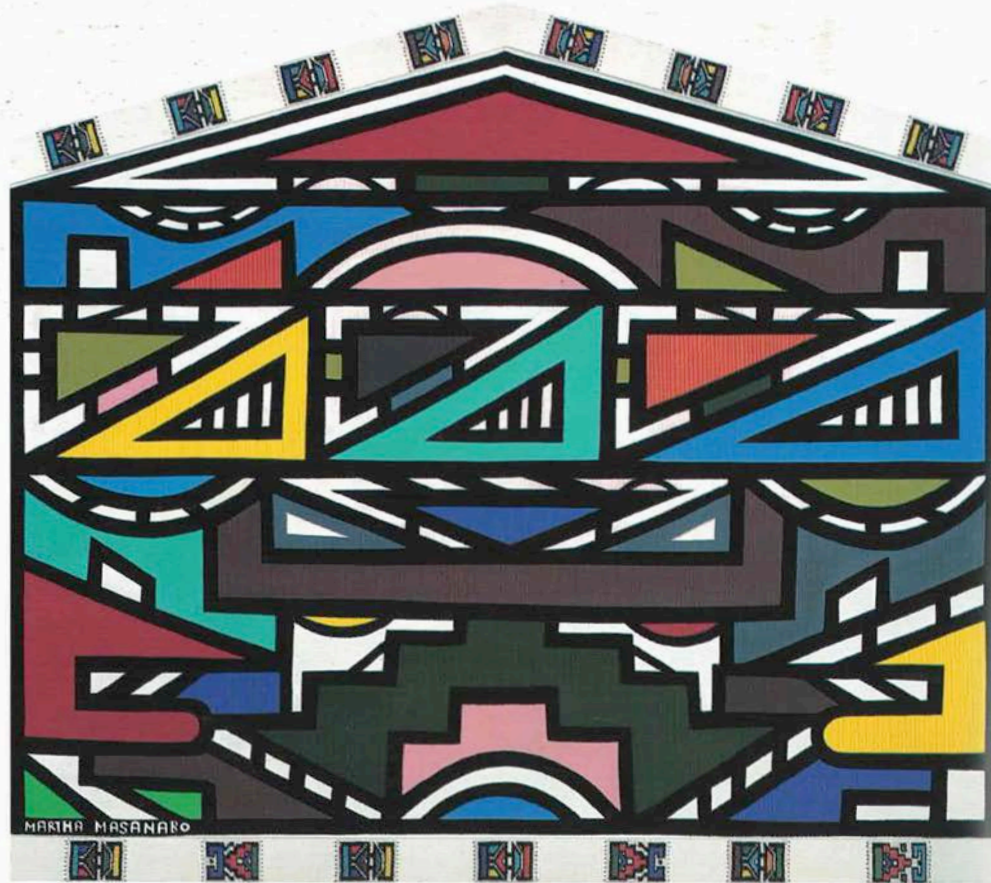
Above panel by Emmly Masanabo, courtesy of British Airways Plc 2003



**Ndebele planes for British Airways**

The women of the Ndebele people replaster the outside of their homes every four years and paint them in bright, bold geometric patterns drawn from the beadwork for which the Ndebele people are known.

Twin sisters, Emmly and Martha Masanabo, two respected house painters from Mpumalanga Province, South Afrika, were commissioned by British Airways to paint panels for the tail fins of 747s as part of a Corporate Identity program during 1997–2000 that included work by many international artists. The tailfin design shown on the 747 above is a detail of the design shown on page 43. The panel (at right) is designed by Martha Masanabo.



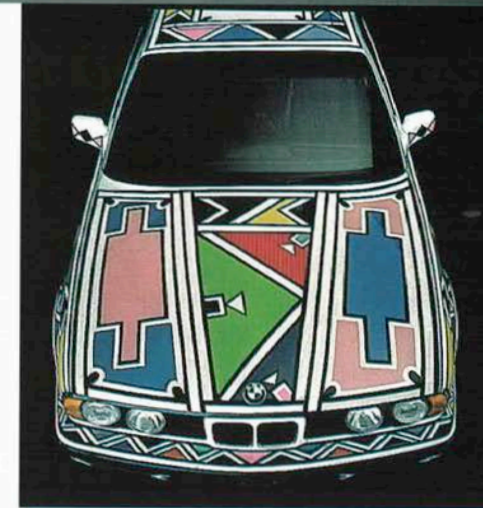
Courtesy British Airways Plc, 2003



**BMW Ndebele Art Car**

Since the 1970s the German auto-maker has commissioned artists from around the globe to design a series of Art Cars. In 1991 Esther Mahlangu, a renowned house painter from Mpumalanga Province, South Afrika, became the first woman in BMW's international list of Art Car artists. Her art has evolved from the tradition of home decoration for which the Ndebele people are famous.

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## Historical Afrikan Writing Systems

The Afrikan alphabets characterized as historic range widely in their dates of origin. Some date from thousands of years ago (Ethiopic), some are hundreds of years ago (Nsibidi), some are from the early 20th century (Shū-mom and Vai), and some date from the comparatively recent times of the mid-20th century (Mende, Loma, and Kpelle).

The desire to express ideas and relay and record information – selectively, but for posterity – is an ancient concept. While many of the new alphabets are based on what has gone before, many individuals and Afrikan societies have felt the need for their own means of expression. What sets these writing systems apart from other Afrikan writing systems is that they continue to be in use today – some by millions of people – in all the written communication of their daily lives. There continues to be an interest in the teaching of these Afrikan alphabets to both the young and other initiates in order to preserve and continue cultural traditions.

