

# The cultural transmission of script in Africa: The idea versus the system of writing

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Africa has a central role in the creation of writing systems. Egyptian writing dates to the third millennium BC, one of the most ancient occurrences of writing, but there are at least three other traditions of writing in antiquity that continue a tradition of writing in their respective regions to this day. They date back to fourth century BC in the case of Sudan with the Nubian writing tradition and to a few centuries later for the Ethiopian scripts to the East of Sudan as well as the Berber scripts to the West.

Two recent studies on writing systems in Africa have revealed a separate tradition of script development that started in the early nineteenth century (Kootz & Pasch 2008; Rovenchak & Glavy 2011). More than twenty scripts were developed and in use in sub-Saharan Africa in this period with about ten additional scripts that were developed for but did not or have not yet been used by a particular language group (see Table 1). For all these scripts, the name of the inventor(s) is known, lists of signs have been collected and the implementation of these writing systems

has been described where possible. The sheer number of scripts that have been invented and documented for Africa is far higher than for any other region and makes Africa particularly suitable for studying script development.

### **Early history of writing in Africa**

While Egypt may claim the earliest writing on the African continent, the Sudanese Nile basin has an equally impressive history of writing part of which concerns a group of Nilo-Saharan languages, classified by Claude Rilly (2004) as the North Eastern Sudanic branch. The first of these Nubian scripts, as they are referred to here, is the development of the Meroitic writing system that developed ca. 300 BC and continued no later than the fifth century AD. The signs are mostly inspired by those found in demotic script but the system is alphasyllabic rather than the logographic script found in ancient Egypt.

A few centuries after the disappearance of Meroitic writing, the Nubians in Sudan started using a language and script known as Old Nubian. This script is largely based on the Coptic alphabet and its texts have religious Christian content. Although not every aspect of the language is understood, Old Nubian is clearly a close neighbor to both the Meroitic language and some of the later Nubian languages spoken in the region. Between the end of the Meroitic script in the fifth century and the start of Old Nubian writing in the eighth or ninth century, there were other scripts in the region but they were not designed for a Nubian language.

The Meroitic script existed next to Greek texts and Egyptian (Ptolemaic) writing, the latter either in hieroglyphic, demotic or hieratic form. Coptic came about in the second century in Egypt and gained more prominence around the time of the Arab conquest in the seventh century. Roman script was also present although few Romans ever lived in Nubia.

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In other words, both Meroitic and Old Nubian were developed at a time that many scripts of different languages appeared in the region.

Egypt and parts of Sudan were conquered by the Arabs in the seventh century and this eventually made the Arabic script replace most if not all other scripts in the region by the tenth century. Later conquests by Ottomans added another language written in Arabic script. Only British rule in the nineteenth century saw the introduction again of a Roman alphabet and for the instruction of English in Sudanese schools, which continues until the present.

Today's languages that are still related to previous written Nubian languages have in some cases a documented grammar and phonology for which an alphabet was developed by linguists but not necessarily introduced to the speakers of the language. Even though these languages are not taught, they continue to be spoken. Individual attempts to develop a script for these languages have been frequent but remained largely unsuccessful and literacy is limited to Arabic (Hashim 2004).

In Ethiopia, script tradition goes back to the writing of the Ge'ez language that started around the fourth century AD. This script has inspired subsequent scripts that are still largely similar but that serve a series of languages in Ethiopia. Fidäl script, as the modern variation is often referred to, is not only used for Amharic but also for an increasing number of neighboring tongues (Amha 2010).

The Berber languages are known to have a script called Tifinagh that has also seen a number of modern versions. The script was rarely used for inscriptions and its history has remained obscured due to the limited data available. However, its relation to Numidia and ancient North Arabic scripts is generally accepted. Modern versions include Cabilia or Kabylia, the dominant Berber language of Algeria with no previous Tifinagh tradition but a politically active group of users.

In all these traditions, the development of a new writing system is clouded in questions of origin and motive. The shape and system of writing are usually better understood but even the reasons for choosing either a (alpha)syllabic or alphabetic script are unclear.

### **The process of script invention in sub-Saharan Africa**

Modern, meaning nineteenth century and later, script development presents a contrasting set of information. None of these scripts boasts a long history and only few are still in use. However, for all these scripts the inventor is known as well as the circumstances in which the script was developed. The sheer number of script inventions allows a broader comparison that may give insight in the choices that were made during script development.

There are a number of trends that become apparent when all these scripts are presented chronologically. For this, the data from Rovenchak & Glavy (2011) appear particularly useful. Most strikingly, the syllabic scripts are limited to the time before 1935 or just before the Second World War while the alphabetic scripts seem clearly preferred in the period after the war.

The above shift in preference from syllabic to alphabetic has not been noticed before since most of our understanding of the inception of scripts in modern times is based on fewer examples from more diverse periods and regions (cf. Daniels & Bright 1996: 577–624).

