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Typography in Publication Design

Innovative applications of Typography

Ancient African Typographic Symbols in Contemporary Publication Design

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1. Introduction

The awareness of the power of typography in communication can be traced back to the earliest civilizations of mankind when production of type was through scratch marks made on flat surfaces using sharp objects. Twentieth century records show well developed type from Mesopotamia, Chinese calligraphy, Egyptian Hieroglyphics and Phoenician alphabet.

How do you make any sense of history, art or literature without knowing the stories and typography of your own culture and all the world's main religions? Polly Toynbee (1947).

Contemporary typography is significant because it brings attention to civilization within the African continent. African countries have type and symbols that have been used to communicate written messages. Many of these remain undiscovered by the mainstream theorists. Saki Mafundikwa in his book 'afrikan alphabets', has made presentations on African letterforms, and he continues to unearth innovative and little understood symbols.

This paper aims to explore how the Ancient African iconology has been reborn in to contemporary typography and is used in today's publishing. The study is placed in the context of the history, meaning, deciphering and transformation of Typography. A conceptual framework is constructed, based on critical theory from arts disciplines, notably from the history of African Iconography from the Igbos and the Adinkra.

This paper also finds that typography has now transformed into informal, colloquial icons, where everyday published communiqué can occur through signs rather than speaking.

These signs are conclusively a replica of ancient African symbols. The visual framework reveals a changing iconology where symbols may be discerned.

The study provides a model which may be applied to visual aspects of ancient type in today's publishing. It would benefit from an assessment of readership impact. The analysis is of interest to design researchers, practitioners and trainees. It illuminates the ways in which contemporary iconology interacts with African symbols and conveys intangible values that may not be reflected in our modern day lives.

2. Typography

Typography according to dictionary.com is the art or process of printing with type. It has also been defined as the art and technique of arranging type in order to make language visible. Typographic symbols on the other hand are generally marks and special purpose characters used to denote or express words and emotions.

3. Symbols

An anonymous Aboriginal Tribal Elder stated, "They say we have been here for 60,000 years, but it is much longer. We have been here since the time before time began. We have come directly out of the Dreamtime of the Creative Ancestors. We have lived and kept the earth as it was on the First Day." Symbols, language of the soul, symbols, an alphabet of human thoughts.

Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung, who studied archetypes, proposed an alternative definition of symbol, distinguishing it from the term sign. In Jung's view, a sign stands for something known, as a word stands for its referent. He contrasted this with symbol, which he used to stand for something that is unknown and that cannot be made clear or precise. Carl Jung theorized that we are able to go beyond the artificial barriers imposed by language to speak directly to our unconscious. Symbols allow us to become time travellers as we connect to our past as well as connect to other nations and religions. C. G. Jung, (1992)

A symbol is an icon that has a meaning. Jung recognized that the universal symbols common to many world religions are archetypal products of humankind's natural religious function. Two of the most important universal symbolic images that he studied for instance, were the circle, or mandala--a symbol of unity and eternity--and the cosmic tree, which can be regarded both as a symbol of the self, or as a cosmic axis linking the underworld, earth and heavens.

4. African Typographic Symbols

African typographic symbols on the other hand, often hold sacred beliefs which are sometimes used as significant tools in spiritual journeys to perhaps gain insight into collective rituals and spiritual practices. Clare Gibson in *Sacred Symbols* (Saraband Inc.) wrote, "Because sacred thought involves the intangible and supernatural, it cannot help but be expressed symbolically. Barbara Biziou (2002)

Many African cultures for instance, traditionally used animals as symbolism. Animals were viewed as teachers, as each represents a beneficial quality that can help strengthen and educate a person. If they understood each animal's essence--the specific gifts and strengths the creature represents--they would then incorporate a particular animal into a ritual and ask its guidance.

Burkina Faso

Our ancestors expressed themselves to us in the typographic symbols of our cultures and religions. In Burkina Faso, among the Nunuma, Nuna, Winiama, Lela, Bwa, and Mossi, and in Mali among the Dogon, masks are among the most strikingly abstract symbol of African culture. (See samples at Image 01) These masks are abstract because they are portraits of the nature spirits. The symbolic representations of these masks show the spiritual beings that give life to the world in which we live. These spirit beings are normally invisible, unseeable and untouchable. But we can feel their presence in the power of nature, in the new life that appears following the first storms of the rainy season. What more effective way to represent this abstract idea than with a symbol.