### Ethiopic ልደል

It is popularly thought that Ethiopic has Semitic origins, developing from the script of Ethiopia's classical language, Ge'ez, which was derived from the Sabaeen/Minean script brought to Eritrea from south Arabia over 2,500 years ago. The script used to write Ge'ez has been in use since at least the 4th century AD. At first the script represented only consonants; vowel indication was added in around 350 AD, when the 22 consonants took on vowel indications for the 7 vowel sounds of the Ge'ez language. They were written with small appendages to the consonant letters, with modifications of their shapes.

In contrast to popular thought, the Ethiopian semiotician, Ayele Bekerie, maintains that the Ethiopic writing system is, from the beginning, the work of an Afrikan people and can be defined as a system of knowledge through concretized symbols because it incorporates philosophical features. His book *Ethiopic, An African Writing System* is a comprehensive study of this writing system, defining it as a writing system that expresses the Ethiopian cultural identity and their sense of connectedness to the people of the world.



**Ge'ez Bible**  
 Above: A manuscript Bible featuring Ge'ez, an Ethiopic script.  
 Right: Rubrication and decorative elements of this book dating from the 19th century.

Courtesy the Hemingway Gallery, NYC  
 Photo: Tapiwa Muronda



## Ethiopic Script

Ethiopic script in its classic state has a total of 182 syllographs, which are arranged in seven columns, each column containing 26 syllographs.

Each symbol represents a syllable consisting of a consonant plus a vowel. The basic signs are modified in a number of different ways to indicate the various vowels.

Written horizontally from left to right, words in inscriptions are separated with a vertical line. Elsewhere, two dots similar to a colon are used to separate words, although in languages such as Amharic, blank spaces are generally used instead. A full stop or period is four dots (:) and a comma is two dots with horizontal lines over and between them.

This script is used to write Amharic, the national language of Ethiopia, which has about 14 million speakers.

The Ethiopic Writing System

hoy (h)

<b>ሀ</b>	<b>ሁ</b>	<b>ሂ</b>	<b>ሃ</b>	<b>ሄ</b>	<b>ህ</b>	<b>ሆ</b>
hā	hu	hi	ha	he	hə/ø	ho

läwe (l)

<b>ለ</b>	<b>ሉ</b>	<b>ሊ</b>	<b>ላ</b>	<b>ሌ</b>	<b>ል</b>	<b>ሎ</b>
lä	lu	li	la	le	lə/ø	lo

häwt (h/h)

<b>ሐ</b>	<b>ሑ</b>	<b>ሒ</b>	<b>ሓ</b>	<b>ሔ</b>	<b>ሕ</b>	<b>ሖ</b>
hä	hu	hi	ha	he	hə/ø	ho

may (m)

<b>መ</b>	<b>ሙ</b>	<b>ሚ</b>	<b>ማ</b>	<b>ሜ</b>	<b>ሞ</b>	<b>ሟ</b>
mā	mu	mi	ma	me	mə/ø	mo

śawt (ś)

ሠ	ሠ	ሠ	ሠ	ሠ	ሠ	ሠ
śä	śu	śi	śa	śe	śə/ø	śo

ṛ 's (r)

ረ	ረ	ረ	ረ	ረ	ረ	ረ
rä	ru	ri	ra	re	rə/ø	ro

sat (s)

ሰ	ሰ	ሰ	ሰ	ሰ	ሰ	ሰ
sä	su	si	sa	se	sə/ø	so

**Vowel sounds**

ä = open a as in "art"

long u = "ooo" as in "use"

long i = i as "lie"

long and short a = "play" & "cat"

long and short e = "feet" & "fret"

ə (schwah) = indeterminate "eh/ah" sound of unstressed syllables

long and short o = "toe" & "tot"

ሸ	ሸ	ሸ	ሸ	ሸ	ሸ	ሸ
sä	su	si	sa	se	sə/ø	so

qaf (q)

ቀ	ቀ	ቀ	ቀ	ቀ	ቀ	ቀ
qä	qu	qi	qa	qe	qə/ø	qo

qaf (q)

ቁ	ቁ	ቁ	ቁ	ቁ	ቁ	ቁ
quä	qui	qua	que	quə	quə	quə

bet (b)

በ	በ	በ	በ	በ	በ	በ
bä	bu	bi	ba	be	bə/ø	bo

täwe (t)

ተ	ተ	ተ	ተ	ተ	ተ	ተ
tä	tu	ti	ta	te	tə/ø	to

ቸ	ቸ	ቸ	ቸ	ቸ	ቸ	ቸ
čä	ču	či	ča	če	čə/ø	čo

härm (h/h)

ከ	ከ	ከ	ከ	ከ	ከ	ከ
hä	hu	hi	ha	he	hə/ø	ho

härm (h/h)

ከ

huä

ከህ

hui

ከህል

hua

ከህይ

hue

ከህዕ

huə

nähas (n)

ነ

nä

ነህ

nu

ነህል

ni

ነህል

na

ነህይ

ne

ነህዕ

nə/ø

ነህዕ

no

ነህል

nā

ነህህ

nū

ነህህል

nī

ነህህል

nā

ነህህይ

nē

ነህህዕ

nə/ø

ነህህዕ

nō

'älf

አ

'ä

አህ

'u

አህል

'i

አህል

'a

አህይ

'e

አህዕ

ə/ø

አህዕ

'o

kaf (k)

