

# General Introduction

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As an addendum to our book titled *Great Books Written by Africans across the Academic Disciplines* (2022) published by the Cambridge Scholars Publishing company, in this special issue of *The Journal of African Studies and Research Forum*, we present the 23 book reviews that were removed from the 23 academic disciplines (one book review from each discipline) written by Africans born in Africa due to space limitations. The 23 books were among 115 selected by the authors of the articles and suggestively evaluated by experts in the relevant disciplines. A chosen book is one that has had a significant impact on the writer of a chapter in this book, as a distinctive person, or on the public. The two earlier efforts to delineate such great books are (1) *Africa's Best Books of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Columbia University Libraries, 2021) and (2) *Great African Book Contributions to Civilization* (AASCNR, 2006).). These attempts, however, are not representative of most of the academic disciplines, since most of the books are of the story-telling variety.

Indeed, it behooves me to mention here that the first book ever written was in Kemet/Sncikent Egypt in 2500 BC by Ptahhotep and .titled *The Teachings of Ptahhotep* (Hilliard III et al., 1987). And, as I demonstrate in the section that follows, the writing tradition started in Africa and has had a long history there.

## Ancient African Writing Tradition

TaNeter.org (2021) proffers the most comprehensive account of Africa's ancient writing tradition. For instance, while the organization discusses 16 of these writing systems, A. Moore (2014), who has the second largest number of explorations, examines 11 of them. It therefore makes sense that what is presented in this section is from the exposition of TaNeter.org and augmented with a few other sources where necessary. And, as the organization points out, Ancient Africa is home of the oldest and largest group of writing systems and the first proto-writing in the world. The evidence presented in the ensuing subsections shows that Africa's oldest writing system dates back to more than 6,000 years and other writing systems existed in various parts of the continent during pre-historic time.

### Proto-writing, 60000 BC

To begin with, for at least 100,000 years, like the engravings found in the Blombos Cave in South Africa, humans have been using writing systems to communicate ideas. These engravings, while they were not considered to be part of language, they, nonetheless, emerged as proto-writing or recognized symbols that were employed to pass on information (TaNeter.org, 2021).

Next, an important nexus between engravings and the development of writing by modern

humans was constructed when two important discoveries were made. One discovery was that of the 60,000-year-old ostrich eggshells in Diepkloof, South Africa by researchers from the University of Bordeaux, France. The eggshells have symbolic patterns representing the names of the local communities. The other discovery was that in northern South Africa of the Wonderwerk cave paintings dated to 25000 BC. In addition to images of humans and wildlife, the paintings also entail hundreds of unique patterns and symbols (TaNeter.org, 2021).

### **Proto-Saharan, 5000—3000 BC**

Proto-Saharan is a coinage of archaeologists and linguists for the inscriptions of what comprised the world's oldest writing system. Dated to at least 5000 BC, the inscriptions were found in the vicinity of the Kharga oasis situated in what is referred to as Nubia. Similarities can be discerned among the writings beneath the image of the Nilotic god Seth and later writings like Tifinagh and Vai (TaNeter.org, 2021).

### **Nsibidi, 5000 BC—Present**

For starters, while primarily utilized by the Uguakima and Ejagham—also called Ekoi—languages of Cameroon and Nigeria, the ancient Nsibidi writing system is still being used in some other languages of West Central Africa as well. These other tongues include Uyanga, Igbo, Ibibio, Efik and Ebe. While the oldest archaeological find of the monoliths in Ikom, Nigeria dates Nsibidi to 2000 BC, the writing system is, however, believed to go back to 5000 BC based on oral tradition (TaNeter.org, 2021).

In addition, Nsibidi is a standardized pictographic writing system that is similar to the Kemeti Medu Neter or Ta Merrian “Hieroglyphics” (more on this in the next subsection). The two writings share several identically precise symbols (TaNeter.org, 2021).

