

AFRICAN SIGN-WRITING

BY C. W. HOBLEY, C.M.G.

The early origins of written script have afforded great interest to inquirers during the last century or so, and the general failure of African races to originate and develop written languages is a point which affords some thought, especially when we consider the faculty they have demonstrated of developing such a wealth of oral language. Possibly, however, if written script had been invented, its existence would have checked the numerous variations in language.

I have for some years recorded any instance of sign-writing which came to my notice, and my interest in the subject was reawakened by some notes by Prof. K. Weule, which were picked up in German East Africa and sent to me by one of the officers of our expeditionary force. I propose to quote herein some of the examples which he mentions. His premise is that the origin of all writing was the marks made on rocks by early man, and that these markings, which were mostly geometrical, were first inscribed without any ulterior object—i.e. merely for amusement—but later on individuals of more ability used them to convey some meaning to another person. This may or may not be. I should be inclined to doubt whether early man went to the trouble of incising marks on stone for mere amusement. The whole question, it appears to me, is bound up with the dawn of decorative art, which probably commenced on the human body, and at a very early date branched off into pictorial representations of the animals of the chase, *vide* the wonderful paintings made by men of the Magdalenian era in the Altamira caves in Spain and elsewhere. I would postulate that sign-writing presupposes articulate speech, and a certain development of the art of ornament.

In South Africa a wealth of rock paintings have come to light, and also a large number of incised figures on rock surfaces—petroglyphs, as they are usually termed.

Thus, incised figures are believed to be of earlier date than the paintings.

Many of the figures are lifelike reproductions of the large fauna of the country, viz. giraffe, elephants, buffalo, antelopes, etc. Other markings are mere copies of the spoor of various animals, and some think that these were cut to indicate to their friends the presence of certain species in a particular locality; this is doubtful, as, judging by present-day hunting tribes, they depend entirely on the actual recent spoor, and naturally too, for a sign on a rock that an elephant was seen at a certain place some months before is of little value to a hunter. These signs are more likely to be cut as a mark of thankfulness to the spirit which has assisted the hunter in a successful chase.

As the learned professor points out, two well-known classes of signs in use at the present day are locality marks and property marks, and as regards the former, he points out even to-day how the various touring clubs paint coloured patches on trees at intervals along a road to guide persons along a particular route. The Automobile Association signs belong to the same class, and also the universal delineation of a human hand, with the index finger extended in order to point to a passage or door. In Africa it is the custom for the guide of a caravan of porters, when the path divides, to close one branch by scoring lines on the ground, or by breaking off a few leaves and strewing them on the path which is to be avoided. In Kavirondo the grass on each side of the path will be sometimes knotted across the branch to be avoided, and if the path is indistinct, knots will be tied in the grass alongside a path to reassure the people who have lagged behind that they are on the right road.

In some places a pile of stones will be observed by the side of the road, or, again, stones will be seen in the cleft of a tree by the roadside, and it will be noted that some natives will stop and add a stone to the pile; this custom has a different origin, and is usually done to propitiate a spirit which is believed to haunt the spot. The native argues that it is not much trouble to add a stone; there may be nothing in it or,

again, there may, and in these matters it is just as well to be on the safe side—you never know!

On an escarpment a few miles to the east of Naivasha there is a large heap of stones by the path, and the Masai used to tell one that a great chief of old time was killed there, and if a man was travelling from the Kinobop plateau to Naivasha, he generally reached there near sundown and the votive addition of a stone would delay the sunset a little, and enable him to reach the Naivasha settlements in safety before darkness overtook him. This, I take it, is an interesting example of how increase of potency will often accrue to a shrine.

To revert, however, to our signs: it is said that among the Ewe people of Togoland if a person calls on a friend and finds him absent, he will pull a little grass from the roof of the hut and attach it to a stick placed outside the door, to let the hut owner know that a visitor has called.

Sheane ('Great Plateau of N. Rhodesia') tells us that the A-Wemba hunters make certain marks on their arms to record the number of the bigger animals they have killed, and in some parts of Kavirondo the birth of each child is marked by a little extra cicatrisation on the abdomen; these marks may however have a magical origin.