ከ

kä

ከህ

ku

ከህል

ki

ከህል

ka

ከህይ

ke

ከህዕ

kə/ø

ከህዕ

ko

kaf (k)

ከህ

kuä

ከህህ

kui

ከህህል

kua

ከህህይ

kue

ከህህዕ

kuə

ከህ

hä

ከህህ

hu

ከህህል

hi

ከህህል

ha

ከህህይ

he

ከህህዕ

hə/ø

ከህህዕ

ho

wäwe (w)

ወ

wä

ወህ

wu

ወህል

wi

ወህል

wa

ወህይ

we

ወህዕ

wə/ø

ወህዕ

wo

'äyn

ዐ

'ä

ዐህ

'u

ዐህል

'i

ዐህል

'a

ዐህይ

'e

ዐህዕ

'ə/ø

ዐህዕ

o

zäy (z)

ዘ

za

ዘህ

zu

ዘህል

zi

ዘህል

za

ዘህይ

ze

ዘህዕ

zə/ø

ዘህዕ

zo

ž

ዠ

žä

ዠህ

žu

ዠህል

ži

ዠህል

ža

ዠህይ

že

ዠህዕ

žə/ø

ዠህዕ

žo

yämän (y)

የ

yä

የህ

yu

የህል

yi

የህል

ya

የህይ

ye

የህዕ

yə/ø

የህዕ

yo

dänt (d)

ደ

dä

ደህ

du

ደህል

di

ደህል

da

ደህይ

de

ደህዕ

də/ø

ደህዕ

do

ğ

ጀ

ğä

ጀህ

ğu

ጀህል

ği

ጀህል

ğa

ጀህይ

ge

ጀህዕ

ğə/ø

ጀህዕ

go

gäml (g)

ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ
gä	gu	gi	ga	ge	gə/ø	go

gäml

ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ
guä	gui	gua	gue	guä

tyät

ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ
tä	tu	ti	ta	te	tə/ø	to

č

ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ
čä	ču	či	ča	če	čə/ø	čo

päyt

ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ
pä	pu	pi	pa	pe	pə/ø	po

šädäy

ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ
šä	šu	ši	ša	še	šə/ø	šo

däppa (s/z)

ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ
zä	zu	zi	za	ze	zə/ø	zo

äf (f)

ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ
fä	fu	fi	fa	fe	fə/ø	fo

psa (p)

ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ
pä	pu	pi	pa	pe	pə/ø	po

Ethiopic numbers:

ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ
10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90
ገ	ገ							
100	1000							

Ethiopic consonants:

ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ
h	l	h	m	s	r	s	s	q	qu	b
ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ
t	c	k	h	w	z	z	y	d	g	
ገ	ገ	ገ	ገ							
g	gu	t	c							



**King Ibrahim Njoya**  
The 17th king of the Bamum.  
A Renaissance man whose  
achievements were destroyed by  
colonialism, in particular the French.

## King Njoya's Syllabary

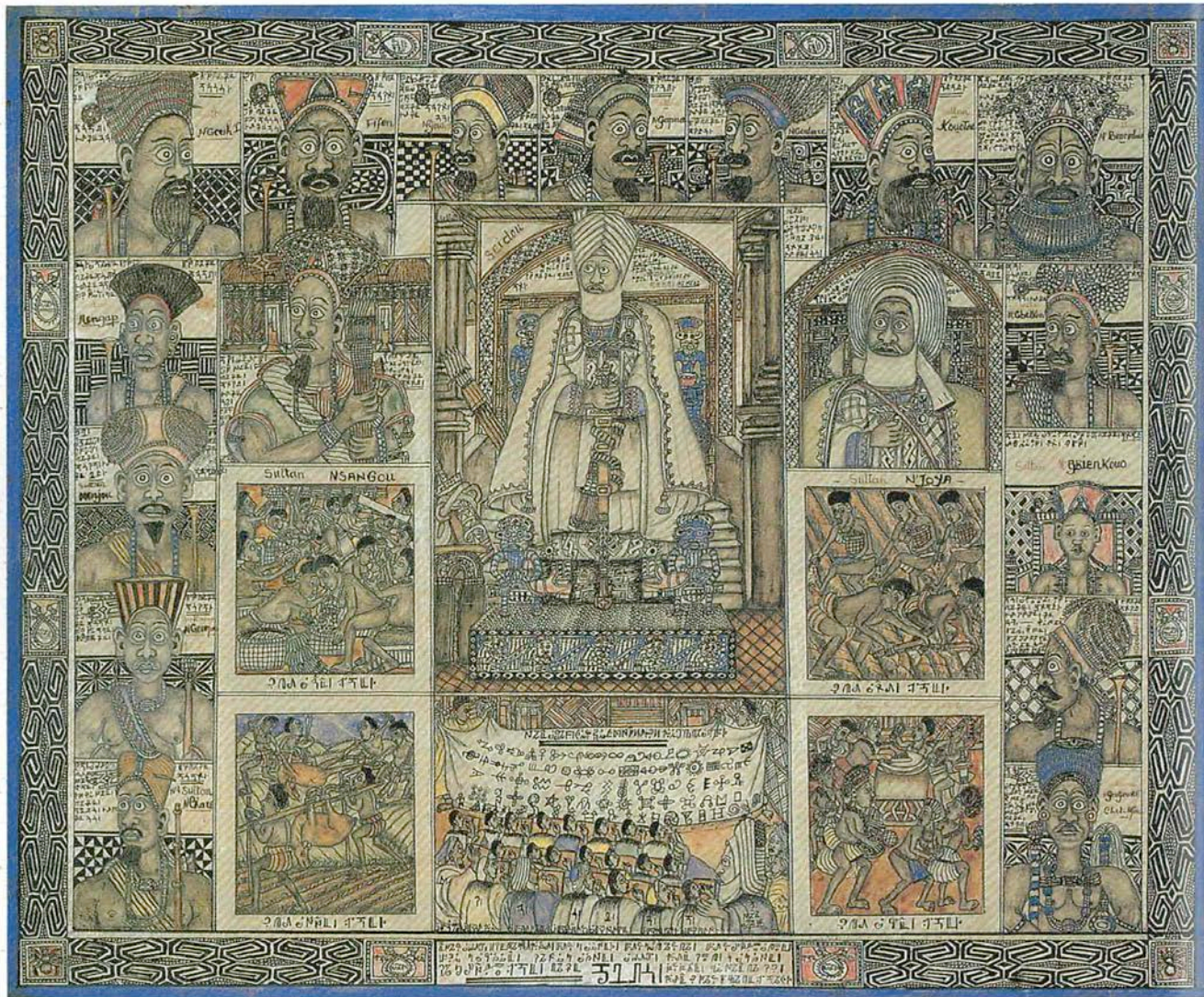
In the year 1896, during the period that Cameroon was colonized by Germany, King Ibrahim Njoya of the Bamum Kingdom undertook a massive effort to develop a system of writing. King Njoya not only invented a writing system at the age of 25, he also left behind a huge collection of his manuscripts detailing the history of his people. He compiled a pharmacopœia, designed a calendar, drew maps of his kingdom, kept administrative records and legal codes, and wrote a Kama Sutra-like book – all this in the Shū-mom writing which he had invented. King Njoya also produced a large collection of drawings. This collection is still housed in the museum that he developed to preserve his people's heritage.