### **Medu Neter or Ta Merrian “Hieroglyphics,” 4000 BC—600 AD**

To commence with, the literal denotation of Medu Neter (MDW W NTR) is the “tongue of God” or transliterally “God’s words.” Akin to Medu Neter, the English word “hieroglyphics” is a derivative from the Greek word *hieroglyphikos*. Medu Neter is a complex logosyllabic writing system that combines *logographic* (i.e. signs or characters representing words or phrases, such as those used in shorthand) and *syllabic* (i.e. units of pronunciation having one vowel sound, with or without surrounding consonants, forming the whole or a part of a word; e.g., there are two syllables in *water* and three in *inferno*) symbols which, based on the context, refer to words (concepts) or phonetic sounds or both (TaNeter.org, 2021).

Also, many sources have been identified for the existence of Medu Neter. The first is one of the oldest finds of the pre-dynastic pottery at Gerzeh (c. 4000—3500 BC Gerzean culture) situated approximately 100 miles south of Ha Ka Ptah (Gizah). The second is the other of the oldest finds of inscriptions at Gebel Sheikh Suleiman (Wadi Halfa, 4000—3500 BC Nubian A-Group culture) in Nubia. The third is the find comprising clay tablets that recorded linen and oil deliveries between 3300 and 3200 BC at the tomb of what is referred to as “Scorpion” Suten in Abydos, Egypt. The fourth find is the oldest 3100 BC Narmer Palette used on historical texts between 3100 BC and 500 AD. This writing system was commonly employed for metaphysical/spiritual Pyramid texts between 2400 and 2200 BC; coffin texts between 2200 to

2000 BC; and administrative, scientific and spiritual texts between 3200 BC and 600 AD (TaNeter.org, 2021).

### **Kemetic “Hieratic,” 3200 BC—600 AD**

Greek theologian Saint Clement of Alexandria whose full name was Titus Flavius Clemens (c. 150—c. 215 AD) is the originator of the name “Hieratic” when he called the writing system in Greek *grammata hiertika*, meaning in English “priestly” or “sacerdotal” writing. The symbols of the system suggest that it is a sort of simplified version of Medu Neter which, as stated earlier, was utilized for writing administrative and scientific documents throughout the dynastic history of Kemet and Kush from 3200 BC to 600 AD. Nevertheless, it has been postulated by certain scholars that the two writing systems are completely different. Some linguists, however, have pointed out the similarities between the Hieratic writing system and the Proto-Saharan or Thinite alphabetic writing system (TaNeter.org, 2021) broached next.

### **“Thinite,” 3200—2700 BC**

As aforementioned, the Thinite writing system is quite similar to that of Proto-Saharan. Evidence of this was recognized in pottery inscriptions discovered in the vicinity of the fabled city of Thinis also known as Tjenu situated between Abdu (Abydos) and Weset (Thebes) in Upper Kemet. The city is said to be the home of Pharaoh Menes, who established the first unified dynasty of Kemet when he amalgamated Upper and Lower Kemet (TaNeter.org, 2021).

### **Tifanagh or “Lybico-Berber” or “Mande,” c. 3000 BC—Present**

The earliest evidence of the Tifanagh writing system, which dates back to 3000 BC and utilized to this day, was found on the rock paintings of Qued Mertoutek located in the southern part of Algeria. The Amajegh, also called Tauregs who occupy a vast expanse of West Africa, have been using Tifanagh since its beginning to now. Members of this language group are in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Niger, Southern Algeria and Southern Libya. The larger Tamazight language group has also been using the writing system in contemporary times (TaNeter.org, 2021).

### **Vai, 3000 BC—Present**

To start with, Vai is a highly developed syllabic phonetic writing system comprising 215 distinct symbols used primarily by the Vai people in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Three myths about the script that (1) it was invented in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century, (2) it was initially codified by a Vai called Momodu Doalu Boakai (see Foray, 1977), and (3) invented by a Vai whose friends helped him to remember a dream (see, for example, Tuchscherer and Hair, 2002) have been challenged. This is because based on evidence from inscriptions found in Goundaka, Mali, the Vai writing system has been dated to 3000 BC. Also, similarities were detected among the Vai, Proto-Saharan and Tifanagh writing systems found across the Saharan region (TaNeter.org, 2021).

