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The origins of writing

INTERVIEW WITH
ERNEST J. GAINES

HERITAGE
QUITO, A CITY
NEAR TO HEAVEN

ENVIRONMENT
OMAN'S GREEN
STRATEGY



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Sultan Njoya of Fommban poses in western military uniform in front of a royal costume displayed by his chamberlain (1908).



An inspired invention

by David Dalby

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 *idiok*. 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

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