Most African Typographic symbols are representative, not representational. The invented spirits these figures and masks symbolize are supernatural, unseen, unknown, incomprehensible, so that the concrete forms that are carved to house them must also be invented.

The typographic patterns that cover masks in Burkina Faso comprise a system of communication in which the combination of symbols transmits rules about the moral conduct of life. Each of these masks represents a spirit which is invented by the people when a particular need arises. This process of inventing spirits and creating masks to represent them continues to be very active to the present day in the lives of the people in Burkina Faso. As new challenges arise, new spirits are invented, and new masks are

carved. This process means that the types of typographic patterns that appear are constantly subjected to change. Christopher D. Roy (2007)



Figure.1 Samples of Burkina Faso Symbolic Masks

Ghana

The Adinkra Typographic symbols were originally created by the Akan of Ghana and the Gyaman of Cote d'Ivoire in West Africa and represent concepts or aphorisms. African oral tradition dates the arrival of adinkra among the Akan to the end of the 1818 Asante-Gyaman War. However, the Englishman Thomas Edward Bowdich collected a piece of adinkra cloth in 1817, which demonstrates that adinkra art existed before the traditional starting date. Appiah, Kwame Anthony (1993). Historically, King Adinkra, the chief of Gyaman, wore special clothes with patterns on them made up of symbols with special meanings. King Adinkra insulted the king of the Ashanti by copying the design of his sacred golden stool. King Bonsu of the Ashanti was angry with King Adinkra and killed him, and the Ashanti took the symbols from King Adinkra's clothes as their own.

(See samples at Image 02)

The Adinkra typographic symbols have a decorative function but also represent objects that encapsulate evocative messages that convey traditional wisdom, aspects of life or the environment. There are many different typographic symbols with distinct meanings, often linked with proverbs. In the words of Anthony Appiah, they were one of the means in a pre-literate society for "supporting the transmission of a complex and nuanced body of practice and belief".

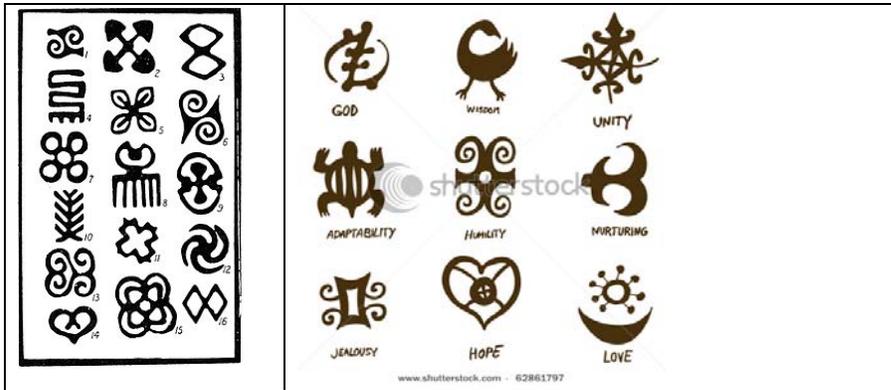


Figure.2 Samples of the Adinkra Typographic symbols

Nigeria

The Igbo people are one of the largest and most influential ethnic groups in Nigeria. Igbo art is generally known for various types of masquerade, masks and outfits symbolising people animals or abstract conceptions. The Igbo typographic symbolic language was used by John Goldsmith as an example to justify deviating from the classical linear model of phonology as laid out in *The Sound Pattern of English*. It is written in the Roman script as well as the Nsibidi formalized ideograms which is used by the Ekpe society and Okonko fraternity, but is no longer widely used. Oraka, L. N. (1983). Nsibidi ideography existed among the Igbo before the 16th century, but died out after it became popular among secret societies, who then made Nsibidi a secret form of communication.

Scholars of the Igbo cultural typographic symbols, confused the sacred and profane, the religious, social and political. Bishop A.K. Obiefuna testifies to this by saying that "In traditional Igbo life no distinctions were made between the sacred and profane, fact and fiction, history and poetry, all served the same purpose in a world where the natural and the supernatural interchanged hands..." He felt that the fact that most typographic symbols are associated with religion does not ritualize them or make them become religious symbols. Moreover, there is no Igbo cultural typographic symbol that has received an equal attention as the kola nut. *Ọjị Igbo*, - *cola acuminata*, has more than two cotyledons or seed leaves which is the material that is chewed. *Ọjị Awụsa* or *gworo*, - *cola nitida*, has only two cotyledons. In Igbo traditional rituals and ceremonies, the *gworo* is not a valid matter: only the Igbo kola, *cola acuminata* is acceptable.