Furthermore, a link has been made between the Vai writing system and other West African writing systems said to have been invented in the 1800s. Furthermore, the Vai script bears similarities with writing systems invented by Africans in the Americas. An example of this is the Afaka script of the Ndyuka language, an English-based creole of Suriname whose 34 (or

approximately 61%) of its 56 characters are the same as those of the Vai (TaNeter.org, 2021).

### **Wadi El-Hol or “Proto-Sinaitic,” 2000 BC—1400 BC**

In Wadi El-Hol, a narrow valley located between Abdu and Weset in Southern Kemet, a team of archaeologists from Yale University in the United States found the Proto-Sinaitic script in 1999. The find, which was dated to 1900 BC, has similarities with the Medu Neter and the much older Proto-Saharan writing system. Also, in Serabit el-Khadim situated on Africa’s Sinai Peninsula, a similar script was found and dated to 1500 BC. The script is believed to be the kernel of the Phoenician and Proto-Canaanite writing systems. All of these writing systems are progenies of the Proto-Saharan and, more significantly, the find provides evidence that Africa was the birthplace of the Phoenician writing system (TaNeter.org, 2021).

### **Napatan or “Meroitic,” 800 BC—600 AD**

The more suitable name for the Meroitic writing system should be Napatan because it was invented in 800 BC and utilized in Napata, the capital of Kush or Ethiopia, until 600 AD when that capital was relocated to Meroe. Many stelae and inscriptions on statues and the walls of temples which have the scripts have been found by archaeologists, and some linguists have been working on translating the text for a long time. The Napatan script has been deciphered and determined to be entirely African. It has also been shown to be related to modern African languages such as Taman spoken in Chad and Darfur, Niyma spoken in Northern Sudan, and Nubian spoken in Southern Egypt (TaNeter.org, 2021).

### **Ge’ez or “Ethiopic,” 800 BC—Present**

Invented in 800 BC and is one of the undoubtedly oldest writing systems in continuous use in the world, Ge’ez is composed of 231 symbols used in several Ethiopic languages. While the script is used principally by speakers of Amharic, Tigre, Tigrinya, etc. in every area of life today, it was invented purposefully for use in Beta Israel churches and Eritrean and Ethiopian Tawahedo Orthodox churches. The Hawulti stela, which dates back to 800 BC or the pre-Aksumite epoch, is the oldest find bearing evidence of Ge’ez. Thus, even though the Old Ethiopian script looks more primitive than Ge’ez, the latter is much older than the former (TaNeter.org, 2021).

### **“Old Ethiopian” or “Sabaeen,” 700 BC—600 AD**

To begin with, a descendant of the Proto-Saharan writing system, Old Ethiopian or Sabaeen is an ancient African syllabary script that is akin to Ge’ez. The term Sabaeen is what is called by the western name Sheba, a derivative of the Ge’ez name Saba. Contemporary Ethiopians call Saba Makeda, who was the D’m’t leader (Queen) to whom the Old Ethiopian writing system is ascribed (TaNeter.org, 2021).

Next, there are a number of reasons for the African originality and older origin of the Old Ethiopian script compared to that of the Old Arabian/Sabaeen. First, ample evidence in ancient literature show that it was Ethiopians that first colonized the inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula, not the other way around. Second, the inscriptions at the Temple of Yeha in Ethiopia are the oldest specimen of the Old Ethiopian script dated to 700 BC. Third, several inscriptions

of the writing systems exist in Aksum, the major capital from where Queen Makeda reigned. Fourth, ultra-fine differences exist between the Old Ethiopian script and that of Old Arabian (TaNeter.org, 2021).

### **Kemetic “Demotic,” 650 BC—600 AD**

The Kemetic “Demotic” writing system is the oldest cursive or flowing script in the world. Greek historian and writer Herodotus (484—425 BC) coined the words *Demos* (“Demotic” in English) to denote “common people” and *Hieratic* to represent the “priestly.” Also, the script originated in Kush or Nubia and was introduced in Kemet during the 25<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (744—658 BC). In addition, the script is the second used on the Rosetta Stone and by linguists to decipher the older Medu Neter. Furthermore, the Kemetic “Demotic” script served as the basis for later scripts like Arabic (TaNeter.org, 2021).