He created this legacy for his people by putting together a group of dignitaries from among his people who were chosen for their intellect and drawing talents. With the notables, especially his cousin Ibrahim Njoya, who was a talented and prolific artist, the king was able to build a large collection of art and records. As a student of Afrikan alphabets and history, I wanted to find out more about this Renaissance man.

Not long after he had built a magnificent palace and built schools for his people, the French took control of Cameroon. Their power was threatened by his achievements. They destroyed the printing press that he invented, destroyed his libraries, and burned many of the books he had written. The French soldiers threw Bamum sacred objects into the street. And finally, in 1931, they sent him into exile in the capital of Yaoundé where he died a broken man in 1933. Over the years, Njoya's son and his heir Seidou Njimoluh quietly worked to preserve his heritage.

After Cameroon claimed its independence from the French in 1960, King Njimoluh collected those objects that had not been destroyed and put them in his father's museum where they could be kept safe. King Njimoluh ruled from 1933 to 1992. Today King Njimoluh's son, Sultan El Hadj Ibrahim Mbombo Njoya, no longer has the political power the dynasty had before the Europeans arrived. However, he continues to keep a watchful eye over the Bamum legacy. I hoped to meet him and discuss his grandfather's work with him.





**18 Bamum kings** surrounding King Ibrahim Njoya  
Ibrahim Njoya, 1938–1940.  
Pencil, color pencils, and gouache on paper

Courtesy of Bamum Palace Museum

**Portrait of King Njoya**

Ibrahim Njoya, 1920.  
Pencil, ink, color pencils on paper  
34.5 x 36.5 inches (87.5 x 93 cm)

King Ibrahim Njoya carefully picked the best from among his “notables” to help him devise his writing system. They were all highly talented artists. Among them was his cousin, a very talented draughtsman and painter, who created a prolific body of work. Some of these magnificent drawings are shown on these pages.

Courtesy of Bamum Palace Museum



2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20  
 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40  
 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60  
 61 62 63 64 65 66 67 68 69 70 71 72 73 74 75 76 77 78 79 80  
 81 82 83 84 85 86 87 88 89 90 91 92 93 94 95 96 97 98 99 100

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20  
 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40  
 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60  
 61 62 63 64 65 66 67 68 69 70 71 72 73 74 75 76 77 78 79 80  
 81 82 83 84 85 86 87 88 89 90 91 92 93 94 95 96 97 98 99 100

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20  
 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40  
 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60  
 61 62 63 64 65 66 67 68 69 70 71 72 73 74 75 76 77 78 79 80  
 81 82 83 84 85 86 87 88 89 90 91 92 93 94 95 96 97 98 99 100

Shü-mom, King Njoya's writing system invented in 1896. Three versions of six developed over 30 years. Lerawa niet (top) A Ka u Ku, (middle) and A Ka u Ku Mfemfe (bottom) The three versions of Shü-mom show its transition from an elaborate to more simplified cursive script.