African Typographic symbols express concepts by means of visual shorthand. These Symbols transcend the barriers of language, they can be instantly registered and absorbed, and most significantly, in an African context, it would be said to encourage a mystical

reaction in achieving a closer communion with the spirituals. Symbols are powerful and complex forms of communication despite their typographic simplicity. "In any kind of inner work, whether it is in dreams, meditation, contemplation, guided imagery, or creative visualizations, typographic symbols appear to us as signposts or keys and they function as containers, revealers, or concealers of meaning to enable us to penetrate deeper into the mystery of life." Angeles Arien (1995)

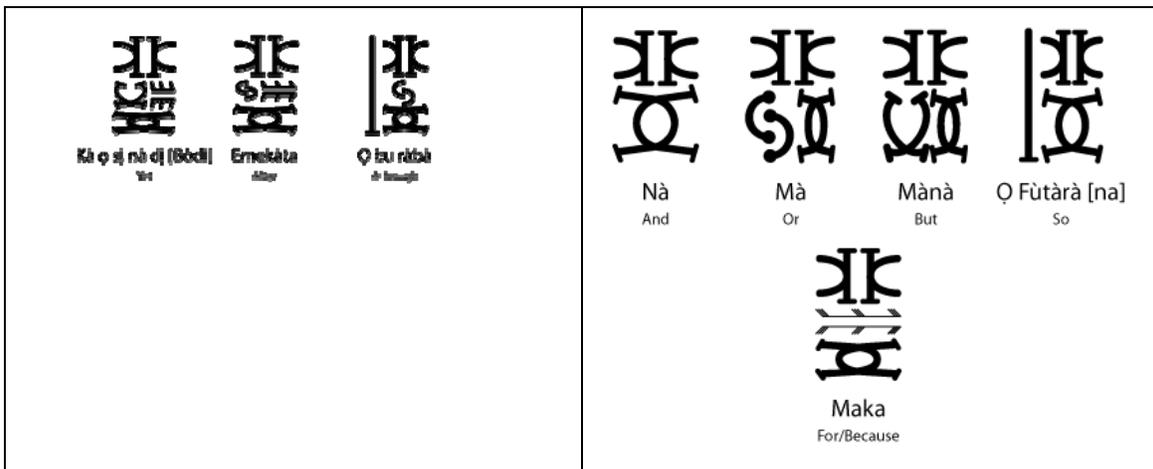


Figure.3 Samples of the Igbo Typographic symbols

5. African Typographic symbols in Today's Publication

Writing as a means of communication has been constantly evolved, 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 transformations which have altered what is written, and the medium through which the written word is produced. More so with the advent of digital technologies, for instance 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.

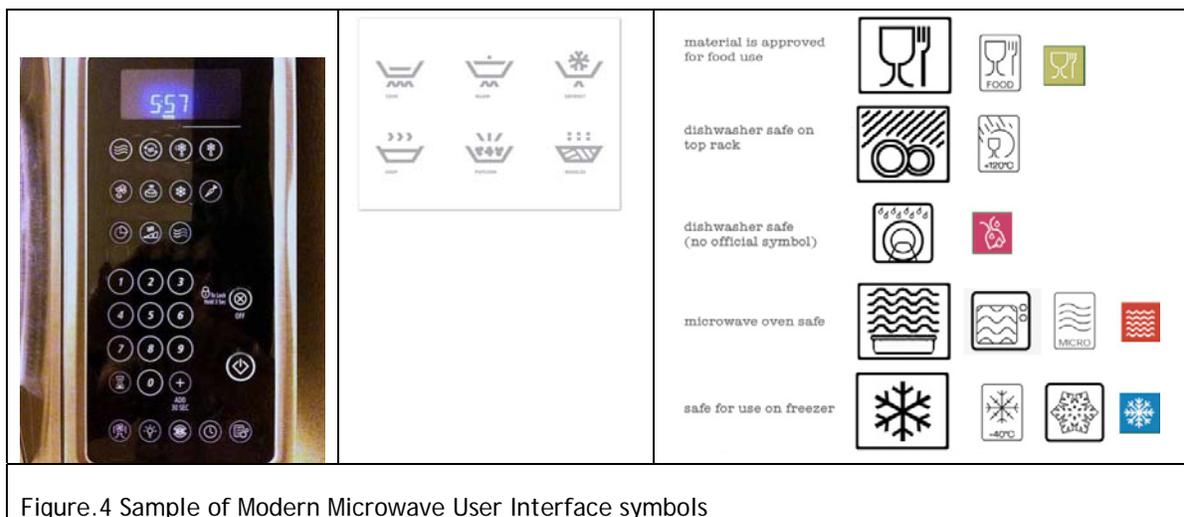
Contemporary iconography exists in two directions: modernist and traditionalist.

