CONCEPT OF AFRICAN SCRIPT: PRE-COLONIAL, COLONIAL AND MODERN PERIODS

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Abstract

Language expresses thought, preserves thought, and also suggests or creates thought. But language in its unwritten or oral form cannot perfectly carry out these functions. At a very early stage of man's history, attempts were made to present in some visible way, the thought which spoken language conveyed to the ear. By so doing, man came about the concept, script. Looking at the concept of African script, the purpose of this paper is to see the general ideas derived or inferred from specific instances about it. The paper x-rays thoughts or notions formed by people about the script. Constraints of African scripts are pointed out. The effect of colonialism on African script is also discussed and recommendations made. The paper concludes that the provision of proper script for African languages will help the languages to develop more effectively along line with African way of thought and world view.

Introduction

Language is a means which human beings have devised for communicating ideas, feelings, emotions, desires, etc through complex vocal or written symbols (Unesco, 1965 & Anigbogu, Mbah and Eme, 2001). Language expresses thought, preserves thought, and also suggests or creates thought. Language in its unwritten or oral form cannot perfectly carry out this function even though language has been with man from origin. At a very early stage of man's history, attempts were made to present in some visible way, the thought which spoken language conveyed to the ear. This is how we came about the concept or idea of script. Script is the written form of speech, play or film, etc. (Pearson, 2001). The esteem view of Script makes Agbaedo (2008) emphasize that the two greatest invention of man are writing and money.

The history of script or writing follows the art of expressing words by letters or other marks. One can make a mark on something. Mark can be used to show position of something. Example, a cross is used to show Church, somebody's grave, Hospital, Red Cross society, etc. Mark can be used to write or draw on something so that someone will notice what one has written.

In the history of how systems of representation of language through graphic means have evolved in different human civilizations, one observes that more complete writing systems were preceded by proto-writing. Proto according to Pearson (2001), means first in time or order before other things of the same kind are developed. Proto writing therefore, means first form of script or writing before other forms of writing developed. The idea of script in Africa cuts across pre-colonial period, colonial and present periods.

Concept of Script.

How did people conceive script/writing? Script or writing in its original form came in systems of ideographic and/ or early mnemonic symbol (wikipedia 2010). Symbol means a picture or shape that has a particular meaning or represents an idea. Example, the dove is a symbol of unity. Symbol can as well mean a letter, number or sign that represent a sound, an amount, a chemical substance, etc. Symbol can also be seen as someone or something that people think of as representing a particular quality or idea.

For something to be symbolic or symbolical means that it is to represent or suggest something or idea. Example, a symbolic painting. The snake is symbolic of evil. Symbolic on the other hand, is the use of symbol to represent something. For Example, religious symbolism. In the African Traditional Religion (ATR), "omu" symbolizes danger, death, sanction, no entry, keep off etc, In Christianity, cross symbolizes Christ. Cross also symbolizes Hospital, Red Cross etc. "Nzu" in Igbo culture symbolizes purity. In Europe, it is the colour white that symbolizes purity. Peace is symbolized by a dove. Ricard (2007:7) observes that Africa is the "continent with the largest number

of recorded rock art paintings: from the Drakensbery and the Matoops in Southern Africa to the Air in the Sahara." These paintings are not ordinary paintings. They are symbolic and serve some purposes. He further points out that the "continent seems to have been populated by crowds of painters eager to record, to pray, or to celebrate."

Emmanuel Anati (Director of Unesco World Archive of Rock Art (WARA), based on an extensive survey of several millions of pictures and engravings, attempts to demonstrate that cave paintings are indeed a kind of writing. Such carvings are regarded as universal code. They are universal code in that one can understand them without relating them to the spoken language of a particular area. This is to say that script and language are two different entities.

In the words of Ricard (2007:7), "Africa is everywhere inscribed: from rocks to marks, sculptures, pyramids, manuscripts, etc. The continent has left graphic marks of its history everywhere."