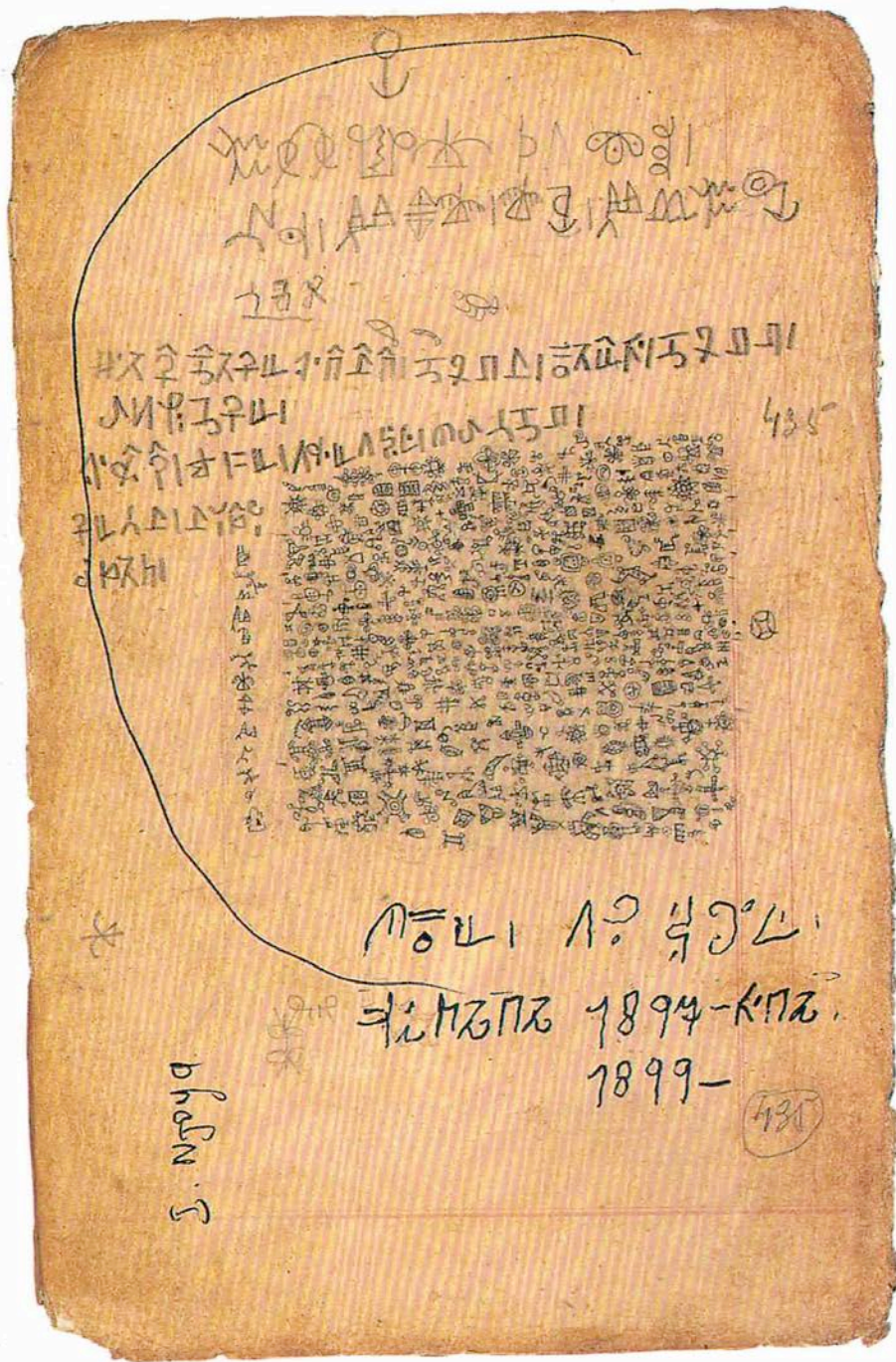
♪	И	ō	♫	ù	レ	♪
a	ka	u	ku	é	Re	te
λ	7	6	♫	À	Ṗ	ㄣ
o	nyi	i	la	Pa	Ri	rié
ḃ	ḃ	ḃ	ḃ	ḃ	ḃ	ḃ
lé	mé	ta	da	njem	M	Su
Y	⋮	ḃ	ḃ	ḃ	ḃ	ḃ
Mu	Shi	Si	Shù	sù	Ké	Két
➤	ḃ	4	ḃ	ḃ	ḃ	ḃ
Noue	Nou	Njoue	Yo	Shou	You	Ya
W	И	ḃ	ḃ	ḃ	ḃ	ḃ
Sha	Kú	pou	jé	té	Pü	Wí
μ	↑	3	♀	Λ	ḃ	ḃ
Pé	fé	Rou	Lou	Mi	Ni	Rú
⋮	2	ḃ	ḃ	ḃ	ḃ	ḃ
Re	Kén	Kwen	Ga	gna	Cho	Poue
И	4	ḃ	ḃ	ḃ	ḃ	ḃ
Fou	Fem	Wa	Na	Li	Pi	Lo
√	ḃ	ḃ	ḃ	ḃ	ḃ	ḃ
Ke	Mbèn	Rèn	Mèn	Ma	Ti	Ki
			♪	ō	ù	λ
			a	u	e	o

The Current Shü-mom Syllabary King Njoya of the Bamum in Cameroon ruled from 1880 to 1931. After much consideration he decided to create a script for his own people. This first script was logographic, containing 465 signs. Njoya modified his script several times during his reign, each time with fewer and fewer signs, as it slowly morphed into a syllabary using the rebus principle. The final script had just 83 signs: 10 numbers and 73 syllables. Each syllable could have a tone indicator if necessary.