As regards property marks these are common in Africa; the cattle markings of the Masai and A-Kamba are well known, and in the Sudan there is an elaborate system of camel marking. Weule gives examples taken from Merker's book, 'Die Masai,' showing the clan markings of three of the divisions of the S. Masai (see Fig. 1). Merker also states that the arrow and shaft heads of the arrows of the 'moru' (the married men) are also marked. The marks, if any, on the midrib of the shield are merely ornamental; the main feature is the clan mark, and in addition there are occasionally a personal mark at the side, which in the old days was generally added by permission of the 'ligwanan' as a sign of personal bravery.

Some allege that a mark is added to denote to which company the warrior belongs. I, however, have not identified any such mark.

Weule alleges that beehives in Kikuyu are marked with a kind of trade-mark placed on them by the maker. According to my information, however, this is not usually the case; beehives in Ukamba, also those belonging to the Dorobo of

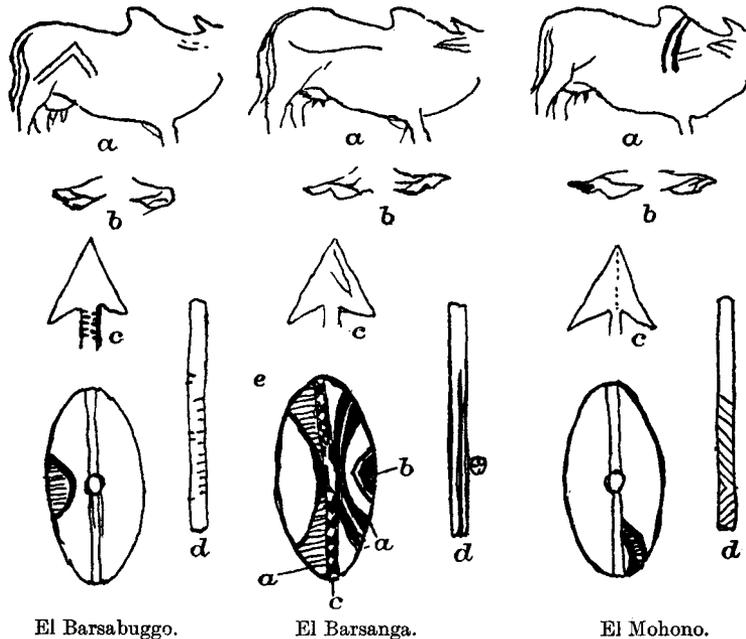


FIG. 1.—Cattle and weapon marks among Masai.

(a) Cattle brands of the three clans above enumerated. (b) Ear marks on live stock of same class. (c) Marks on iron points of arrows. (d) Marks on detachable wooden shaft to which the iron arrow point is attached. (e) Patterns on the shields: (a) War mark (according to Weule); I have always been informed that these are clan marks. (b) Personal marks, generally awarded for bravery or other particular reason. (c) Merely ornamental.

the forests of Kenya and the Aberdare Range, bear a clan mark, and sometimes a personal mark. This is a sign of ownership, and is done as a warning to pilferers, the rifling of the honey from a beehive being looked upon as a very grave offence by African tribes.

Knots on a string are sometimes used by natives as aids to memory, especially in keeping a tally of people who had

to pay their hut tax, and as a record of debts of cattle. A Kavirondo once came to me to crave assistance in recovering an old debt of cattle dating back for a considerable number of years. He had a big basket with him, and he sat down and gradually unfolded his tale of woe. He first produced a couple of artistic models of two head of cattle fashioned out of black clay; these represented the original loan. He then produced over twenty smaller models; these represented the progeny of the original pair, and his claim was for the total.

Weule states that the fetish priests of Isa at Atakpam in Togoland use small strips of bark as writing material; on these they incise marks with a knife; he gives examples (*vide* Fig. 2 *a*, *b*, and *c*).

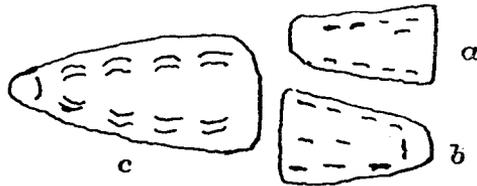


FIG. 2.—Communication in sign code used by priests of Isa at Atakpam, Togoland.