The Constituents of Pre-colonial African Script / Writing

According to Isichei (1976:35), "It was generally believed that the people of the sub-Sahara did not invent writing". Rev. J.K Macgregor had this notion in 1905 while teaching his class and in a typical ethnocentric fashion according to Nwadike (2002:14),

> *He took time off to declaim the heights of his European civilization in contrast to the primitive cultures of Africans who had no writing system of their own. His students swallowed hard to this racial, slur but one of them, Ezeikpe Agwu pointed out to him that his people of Abriba had a script which had existed prior to the coming of the whiteman; and that the script was known as Nsibidi.*

It was this revelation that moved Macgregor into researching and digging out information about nsibidi.

Graphic representation is indeed present in Africa and its existence is viewed along line two schools of thought. According to Uzoagba (1978:19-21) different types of lines or strokes, shapes, forms, etc are used to evoke feelings and emotions in us "But is it writing?". Speech communities always generate material means to keep and retrieve information. This according to Richard (2007) is not always writing. Reflecting, "On graphic representation of sounds and the competition generated between several systems of graphic representation," Let us now refer to the contribution of De Francis. De Francis makes two useful distinctions that have a practical bearing on the analysis of writing in Africa. He divides students of graphic systems into two camps: the inclucivists and exclusivists using as a discriminating criterion, their definition of writing. The view put forward two types of definition: partial writing and full writing. Taking this ideology from the point of view of De Francis (1989:5), Partial writing is a system of graphic symbols that can be used to convey only some thought. Full writing is a system of graphic symbols that can be used to convey any and all thought.

Going by the above assertion, two groups emerge on the acceptability of what the definition of writing aught to be. The inclucivists believe that both partial and full writing should be called writing. The exclucivists believe that only full writing deserve the label. However De Francis in his "Writing Classification Scheme" classifies picture into two: non writing and writing. His non-writing includes dead-end symbols: cave paintings Uruk IV symbolization, Yukaghir pictographs and Amerindian pictographs. Nsibidi, Nwagu Aneke and other indigenous scripts can fit in here because they are based on symbolization, pictographs, etc. What he classified as writing are rebus symbols-syllabic systems. The researcher do not quite agree with De Francis in his classification of writing. The researcher's thought is in line with Anati (1997) attempts to demonstrate that "cave paintings are indeed a kind of writing." In the view of Anati, some pictograms are ideograms and point to a universal code of graphic expression. In his view also, central Tanzania offers what is probably the longest sequence in the world of such images and probably the "cradle" of his art. Anati in 1997, gave that as an exceptional testimony of the development process of thinking of intellectual achievement, and of the cultural changes that have marked East Africa within the last 40,000 years. Especially impressive are the pictures of the Kundusi gatherers, with their heads marked, arranged in a triad, as if captivated by a special myth. He further states that, painted walls stand for a cathedral. In the painted walls are kept myths and legends, ie, the capacity to keep a living relationship with the past or

the future, which is usually done in palace or sanctuaries. This is likened to Yoruba panegyric poetry that offers us a true historical archive, full of pictograms and ideograms, which remain to be interpreted. It provides extraordinary information on the concepts and beliefs of Bantu people.

Anati (1997) attempts to relate recent finding to Nyau ritual and dance. The finding helps people to read the paintings as pictograms of masks and dance and provides a bridge to present-day Chewa society. Achebe (1958) also employed the idea of pictogram when he presented Unoka using strokes on the wall to represent the height (amount) of his debt to his various creditors. In the traditional Igbo society, strokes were also used for bride price and also as a counting system. The highest number in Igbo traditional counting system was "nnu" four hundred. In counting things like yam, a stroke represents "nnu".

Africa is full of inscriptions. The Angolan writer Luandino Viera regards these inscriptions as "illiterate writing". Ricard (2007), maintains that paintings and engravings that encode stories and rituals belong to writing, if we adopt an inclusive position. He includes graphic symbolism as writing in a different way. The symbols are produced within speech communities and they demand interpretation by the communities. They fulfill one of the essential functions of writing: recording information and enabling its retrieval. They do this in a specialized way not available for any kind of messages.

Studying the ways to keep and retrieve information by graphic means, Raum (1943:181) says, "When Livingstone entered the country of the Lunels, he observed that all trees along his route bore incisions, which are said to have resembled faces reminiscent of Egyptian pictures". The signs or incisions are writing because they fulfil some functions of writing, by reminding us of the words, spells, and prayers of those who inscribed them. Faik-Nzuji (1992:122) brings to mind that, symbols are cultural creations that derive their meanings from ritual and cults, and intense moments that punctuate the life of their users. In most cases, the body is marked, objects are carved, and modeled in line with some rituals and cults in the society. Scarifications are thus messages sent to the ages.