An exception to the above trend identified for sub-Saharan Africa is found with African scripts that were not implemented. Most of these scripts were created after the Second World War but are often (alpha)syllabi. In more than half of these cases, the scripts were meant to

The cultural transmission of script in Africa: The idea versus the system of writing write more than one language/dialect, and serve as more universal writing systems than most of the others.

### **Historical developments and the development of script**

In a set of twenty scripts that have been implemented in sub-Saharan Africa, the change in preference from the syllabic to the alphabetic system is clearly marked by the late 1930s, the time just before the Second World War. A number of historical events point at possible explanations for this change. It is important to note that there is a change towards alphabets. This is perhaps best explained as both exposure to and familiarity with alphabetic scripts.

The period that marks this change in sub-Saharan Africa coincides with at least two developments, one linguistic and the other political. In 1934, the Summer Institute of Linguistics came into being and although their language-based programs for Africa did not start until 1962, the Africa Alphabet was also developed around this time, both of which mark the onset of the alphabetization efforts in the region. The Africa Alphabet was developed in 1928 under the direction of Diedrich Westermann who started the International Institute of African Languages and Cultures in London. His alphabet that was later superseded by the International Phonetic Alphabet was aimed to write any African language for both practical and scientific purposes. It became the basis of many orthographies in Africa soon after.

The second, political, development is the onset of the decolonization process. The year 1935 is used by some as a turning point (e.g., Mazrui & Wondii 1999) in Africa's history that has the onset of the Second World War with Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia and the ensuing Africa-wide struggle for political independence after the war. These events coincided with

socio-cultural changes that had a reaction against European imperialism and growing African consciousness as their main themes.

The marked change between syllabic and alphabetic writing systems can at least be partially attributed to these developments. The increased attention to African languages added many examples of alphabets in the region using the universal alphabetic notation systems developed in Europe. At the same time, growing African consciousness fed the motivation to provide an alternative writing system, in competition with existing systems. They applied the European system of writing and created unique signs rather than change the value or copy existing signs.

The scripts developed before this period were unique systems of writing that tried to give unwritten languages a script rather than compete with existing systems. The syllabaries were designed with a limited understanding of writing practices but with a clear idea that writing was possible and advantageous. There does not seem to be a general idea that the scripts had to be different or unique but rather that they would need to be uniquely suited to a language. Indeed, the application of an existing script to a new language was not the strategy in use.

Interestingly, the attempts by Africans at developing a universal writing system for African languages are mostly (alpha)syllabic and are not based on the universal alphabets. These efforts, mostly dating to the period after the war and continuing to this day, combine both the idea of a unique system of writing and of a competing system of writing. They move away from applying an existing system of writing, the alphabet, and set both system and signs apart from the European tradition.

### **Cultural transmission of scripts**

Africa has a rich heritage in terms of script development. Recent descriptions of script invention in sub-Saharan Africa allow better insight

The cultural transmission of script in Africa: The idea versus the system of writing in the choice of writing system that was made during the early development of a script. The clear break around the 1930s from a preference for syllabic to one for mostly alphabetic systems suggests that historical events are likely to have played a role. The alphabetization projects as well as the oncoming independence movements urged inventors to develop competing scripts rather than independent scripts in the context of an increasing number of examples in which a European script was applied to several African languages.

This insight that was gained from relatively recent script inventions can also be used to understand the choices made in antiquity. The application of an existing system to a new language may be equaled to an imperialist effort. In these cases the signs and the system of writing are likely to be preserved. Similarly, if there is much exposure to a particular script or many scripts, a newly invented script is likely to adopt a system of writing that is already present although the design of the signs is more likely to change. Finally, when there is limited exposure to scripts, there is a preference for (alpha)syllabic writing.

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**Table 1. Sub-Saharan scripts and their system of writing**

Language	Year(s) of invention	Country	System of writing
Vai	1820-	Liberia	syllabic
Amharic	1860-	Ethiopia	syllabic
Bamum	1896-	Cameroun	syllabic
Eghap	1910	Cameroun	syllabic
Bassa	1920s	Liberia	alphabet
Mende	1917-	Sierra Leone	syllabic
Somali	1922	Somalia	alphabet
Bambara	1930	Mali	syllabic
Loma	1930s	Liberia	syllabic
Kpelle	1930s	Liberia	syllabic
Somali	1933	Somalia	alphabet
Nko	1947-49	Guinea, e.a.	alphabet
Somali	1952	Somalia	alphabet
Oromo	1956	Ethiopia	alphasyllabary
Wolof	1961	Senegal	alphabet
Hausa	1970s	Nigeria	alphabet
Hausa	1980s/90s	Nigeria	alphabet
Beria	1986/2000	Sudan (Darfur)	alphabet
Nubian	1993	Sudan	alphabet
Hausa	1996	Nigeria	alphabet
Nubian	2005	Sudan	alphabet



## Discussion: The cultural transmission of script in Africa: The idea versus the system of writing

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*Unlike* a quite commonly held view that many African societies have not developed their own writing systems and are, as a matter of fact, deemed to be societies devoid of objectifiable history, this paper seeks to demonstrate that many African societies have indeed devised various writing systems over the centuries in many parts of the continent, specifically in Northeastern and West Africa. There has been a prevalent tendency that oral transmission of knowledge in Africa is so overemphasized as to deemphasize its equally important written tradition. This tendency seems to have deeply influenced the way people in other parts of the world look at African societies as pre-literate societies before the arrival of the Europeans.