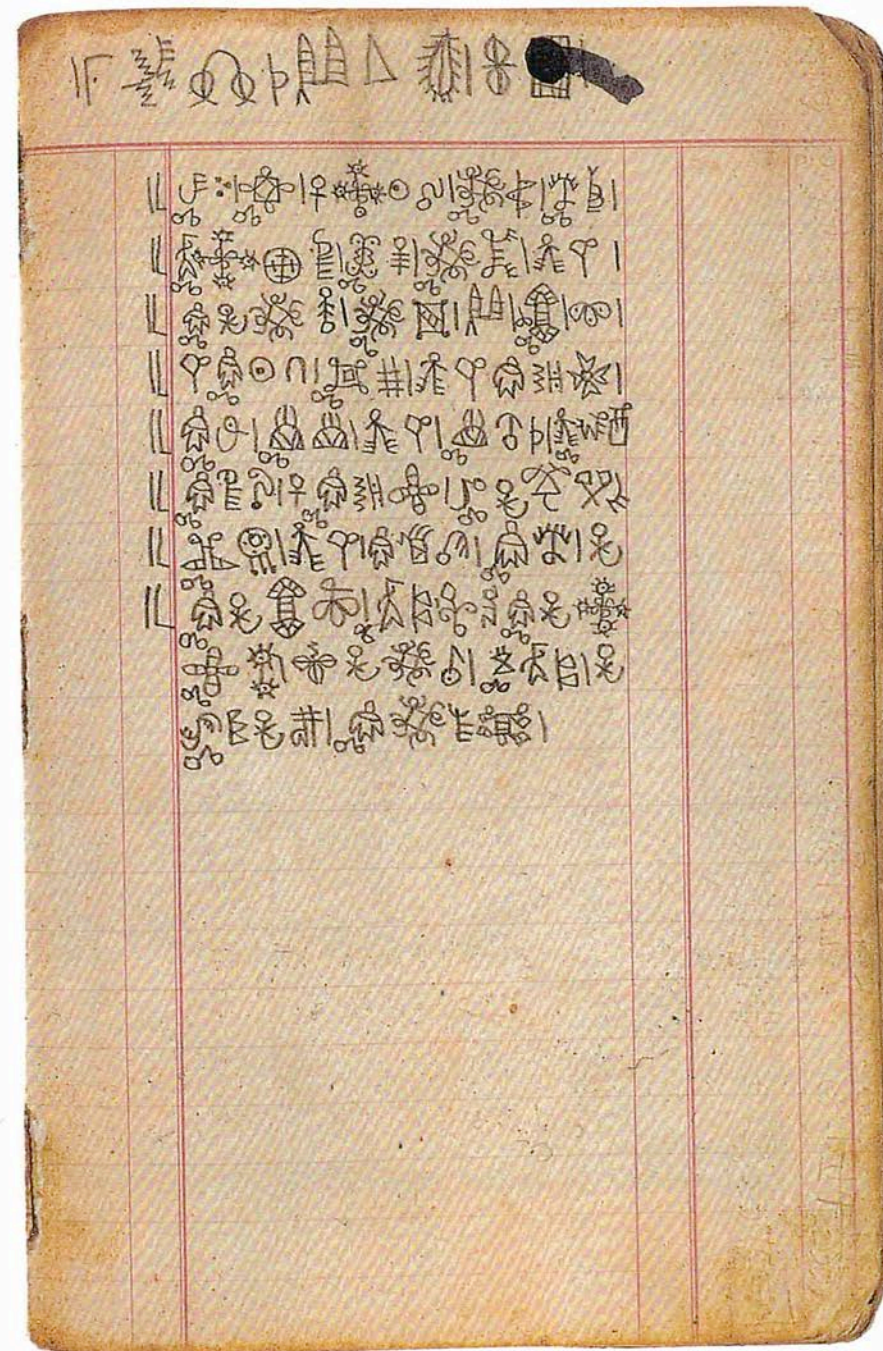
The first version of Shü-mom.  
Ibrahim Njoya, 1897  
Pencil on paper  
4.75 x 7.5 inches (12 x 19 cm)