What has been said in the preceding paragraph are the undiluted truth about symbols in Africa giving rise to African script. For instance, the Sub-sahara people like the Igbo and their Efik, Ibibio and Anang neighbors developed a form of formalized pictograms as a system of writing called Nsibidi. The beginnings of Nsibidi and some other forms of writing in Africa are shrouded in mythology (Nwadike, 2002: 16). The use of Nsibidi was popular among secret societies like Mmonwu, Ekpe and Okonko whose members would not want to discuses the Nsibidi publicly. Afigbo (1975:72) rightly observes that, the ability to write Nsibidi required formal education. This is because those seeking to enter a secret society,

> … were inducted into the secrets and language of the society by the older
> members. It was in this area that education in Igboland came very close to
> the formal school system of the western world to the extent of evolving sign
> writings for preserving and transmitting information.

People make all manner of marks on their bodies. Some of these marks are tribal like in the case of Fulani, Tiv, Igala and Yoruba people of Nigeria. The marks are used as identity and so, send a kind of message to the viewer concerning the tribe or the nativity of the individual concerned. During the period of slavery, hot irons were used to make marks on the body of the people being jam-packed into ships for their onward transmission into slavery in foreign lands. The marks are writings indicating their owners. "Igbu ichi" in Igbo land is not universal to every Igbo person. It is used for class differentiation to show bravery. 'Uli and Ogaru' were used to make bodily designs/marks. For example, in Okija, the body of women taking the "Eze Nwaanyi" title are designed with those substances during the "Ipu ahia" market outing ceremony.

Marks are also made on yams while they are still forming under the soil. Individual farmers have their marks or logo, which they carve into the yam as a mark of identity when eventually the yams are harvested. Raum (1943:187) refered to marking of property as "crystallizing and registering thought processes." Marking of property as well as graphics and coloured symbols, are used by African people. They serve the following purposes:

a. The perpetuation of expressions of emotional states and volitional tendencies in inscriptions, which bear a magical and sometimes religious significance.

b. The regulations of social relations by supplying distinguishing marks for private clan property and it also afford a medium of communication between individuals.

c. Graphic symbols serve to record the shape, name and number of objects as well as subjects of conversations and negations and thus, act as instrument of intellectual processes

On a close observation on the above purposes, one notes that graphic symbolism fulfill different functions: magical and numerical. Certain systems have been particularly well perfected, such as Nsibidi script. Some objects elicit verbal responses and thus, encapsulate a text. The systematic use of such objects can function as writing.

These pictograms have been used for centuries. Dalby (1984) explains that graphic symbolism of the Egyptian ideogram probably belongs to symbolic repertoires long used in Africa whether on rock, on wood, or on skin. The system of writing is confirmed as full writing. It is capable of recording any thought. It recorded a literature used in an actual society quite unlike Nsibidi which could not give rise to literature. According to Nwadike (2002: 18 & 2008,) Nsibidi failed to develop as a medium for the transmission of Igbe literature for the following reasons:

1. The high premium placed on its secrecy
2. Its unsystematic mode of recording and interpretation.
3. I t has many variations
4. Nsibidi did not exist in a simple medium. It was a multi-medium system of communication not confined to graphics. It was partly written and partly acted out (pantomimic)
5. It lacked the support of modern technology such as ink and paper for its advancements. It was recorded on perishable objects such as walls, floors, calabashes, wood and skin parchment, and as a result, it did not endure.

The pictographs have been enriched by what De Francis (1989) describes as rebus principle. He states that pictographs used as pictographs leads no where. It is only pictographs used as phonetic symbols that leads to full writing. The rebus principle formed the basis of three systems of writing, generally thought to have been independently developed, which were created at intervals of about fifteen hundred years (1500).The writing systems are:

a. By the Sumerians about 3000BC.
b. By the Chinese about 1500BC.
c. By the Meyas about the beginning of our era.

