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Ingenuity and elegance in ancient African alphabets, Saki Mafundikwa, 2013

I moved back home 15 years ago after a 20-year stay in the United States, and Africa called me back. And I founded my country's first graphic design and new media college. And I called it the Zimbabwe Institute of Vigital Arts. The idea, the dream, was really for a sort of Bauhaus sort of school where new ideas were interrogated and investigated, the creation of a new visual language based on the African creative heritage. We offer a two-year diploma to talented students who have successfully completed their high school education. And typography's a very important part of the curriculum and we encourage our students to look inward for influence.

Here's a poster designed by one of the students under the theme "Education is a right." Some logos designed by my students. Africa has had a long tradition of writing, but this is not such a well-known fact, and I wrote the book "Afrikan Alphabets" to address that.

The different types of writing in Africa, first was proto-writing, as illustrated by Nsibidi, which is the writing system of a secret society of the Ejagham people in southern Nigeria. So it's a special-interest writing system. The Akan of people of Ghana and [Cote d'Ivoire] developed Adinkra symbols some 400 years ago, and these are proverbs, historical sayings, objects, animals, plants, and my favorite Adinkra system is the first one at the top on the left. It's called Sankofa. It means, "Return and get it." Learn from the past. This pictograph by the Jokwe people of Angola tells the story of the creation of the world. At the top is God, at the bottom is man, mankind, and on the left is the sun, on the right is the moon. All the paths lead to and from God. These secret societies of the Yoruba, Kongo and Palo religions in Nigeria, Congo and Angola respectively, developed this intricate writing system which is alive and well today in the New World in Cuba, Brazil and Trinidad and Haiti.

In the rainforests of the Democratic Republic of Congo, in the Ituri society, the men pound out a cloth out of a special tree, and the women, who are also the praise singers, paint interweaving patterns that are the same in structure as the polyphonic structures that they use in their singing -- a sort of a musical score, if you may. In South Africa, Ndebele women use these symbols and other geometric patterns to paint their homes in bright colors, and the Zulu women use the symbols in the beads that they weave into bracelets and necklaces.

Ethiopia has had the longest tradition of writing, with the Ethiopic script that was developed in the fourth century A.D. and is used to write Amharic, which is spoken by over 24 million people. King Ibrahim Njoya of the Bamum Kingdom of Cameroon developed Shü-mom at the age of 25. Shü-mom is a writing system. It's a syllabary. It's not exactly an alphabet. And here we see three stages of development that it went through in 30 years. The Vai people of Liberia had a long tradition of literacy before their first contact with Europeans in the 1800s. It's a

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syllabary and reads from left to right. Next door, in Sierra Leone, the Mende also developed a syllabary, but theirs reads from right to left.

Africa has had a long tradition of design, a well-defined design sensibility, but the problem in Africa has been that, especially today, designers in Africa struggle with all forms of design because they are more apt to look outward for influence and inspiration. The creative spirit in Africa, the creative tradition, is as potent as it has always been, if only designers could look within. This Ethiopic cross illustrates what Dr. Ron Eglash has established: that Africa has a lot to contribute to computing and mathematics through their intuitive grasp of fractals.

Africans of antiquity created civilization, and their monuments, which still stand today, are a true testimony of their greatness. Most probably, one of humanity's greatest achievements is the invention of the alphabet, and that has been attributed to Mesopotamia with their invention of cuneiform in 1600 BC, followed by hieroglyphics in Egypt, and that story has been cast in stone as historical fact.

That is, until 1998, when one Yale professor John Coleman Darnell discovered these inscriptions in the Thebes desert on the limestone cliffs in western Egypt, and these have been dated at between 1800 and 1900 B.C., centuries before Mesopotamia. Called Wadi el-Hol because of the place that they were discovered, these inscriptions -- research is still going on, a few of them have been deciphered, but there is consensus among scholars that this is really humanity's first alphabet. Over here, you see a paleographic chart that shows what has been deciphered so far, starting with the letter A, "ālep," at the top, and "bêt," in the middle, and so forth. It is time that students of design in Africa read the works of titans like Cheikh Anta Diop, Senegal's Cheikh Anta Diop, whose seminal work on Egypt is vindicated by this discovery.

The last word goes to the great Jamaican leader Marcus Mosiah Garvey and the Akan people of Ghana with their Adinkra symbol Sankofa, which encourages us to go to the past so as to inform our present and build on a future for us and our children. It is also time that designers in Africa stop looking outside. They've been looking outward for a long time, yet what they were looking for has been right there within grasp, right within them.

Thank you very much.

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