(*a*) is said to represent a case of a young priest who asks an old priest what he is to do for a sick man who wishes to know if he will recover.

(*b*) is said to contain the answer of the old priest, which is to the effect that the suppliant must kill a goat and offer it to Isa and he will then recover.

(*c*) is said to represent two men who, as a sign of their friendship, divided a piece of cloth in two. According to the rules of the cult they have to offer it to the priest of Isa, the penalty for refusal being the death of both on the same day. In the case cited it is said that they refused and did die on the same day.

As Prof. Weule says, probably the priests saw to it that they did die, in order to maintain belief in the strength of their cult.

Cases are also quoted of objects being used as a sign to express the power of a chief or ruler. In Dahomey the

king is said to send a staff round to call a meeting, and the people show it the same reverence as they would to himself. The late Masai laibon, when he despatched an order to any of his people, used to send a messenger with an iron club, and it was at once known that the message was *bona fide*.

In Kavirondo there lived a powerful rain maker named Mgahanya, and if the rains were a little overdue he sent out a spear by one of his men. This spear was planted in a village, and was a sign that the rain would be withheld until that village paid an ox; the ox was invariably paid, and the spear was then moved on and planted in another village. A similar instance is quoted by Sheane, as to how the Wemba chief would send a messenger with a spear to the chief of a neighbouring tribe as a token of war unless the annual tribute was paid forthwith.

Schweinfurth relates that when the Azande or Niam Niam tribe were having trouble with a neighbouring tribe they placed a maize cob and the feather of a chicken on a post by a path near the boundary; this sign was equivalent to a challenge, and the removal of these objects meant a declaration of war.

In East Africa, in the early days of the Arab traders, if a party arrived at the boundary of a tribe whose attitude was uncertain, the caravan was halted and some of the elders were induced to come to a conference; they asked the object of the stranger's visit and a palaver took place. At the close of the speeches on both sides, it was a common custom to lay down between the parties two or three arrows on one side and some trade goods, cloth, or wire. Beads would not be used at a ceremony of this kind. The elders would then be asked to choose; if they took the cloth it meant that the caravan would be peacefully received; the next step would then be to request them to tell their women to bring food for sale. Once the women appeared the travellers knew that the peaceful decision would be ratified.

The Yoruba of the West Coast, it is said, also use objects to express meanings: two snails facing each other on a string means friendship, and if placed with their backs to each other it means enmity.

Two snails and a feather means 'I wish to see you: come as quickly as the bird flies.' A stone means either hard, strong, or helpful.

A piece of charcoal means black, downhearted and miserable. Red peppers mean biting-hot, also curiosity. A rag means upset and distressed. A dried-up bit of corn means suffering and pain.

A collection of such objects sent by a prisoner to his wife is said to read as follows: 'My body is as strong as this stone; my future outlook is as black as this charcoal; my body will dry up as this corn from suffering; I look like this rag.'



Fig. 3.—Face of Ekoi girl with Nsibidi marks.

Weule writes that some natives send one of the sticks they use for tooth-brushes to a friend, the idea being that the sender would be as unlikely to forget his friend as he would forget to clean his teeth.

Meinhof records that the chiefs of Ewe in Togoland send each other complimentary presents of gourds upon which proverbs and tribal sayings are illustrated by signs intelligible to both parties. If this is so, we are here approaching the stage of ideographs.

In vol. xli (1911) of the *Royal Anthropological Journal* I published an account of certain Kikuyu minstrels who sang to certain *motifs* depicted by signs on a gourd, a practice which reminds one of the Togoland example.

Sheane records that some of the tribes with which he came in contact possessed a code of signs or gestures for conversing with deaf mutes. Is it possible that the conventional delineation of such gestures forms the beginnings of a sign language or the converse? It would also be very interesting to know if the signs or gestures represented words and ideas, or whether they spelt out words letter by letter as we do.

Symbol writing representing proverbs is also said to be found among some tribes in the Congo, but I have no details.