### **Coptic, 300 AD—Present**

To begin with, the Coptic writing system was derived from the combination of the Kemetic “Demotic” and Greek scripts, albeit it must be pointed out that the Greek script is a derivative of the “Demotic” and Proto-Saharan scripts. The term Coptic is from the Greek *Ai-GYPT-os*, a corrupt form the Kemetic *Ha Ka Ptah*. The Kemetic term refers to the house of the soul of Ptah, where Giza and Memphis, later named the Nile Valley, are located (TaNeter.org, 2021).

Next, the Coptic script is an early Christian outgrowth of efforts by the Copts—descendants of Kemetic people and Greek invaders of Kemet. As the script was falling out of use, the Copts decided to get some of their scribes to write “Demotic” religious texts using divine letters from “Demotic” and Greek letters. While the alphabet was transcribed from “Demotic” to Greek script, the denotations and the quintessence of the text were not translated into Greek. Thus, the ethos of the Coptic writing system is absolutely African and akin to contemporary Nubian languages (TaNeter.org, 2021).

### **“Old Nubian,” 800 AD—1500 AD**

The ancient Napatan and Coptic scripts are the geneses of the “Old Nubian” script. In turn, contemporary Nubian languages like Nobiin are descendants of “Old Nubian.” The script was employed in Makuria, a Christian kingdom whose capital was Dongola located in the central part of the Sudan (TaNeter.org, 2021).

### **West African Ajami, 1000 AD—Present**

For over 1,000 years, the Ajami script has been utilized by numerous people to write texts in the West African languages of Fulani, Hausa, Kanuri, Wolof and Yoruba in the Niger Valley. A derivative of the Arabic script, the term Ajami denotes “non-Arabic or foreign” in the Arabic language. Nonetheless, many features of Ajami are dissimilar to the Eastern or Standard and Maghrebian Arabic scripts. While the majority of the Ajami texts such as the Timbuktu manuscripts were produced in the 1300—1600s before the advent of European colonialism in Africa, the oldest evidence of the use of the scripts dates back to tomb inscriptions of the 11<sup>th</sup> Century. The 1300—1600s marked an era when West African cities like Gao, Kano and

Timbuktu were the major centers of learning with many libraries housing texts on administration, astronomy, law, mathematics, poetry, and religion. More than 700,000 of the Ajami texts have been displayed in recent times (TaNeter.org, 2021).

## Conclusion

The essence of this special issue hinges upon the following observation made by Ali Al'Amin Mazrui when he launched his effort to identify "Africa's 100 Best Books" via an international competition at the Zimbabwe International Book Fair convened in Harare in 2001:

Over the last hundred years African writers have written of their lives, experiences, culture, history and myth; they have written in diverse forms, styles and in many languages. They have been published widely on the African continent, in Europe, the Americas and Asia. They have written in English, French, Portuguese, Arabic, Swahili, and in many other indigenous languages. And they have written with extraordinary originality, flair and great integrity. Nonetheless their work as a corpus deriving from the African continent remains largely unknown and uncelebrated (Columbia University Libraries, 2021, p. 1).

Also, as Arif A. Zahir posits on the Amazon A-Store and California News Reel (AASCNR) website, the significance of engaging in the identification and communication of great works produced by Africans is that it allows the reader to see how these writers "provide proof of the existence of African contributions to world civilizations. Based on this new evidence, modern human behavior is correlated directly with anatomically modern humans going back about 200,000 years found only in Africa. African contributions will remove the veil that has prevented, distorted and destroyed the truth of our ancestors' accomplishments from prehistoric to modern times" (AASCNR, 2006, p. 1).

Therefore, it is our hope as authors that the present issue is one small step toward rectifying the aforementioned shortcoming. Accordingly, each chapter that follows entails a brief biography of the author of the selected book, a thorough review of the book, a justification for why the book is great, and a conclusion and recommendations for research using the book.

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