De Francis (1989) demonstrates convincingly that Chinese ideograms note essentially the sounds of syllables while Egyptian hieroglyphs note the sounds of consonants. Note that "not all the system is phonetically based but it has a central phonetic component and it is precisely this that makes it capable of recording any kind of thought." This is what makes it a full writing. The operation of the "rebus principle" substituting images of things to represent the sounds of their names is the key to the development of a writing system. Pictograms serve to complete the picture, to enrich, and to make the texts precise. The oldest written African language is thus Egyptian, to which we can add Nubian. The Meroe pyramids and the Sudan desert have yielded stones with inscriptions, allowing us to decipher Merioritic script but not to understand the language. Many African languages have been written with inadequate systems. Perhaps, Meroe was the first one of the series and this is the cause of its present opacity. Opacity means the quality of being difficult to understand. Ricard (2007:11) observes that, in Africa, only Egyptian, Nubian, Ge'ez and Tamazight have over the centuries, developed their own systems of full writing. Ricard further explains that the Ethiopian syllabry is the only syllable still in practical use in Africa today. Other African languages, according to him, have borrowed scripts, whether Arabic or Roman. Arabic itself was probably the most commonly used written language in Africa up to the nineteenth century. It was written in Timbuktu in the fifteenth century. There still exists Arabic literature in West Africa. For instance, in Nigeria today, the Moslem Koran is still being written in Arabic script. Ricard further informs that it is important for people to note that "to borrow a script is not to borrow a language, and some adoptions are necessary. Fulani and Hausa were written

in the Arabic script using the "ajami" script created in the eighteenth century. Some adaptations are necessary in borrowing scripts" as already mentioned to avoid problems.

The African Scripts and Colonial Education

There was a large movement towards Romanization, along with the spread of colonial education and missionary Christian activity. The movement was not mainly to convert Muslims to Christianity but to prevent the conversion of non-Muslim Africans to Islam by providing alternative system of writing their languages thereby, detaching them from any association with Arabic. This is the reason why many African languages were written in Roman script especially in Nigeria. At the same time, a romanized version of the Hausa script known as boko was printed and widely circulated. Ricard (2007) further reminds us that the Turkish Language was romanized at the same time. The same thing happened to Kswahili, which was used as a medium by Catholic missionaries at the end of the 19th century. Somali was romanized in the 1970s and became the official language of the defunct Socialist Republic of Somalia.

In a typical romantic worldview, writing the language of an African group meant in the nineteenth century, bringing this group to light, making it emerge from the Dark Ages. The movement from Arabic to Roman script inspired a massive effort to write down African Languages previously unwritten. In practical sense, writing of some African Languages rather posed complex problems.

The creation of an International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), in 1854, provided a useful comparative tool to compare different languages, previously recorded in rather haphazard ways, according to the different linguistic background of their students. French missionaries would write-ch while English would write-sh (Chaka/Shaka). The spread of writing and printing (Coldham 1966 in Ricard, 2007) has been the task of missions in Africa. Crystal (1971:45) affirms this when he says, "Missionaries have often written the first grammars of languages, introduced writing, or developed methods of language teaching." Most African languages were transcribed without some measure of agreement on transcription. In this case, the dissemination of the written version of each African language is heavily handicapped. The Yoruba reached an agreement between themselves in 1875 as a result of the pioneering work of Bishop Samuel Ajai Crowther. This, in no small measure helped in developing Yoruba written literature. Religious differences made for different writing systems, based on conventions of the European tongues. Sometimes, nationalistic concerns were in force, and lasted long, as demonstrated by the differences between South African and Lesotho spellings (Shaka or Chaka) of the same language in the words of Ricard (2007:13-14)

> *The issues in graphization "leave us with a legacy of competition between churches and between States". The Gu people of Porto Novo (Benin Republic) never wrote their language like their Yoruba neighbours in Nigeria. To divide was prerequisite of imperial rule. The invention of different graphic forms of mutually understandable languages was a great tool of division between competing powers.*

In some cases, even when the invention is of the same graphic forms, but with little modifications, the opposing or rivalry religious groups will vehemently oppose it. It should be remembered that all literary works in Igbo were in the first place, done in the Isuama dialect, written in the Lepsius standard orthography (Oraka, 1983; Oruchalu, 1983 & Nwadike, 2002).

