The origins of writing

INTERVIEW WITH
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HERITAGE
QUITO, A CITY
NEAR TO HEAVEN

ENVIRONMENT
OMAN’S GREEN
STRATEGY
Egyptian hieroglyphics may have drawn inspiration from older African traditions

Whereas the writing revolution—the linear, visual representation of specific spoken languages—began only 5,000 years ago, the use of graphic symbols to represent objects and ideas, and to encapsulate magical and religious values, is almost certainly as old as articulate speech itself.

It has sometimes been suggested that certain traditional African symbols, such as those used among the Akan-speaking peoples of Ghana, were inspired by Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, by that magnificent explosion of human writing which took place in northeast Africa. It is more probable, however, that the hieroglyphs themselves drew an important part of their inspiration, 5,000 years ago, from even older traditions of graphic symbolism in Africa itself.

Whereas a long tradition of writing seems to have existed northwards and eastwards of the Sahara and the Nile Valley, southwards stretches an area whose cultures are associated primarily with oral tradition. On the other hand, especially in West Africa, there are strong traditions of graphic symbolism and also many examples of the modern evolution or design of "new" indigenous systems of writing.

One of the most remarkable examples of the use of graphic symbols in Africa is the complex system of pictograms and ideograms known as Nsibidi (or Nsibiri), used traditionally in the Cross River area of southeast Nigeria. The system is known to have many usages, including the use of symbols in combination to record narratives, especially the evidence recorded in contentious love-affairs. Nsibidi symbols may be engraved on calabashes and other domestic objects, painted on walls, printed on cloth or tattooed or painted on the human body. They are not associated with any one specific language but are found in a multilingual area among speakers of Ekoi, Igbo and Ibibio.

A curious tradition relates that the secrets of Nsibidi were long ago revealed to men by a species of large baboon called idok. This legend is above all reminiscent of the divine baboon associated with Thoth, the patron of scribes in ancient Egypt. These widely separated beliefs about the same animal are unlikely to be pure coincidence, and we are left with two other possibilities. Was this a specifically Egyptian belief which found its way over thousands of years and thousands of kilometres to eastern Nigeria, or was it perhaps an ancient and widely spread belief in Black Africa which passed to Egypt...
The Lord's Prayer written in the Bamum language of Cameroon in 1911. The script is known as a-ku-u-ku, a name derived from its first four characters.

Facing page, the first of these two symbols represents the name “nsibidi”, a system of graphic symbols used traditionally in part of southeast Nigeria. The second represents an idiok, one of the large baboons which supposedly revealed the secret of nsibidi to human beings.

This Egyptian statuette depicts Nebtentuf, priest, archivist and scribe to Amenophis III (c. 1400 B.C.), humbly sitting at the feet of Thoth, the baboon-headed god of writing, with hand-made copper dies and compiling texts on the history and customs of his kingdom.

Unfortunately Njoya’s achievements were doomed by the outcome of the First World War. Encouraged under German rule, Njoya’s schools were closed by the post-war colonial authorities, and he destroyed his own printing system in frustration. He was deposed in 1931 and exiled until his death two years later.

A sacred script

The history of Njoya’s system raises the possibility that the form and sudden appearance of Egyptian writing may be explained in a similar way, as the invention primarily of a single man, highly enough placed to have the necessary leisure for his task and for the result to have been accepted without opposition among his own people.

There is no evidence of any long evolution of hieroglyphic writing in the beginning, and the progress of a single inventor could explain the complex structure of the Egyptian script in its earliest recorded form, where different stages of development appear already to be fused into a single system.

Just as Njoya is known to have been impressed, but in no way influenced, by the Arabic script, so an Egyptian inventor may have been stimulated by the slightly earlier invention of a quite different writing system in Mesopotamia.

As in the documented cases of several indigenous writing systems in West Africa, a claim by its inventor to divine inspiration may be assumed in the case of the Egyptian script also, and such an origin was certainly the traditional belief throughout the script’s history. The sacred and revealed nature of Egyptian writing made it immune to any radical restructuring for thousands of years and limited its use to an initiated elite.