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## **Nwantantay mask**

(reverse, at left and front on facing page)

Bwa people, Burkina Faso

Wood, pigment

16.25 x 72 x 10 inches (41.28 x 182.9 x 25.4 cm)

*Nwantantay* – great plank mask primarily used from March until early May, when the rains begin. Like alphabets, the patterns on such masks are more than decorations and combine to convey stories and represent abstract concepts and complex thoughts.

The African Art Museum of the SMA Fathers, Tenafly, NJ  
 Gift of Steward J. Warkow, 1998  
 Photo: Tapiwa Muronda

# Roots of Afrikan Writing Systems



**afrikan alphabets** are born out of an oral story-telling tradition and have grown up in a variety of forms across the Afrikan continent and the Diaspora. Some of these communication systems were created several thousand years ago and are inextricably linked to the culture and ideas from which they came. Their purpose has been primarily to preserve a collective memory and, additionally, to create a permanent record.

In this section pictographs and symbols – used in pictographic rock art, scarification, knotted strings, tally sticks, and symbol writing – are considered together as forerunners of writing in Afrika. They form the roots, both directly and indirectly, of Afrikan writing systems.

The commonly held belief is that most graphic symbols in Afrikan societies are merely decorative. In fact, in Afrikan culture, symbols fill an important communication role. There are stories to be found in the rock art of the San people in southern Afrika; the carvings on the calabashes of the Kikuyu of Kenya. There is information stored in tally sticks like the Ishango Bone from The Congo, the knotted strings of Nigerian Aroko, and the scarification found in many Afrikan societies. The meaning attributed to these symbols and artifacts qualifies as proto-writing, or forerunners of writing. Most of these symbol systems are several thousand years old, suggesting that Afrika has a much older tradition of writing than some have recognized.

This chapter on the forerunners of writing systems demonstrates the transition of graphic characters from symbolic reminders to the phonetic codes of spoken language. Tifinagh, for example, once geometric directional symbols painted on rocks to guide nomadic peoples, is today a phonetic alphabet of commerce.

**Talismanic characters**

Gera, 1992  
ink on paper  
19.75 x 27.5 inches (50 x 70 cm)  
Private collection

Gera, the artist who created the talismanic characters on the right, is a traditional scholar of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Known for his skill in esoteric arts, he was asked to teach his art to the public. He came to identify himself as an artist and produced these characters for a show in Paris.

Ethiopian scholars see the origins of all writing in symbols like these that resemble letters of the Ethiopic syllabary. Talismanic properties are those that possess occult powers or offer protection from evil.

Photograph courtesy Jacques Mercier.




**Poet's Journal** (opposite page)

Wosene Kosrof, 2002  
acrylic on canvas  
17.5 x 18 inches (44.5 x 45.5 cm)

In the words of the artist: "This painting portrays the mind of a poet: the word play that a poet experiences, the search for meaning and metaphor. It breaks apart words and glues them back together in a continually new visual expression. As part of my series *The Color of Words*, 'Poet's Journal' is about how language is itself an expression of the human condition; it's not about words and their meanings, but rather my work is about language as visual form and color."

© Wosene Worke Kosrof 2002  
Courtesy of Mulatu Kosrof,  
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia  
Photographed by Black Cat Studio, San Rafael, CA





*Afrikan Alphabets* will lead you to uncharted places in Afrikan cultures. This book is about the highly graphic pictographs, ideographs, and scripts devised and designed by Afrikans themselves.

In Afrika the harmony of art, nature and spirit is the rule, not the exception. In terms of the graphic arts, alphabets designed by Afrikans show that the spiritual line is free and unencumbered by the rule of the grid. Afrikan alphabets express ideas, systems of thought, cultural imperatives, aesthetic preferences, and spirit. They are one of the important keys to help unlock what has been kept hidden from so many for so long. These alphabets with their deeply meaningful graphic constructions show the intelligence and ingenuity of Afrikan peoples.

—*from the Introduction*

“What is the difference between Africa and *Afrika*? The two sound identical but look different. In fact I cannot recall any African language that spells Africa with a *c*. Africa is spelt *Afrika* in African languages. As you read this book, you will discover that this is a fundamental issue which is part of African identity and reflected in the writing systems devised by Africans over the centuries for their own languages.”

—*Professor Maurice Tadadjeu, Yaounde, Cameroon*



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