In Nigeria, following the enactment of the 1926 Education Ordinance, the Board of Education was re-organized in conformity with the provisions of the ordinance for the purpose of standardizing the orthography of Efik, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. Practical orthography for African languages was introduced. This was with the intention of producing adequate literature. Other language groups settled the issue of the newly introduced orthography amicably. But in the case of Igbo language, it sparked off controversies in many quarters as to the wisdom of adopting it. The champions of the new orthography were Dr. Ida C. Ward and R.F.G. Adams. The Catholics accepted the new orthography as they were new comers and had not done much in the old orthography. The Methodists also accepted the new orthography for their own reason but the CMS opposed it on the ground that they have done much work in the old orthography: accepting the new orthography was to be a set back as they have to re-write all that they have written in the past. No consideration was given to the development and

future of the language. Private individuals were also involved in the controversy brought about by rivalry and church politics.

The orthography controversy lasted till 1961 when the government decided on what shape the final orthography would take, but it mandated Onwu Committee to bring out orthography for Igbo language. This was to absolve itself from being accused of imposing orthography on the people. The Onwu Orthography is the standard orthography in use for Igbo language till today (Oraka, 1983 & Nwadike, 2002).

Modern Script / Writing.

Please note that some aspects of African Script are still in use up till today. People still make use of logo, pictures, paintings, graphics, symbols etc. Some of them are used in combination with other scripts. Nsibidi script is still in use up till today because the members of the secret cults still use them. Road signs are used on our roads. Mathematical signs like +, -, ÷,x, =, etc, are in use. Different institutions, societies, organizations, etc have their logos used independently or in combination with other scripts. Example Lion is the logo for the University of Nigeria. You can have only the Lion as the one located at the entrance of the University of Nigeria at Nsukka. Or you can have the logo on paper or cloth with the name of the institution written together with it. In research strokes in elementary statistics are used to show tally methodology strokes are used to show tally. Other graphical presentations like bar chart, histogram and polygon are used. Signs and symbols are used in measures of central tendency, measures of variability, measures of association (Correlation) (Nworgu, 2006).

The nature of writing according to wikipeda (2010:) has been constantly evolving, particularly due to the development of new technologies over the centuries. The pen, the printing press, the computer and the mobile phone are all technological developments which have altered what is written, and the medium through which the written word is produced. Particularly with the advent of digital technologies, namely the computer and the mobile phone, characters can be formed by the press of a button, rather than making the physical motion with the hand. International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) which was introduced in 1854 is very much in use up till today in writing the languages of the world, and Igbo literature and language have keyed into the universalization of the IPA script. The rearrangement of the Igbo alphabet speaks for itself. Igbo alphabet has been rearranged to fit into the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). According to Oraka, (1983:39), the eleven man committee (Onwu Committee) met at the W.T.C., Enugu on 13th September, 1961. The end result of the Enugu conference was the following pacifying orthography: -

a	b	gb	ch	d	e
f	g	gw	gh	h	i
i	j	k	kw	kp	l
m	n	nw	ny	n	o
o	p	r	s	sh	t
u	u	v	w	y	z.

Going further, Oraka (1983:47) states that, the SPILC (1978:12) recommended in August, 1976 that in order to simplify the work of lexicograhers and in consonance with existing international practices, the present order of presenting the Igbo alphabet should be rearranged thus:

a	b	ch	d	e	f
g	gb	gh	gw	h	i
i	j	k	kp	kw	l
m	n	n	nw	ny	o
o	p	r	s	sh	t
u	u	v	w	y	z

Many African languages, example Meroe which have been written with inadequate systems should be readjusted also to fit into IPA.

Conclusion

The paper therefore concludes that, if the mistakes made in the past in committing African languages into writing are corrected by rearranging them to fit into IPA, it will go a long way helping the languages to develop. The difficulty people have in understanding languages like Meroe will stop. Again, if all the African languages are put into writing, it will help the languages not to go into extinction. The languages will develop into languages of official communication within their areas thereby, giving identity to the owners of the languages.

Recommendations

The paper recommends the following.
1. Suitable scripts should be provided for all African languages for their preservation and development.
2. Borrowed scripts used for African languages should be adapted or revised to suit the African languages.
3. African symbols, paintings, carvings, marks, pictograms and other forms of script should be developed and preserved and also be regarded as forms of writing
4. International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) should be properly adopted and used for African languages also to enable them meet up with the world standard of writing.

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