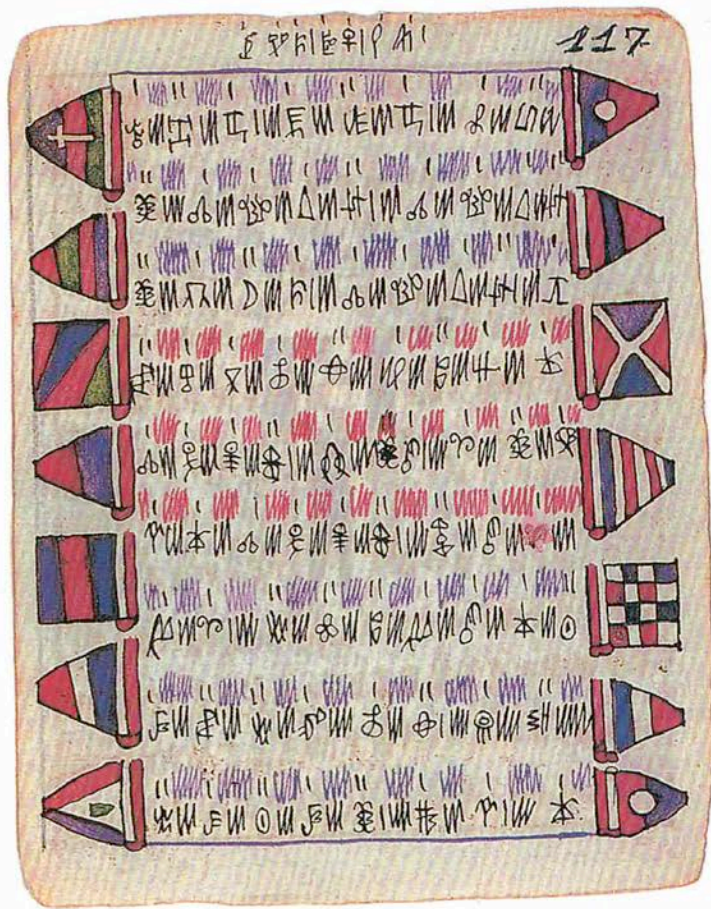
Courtesy of Bamum Palace Museum



A Page of Shü-mom.  
Ibrahim Njoya  
Pencil on paper  
4.75 x 7.5 inches (12 x 19 cm)

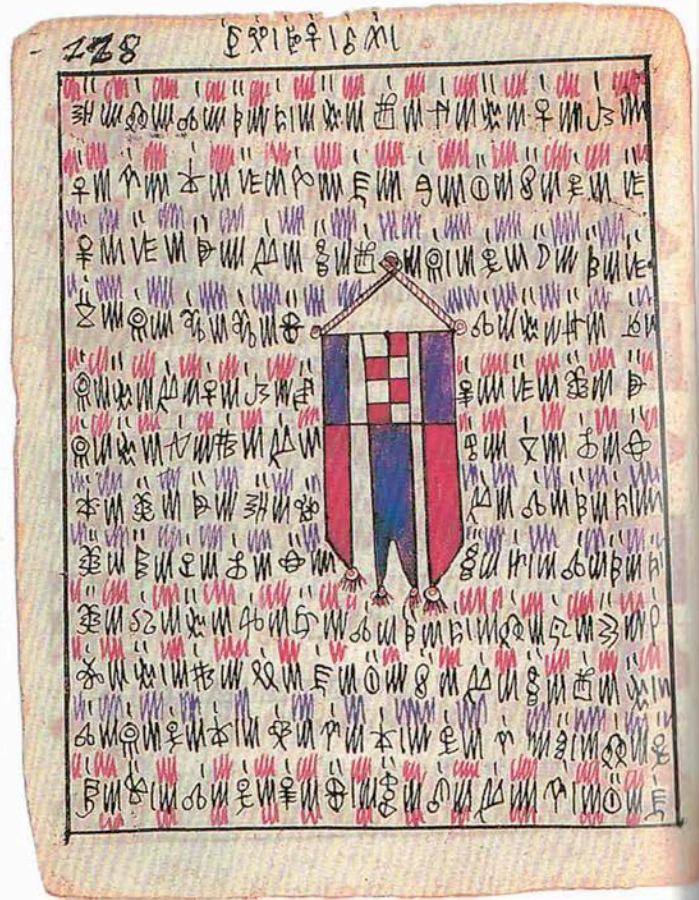
Courtesy of Bamum Palace Museum





The first version of Shü-mom.  
Ibrahim Njoya, 1897  
Pencil on paper

Courtesy of Bamum Palace Museum



Calendar in Shü-mom  
Ibrahim Njoya, 1897  
Pencil on paper

Courtesy of Bamum Palace Museum





The Palace façade.  
Foumban, Cameroon



**On the way to Foumban**  
The minivan and the typical  
landscape we drove through.

### Deep in Bamum country

I decided to travel to Cameroon so that I could meet history face-to-face. I was helped by Cameroonian friends in New York who set me up with family contacts. I finally landed in the coastal city of Douala in January 2003. Tucked on the coast and oppressively hot, this bustling city is the commercial capital of Cameroon. I was very well received by my New York friend's family and the next day flew on to Yaoundé, the administrative capital.

I made contact with two professors at Yaoundé University who gave me much information about the king and the palace. Then I took a four-hour ride in a cramped minivan to Foumban, where the king's legendary grandfather had left an incredible alphabetic legacy. The road was very good, and it meandered through lush green countryside with rolling hills in the distance. Cameroon is endowed with an undulating landscape, many small hills, and some mountain ranges. What should have been a four-hour trip, however, took six because of numerous stops by policemen manning countless impromptu roadblocks solely for the purpose of extorting money from the drivers. I arrived in Foumban late in the afternoon, completely wiped out.

Founded in 1394, this capital of the former Bamum empire is a dust bowl in the dry months (when I went) and a mud bath in the rainy season – a condition I could certainly envision, given the thinness of the soil, which rises easily, coating everything with its fine yellow dust as cars zoom past at speeds far too fast for the narrow roads. Although there are minivans ferrying people from one point to another, rattling yellow taxis zip up and down competing for fares, radios blaring local bikutsi music.

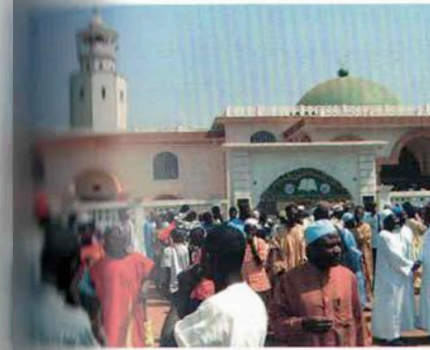
The Bamum people had been keeping the artifacts of each monarch in a room under lock and key; King Ibrahim Njoya decided to put them on display for the enjoyment of his subjects. That is how the idea of a museum was born. As a result, there are some magnificent items on display, a few of them dating back to the 14th century.