Traditionalist, and also the major direction, pleads for the constancy of style and rules, it is conservative, and keep the old templates, generally believing that any deviation from the traditions is regression and wrong. Unlike traditionalist, modernist direction is committed to the modernization of iconography, which should be, in their opinion, witness to the true faith in a modern way, with modern language, modern painting style and materials.

The adinkra symbology for instance, has gradually transformed incorporating diverse ideologies and civilizations. The symbols are also utilized on pottery, metal work, and are also incorporated into modern commercial designs to perhaps give significance to the product. Icons like linguistic signs must be deciphered and like other forms of drawing, they tend to be culturally specific.

In contemporary African cultures typographic symbols are most commonly printed onto fabric to represent proverbs and maxims, record history, express ideologies or concepts uniquely related to abstract shapes. African typographic symbols are particularly relevant because of their effective means of communication in the oral cultural background and their prominence in the socio-cultural and religious dynamics of our contemporary life. These symbols are very visible in our everyday life.

Most kitchen appliances like microwave ovens (Image 04) and food processors are now encrypted with icons that users need a manual to decipher.



Manufacturers are not printing words anymore, cryptic images are the norm and many are struggling to cope with this new mode of publication. The user interfaces now have icons such as solid lines or dotted lines, singular or double lines. Developing through picture, transition and Phonetic, typographic symbols today embraces new evolving styles necessary for the age of industrialization.

Public areas such as toilets have not been spared. Restaurants instead of having the usual man and woman sign could put the man ♂ and woman ♀ symbol. Unless you have some basic knowledge in some biological signage you will be left in utter mystification.

Modern day typographic symbols are now everywhere you look, from your TV remotes, to your portable music players, to your computer monitor settings, there's so many icons to decipher. Roads signs form another category; we actually have to be educated at the driving school on how to decipher these symbols within split seconds of seeing them.

Typographic symbols can also be delivered with minimal time delay, for instance smileys☺. These symbols create the possibility to break spatial boundaries and travel through time, since a word normally spoken could only exist in the time and space it is spoken in. It creates a certain immortality that could not be experienced without it. Socially, symbols are seen as an authoritative means of communication especially where language brings barriers for instance one does not need to know German to navigate Frankfurt Airport and you do not need to know Isizulu or Xhosa to navigate the Gautrain Station. The growth of multimedia literacy can be seen as the first steps toward a post literate society.

Cook & Shanoky Associates in collaboration with the American Institute of Graphic Arts in 1974 developed the universal typographic symbol (Image 05) to differentiate the water closets for men and women. These symbols are endorsed by the U.S. Department of Transportation. Otto Neurath, a founder of logical positivism, used these symbols in the 1920s for presenting social statistics in textbooks, posters and educational museums. Consistency determines the uniformity of symbols. Typographic symbols designed for the Olympics for instance, are a semiotic climax of internationally recognizable motion pictures whereby geometric body alphabets are deployed on consistent grids.



Figure.5 Samples of water closet symbols

6. Conclusion

It is imperative that we understand that these changes to typographic symbols that we call traditional do not represent some period of decline, some sort of decadence, or as Leo Frobenius called it 'Das Sterbende Afrika' the "Death of Africa".

African typographic symbols were not to be static or to symbolize unchanging traditions. The great Roman historian Gaius Plinius Secundus, wrote in 79 A D , *semper ex Africa aliquid novii*, "there is always something new out of Africa." Africa is characterized by constant dynamism, not by a tradition or conservatism.

Therefore, in Burkina Faso where masks have been used symbolically for centuries as a means of communicating important messages about the relationship to their spirit world and to the world around them, the masks that communicate these messages change as quickly and as frequently as the messages themselves do. The Adinkra symbols from Ghana are now worn in printed fabric without any attachment to the initial meaning intended but merely for their aesthetic appeal.

The scarcity of empirical studies on contemporary African visual art has impeded the understanding of the extent to which African contributions shape contemporary life in the Diaspora. In order to understand the typographic iconography of traditional African religions, one must examine the religious iconography of a variety of cultures and fully understand how visual images represent distinctive ways of experiencing the world for the people of Africa.

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