This sort of dichotomy between literate and pre-literate societies has been taken for granted largely because literacy based on standard/standardized

writing systems is used as an essential cornerstone that distinguishes 'the primitive' from 'the civilized'.

When it comes to two very different systems of communication in Africa, the differences between writing and speech are overemphasized without thinking of the interdependent nature of written language and spoken language in any human society. Oral tradition played a vital role as an effective means of communication as well as a way of passing down histories and traditions in many African societies. Being aware of the fact that oral transmission of knowledge heavily relies on memory, story-telling and other socially binding conventions and realizing the distorted transmission of history, some African societies like the Bamun of Cameroon/Cameroun invented their own writing systems.

While oral traditions in so-called pre-literate societies have been depreciated or considered as unsophisticated, African traditions of writing their languages in the Arabic script known as *Ajami* have not been taken into serious consideration in the scholarship. This Arabic script of *Ajami* modified and adapted to African languages was particularly important in places that extend across West Africa and the East African coast, and contributed significantly to the intellectual and religious life of the places mentioned. For instance, pre-20<sup>th</sup> century Swahili poems were composed by using the Arabic script and transliterated in the Roman script late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, the claim that Africa has always been an illiterate continent is a rather Eurocentric perspective (alphabetization-Romanization equation).

This paper sheds light on a variety of scripts that have been devised in Africa and deals with a brief historiography of scripts in Africa that dates back as early as the third millennium BCE. The author chronologically enumerates all the scripts that include Egyptian, Meroitic, Old Nubian, Ethiopian, Tifinagh and modern scripts, providing us with a glimpse of historical and circumstantial context in which these scripts were invented.

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Writing systems are more often than not a consequence of interactions with or exposure to the outside world. For example, a number of writing systems that were used in Africa were devised by those who already knew Roman or Arabic alphabets. In this sense, these scripts appear to have been inspired by Roman and Arabic alphabets as their progenitors. Can a distinction between indigenous/endogenous writing systems and those directly or indirectly inspired by other scripts be made in the history of script invention in Africa? And what can be used for making such a distinction?

What has prevented the wide spread of writing systems from taking place in many parts of Africa? As you have mentioned, just only a small number of scripts are still in active use in Africa. With the exception of Ge'ez script which is in full usage at a national level and Tifinagh/Neo-Tifinagh which has limited usage for a Berber identity distinct from Arabs, scripts devised in Africa have not been in wide currency, but confined only to a small number of people. Does it have something to do with the lack of centralized authority or power in those societies? In many cases all over the world, a script is said to serve as a political and social symbol of power and authority that strengthens collective identity.

In terms of time span, it appears that there has been a visibly remarkable temporal hiatus between the invention of ancient scripts and of those invented in relatively recent times. Ancient scripts such as Egyptian hieroglyphs, Meroitic and Old Nubian scripts were used over many centuries. In which context and for what reason can this in-between vacuum in the invention of scripts be explained? As listed at the end of your paper, it was only in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that a number of scripts started emerging in large numbers in Sub-Saharan Africa. Furthermore, these recently devised scripts have been short-lived without being diffused in every walk of life of the society.

What factors have led some people like the Oromo in Ethiopia and the Somali to have a preference for Roman script? For example, the Oromo in the Horn of Africa used the Ge'ez syllabary and the Somali the Osmanian alphabet respectively. Is the Romanization the only solution for many languages all over the world and Africa in particular?

My last question is about the evolutionary stage of developing writing systems. A shift from non-phonological systems like pictograms, ideograms and logograms to phonological systems such as syllabic, alpha-syllabic and alphabetic writing appears to be explained in a linear order of graphic evolution for the reason that alphabetic writing as the ultimate end product of writing systems is the most adaptable and economic. It, however, is worthy of being mentioned that this kind of evolutionary schematization of script development in the world needs to be reconsidered and historically contextualized. Many languages that use alphabetic writing systems often fail to show an exact correspondence between graphemes and phonemes, namely a marked lack of phonetic regularity between graphemes and phonemes. For this reason, one is required to be schooled and disciplined to learn orthography, not heterography.

And graphetic realizations that show the physical properties of writing systems constitute an integral semiotic and communicative element of conveying what is intended, particularly in multigraphic societies. This also has to be applied to the study of multigraphic African societies like those in the Horn of Africa.