I find it hard to explain my feelings as I walked through the huge arched entrance to the palace. I stopped a few yards inside the courtyard and let my eyes take in the imposing three-story red brick structure – which is both the King's living quarters and a museum. It was envisioned in 1904 after King

Njoya visited the German governor's mansion in the coastal town of Buea and decided he could build a better structure befitting a king! European in style, Njoya's palace maintains a uniquely Afrikan sensibility with features like the wooden shutters carved in the signature Bamum style. Life at the palace seemed to go on in a placid but controlled manner. There are all kinds of officials making sure the place runs efficiently. Visitors are encouraged to tour the museum.

The museum occupies the three main floors of the building, with the King's living quarters occupying a smaller section of the grand building, which has about a hundred rooms in all. The collection, huge and impressive in scope – 8,000 manuscripts – had me transfixed. I was mostly interested in Njoya's manuscripts, feasting my eyes upon the genius of this Afrikan son. I looked up at the huge portrait of him at one end of the hall and bowed my head in silent homage. I also found it hard to comprehend why and how this gem of a building and Njoya's legacy have remained unknown, for the most part, not only to the rest of the world but also to us Afrikans.

**There's always room** for one more package! Transportation Afrikan style at the Fouban market.



Islam is another legacy of the king's grandfather. Raised an animist in the 19th century, King Ibrahim Njoya became a Moslem after observing victorious Arab warriors from the north. He watched them credit their victories to small books of Islamic verses that they kept in little purses sewn into the fronts of their tunics. Soon after the arrival of Europeans, he observed how they obliterated their Arab adversaries with their guns, and when he asked them what their secret was, they pointed to the Bible. Njoya decided the new book was more powerful than the small book of verses, so he adopted Christianity. But he was traditionally a polygamist, and the Europeans told him that he had to give up all his other wives and remain with only one – a proposition he found offensive. So he decided to go back to Islam, since they allowed polygamy. Ultimately he mixed some of his people's animist beliefs with Islam to create a Bamum brand of worship. This explains the drums and fanfare as they go to the mosque.

Every Friday at noon the current king, Sultan el Hadj Ibrahim Mbombo Njoya, goes to pray at the mosque, about 200 yards across the street from the palace. He is surrounded by a slow-moving procession of court musicians clad in bright-colored garments blowing on long brass instruments, drummers beating out intricate rhythms, and singing, ululating women who seem to be trying to outdo each other. The sultan, serene and majestic in flowing robes, smiles as he walks at a crawl in the middle of the crowd, a huge umbrella hoisted over his head to shelter him from the sun. The prayer is short, and soon the procession snakes its way back to the palace.

**The sultan makes his way** back to the Palace from worship at the mosque. The crowd is made up of his attendants, local townsfolk, and curious tourists and visitors. The sultan is under the huge umbrella.





I met Sultan el Hadj Ibrahim Mbombo Njoya one evening just before sundown. He came out (amidst the music of the court musicians, with visitors and attendants bowing and paying respect) and he stood on the steps of the palace looking regal in his sumptuous robes. Oumarou Nchare, the Director of Cultural Affairs at the Bamum Palace, kept telling me to get ready to meet the king but someone else always beat him for the king's attention. The expectation was killing me. I felt the wetness in my armpits, but my face did not give away my emotions. Finally, Oumarou grabbed my arm and thrust me in front of Sultan Njoya and introduced me to him. Protocol be damned, I was all adrenaline as I held my hand out and he took it in a firm grip as he welcomed me in very good English. He told me he had visited South Afrika, met Mandela, and would love to visit Zimbabwe some day. He asked me how Mugabe was doing. I later learned that prior to inheriting the throne in 1992, he had been a government minister and diplomat for decades; this explained his worldly demeanor. Yet something about him made me very comfortable – he had no airs, one felt that he had a strong connection to the people. A people's king.

Opposite page  
**Sultan el Hadj Ibrahim Mbombo Njoya**, the current and 19th king of the Bamum, beats on a double gong.

*Photo courtesy of Palais des Rois Bamoun*

**Court musicians** (top) clad in royal colors jamming on shrilly brass-sounding instruments and large drums that spat out ancient rhythms that spoke of the history of the dynasty.

**Visitors bow** (bottom) as they greet the king.







In an artisans' village a mile or so from the palace, a community of artists and dealers sells masks and other crafts from west and central Afrika. Since Cameroon is the bridge between these parts of Afrika, there are artists and dealers with beautiful pieces from Congo, Sierra Leone and Equatorial Guinea. The main attraction is the Bamum and Bamileke masks of Cameroon. Elegant in shape and color, these masks are unique to Cameroon and bear no resemblance to anything from any other part of Afrika. Some of the kiosks are run by young teenage boys whose tenacity in making a sale is both admirable and sometimes annoying. They speak both English and French and are determined not to let any customer leave without buying.

**Bamum wooden panel** (top) carved with the symbols of the Bamum kingdom like the double-headed snake, the double gong, the elephant and the bull.

*Collection of Michelle Esso*

**An artist** (at left) adds the finishing touches to a Bamum drum at the artisan village.

**Masks** (facing page) from Cameroon and other parts of west and central Afrika, on sale at the artisans' village.