Considerable attention has been attracted to what is

called the Nsibidi writing of the West Coast. Macgregor states that it originated among the Ibo tribe, but Talbot, a more recent student, attributes its origin to the Ekoi people. Macgregor states that it is a writing, the complete key of which is only possessed by a native secret society. Talbot, however, alleges that among the Ekoi, girls and women have these signs painted on their faces, and that these symbols record incidents in their lives. Fig. 3 is a reproduction of a face so painted.

It is said that simple communications are conveyed by marks in the sand, or by paintings on a wall.

The examples shown on p. 24 (Fig. 4) are given by Talbot.

(1) Said to represent a married couple belonging to the Egbo tribe, which is indicated by the feather.

(2) Married affection; the star is said to indicate a true heart.

(3) Quarrel between husband and wife; they have turned their backs to each other, and have placed a cushion between them.

(4) A trader has arrived with native money at a place where the roads fork. The currency consists of brass wire bent into the shape of a horseshoe; these are locally called 'manillas.'

(5) A main road with a lot of traffic.

(6) Symbolises much wealth; five of the so-called 'manillas' are depicted in concentric fashion.

(7) Darkness.

(8) Hunger; it is supposed to represent a man pointing at his stomach.

(9) Said to represent two witnesses contradicting each other; the straight line is the man telling the truth.

(10) Two quarrelling women; the stars are said to indicate the words spoken. The American Indians are alleged to use the same sign for words.

(11) A man who talks too much.

(12) A man lying ill in his house; he has three visitors.

(13) This is said to be a reproduction of a court case.

(a) Is the court.

(b) Sitting man, witnessing the trial.

NSIBIDI SIGNS.

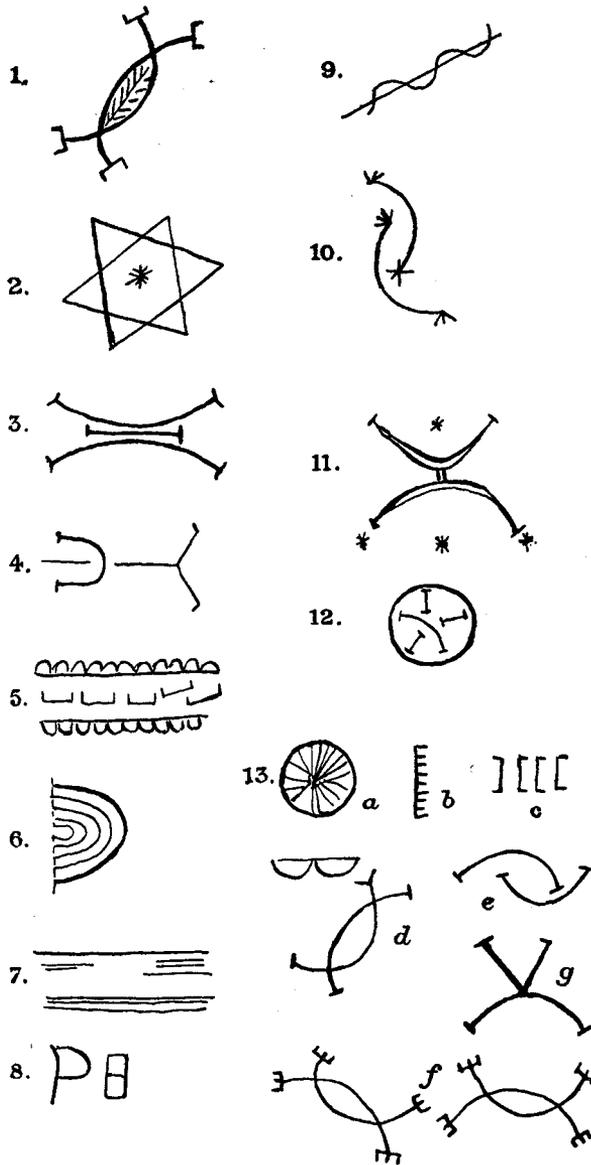


FIG. 4.

- (c) Men standing outside.
- (d) The accused. On the left, at the top, a fetter with which he is secured. The sign used for the man is said to indicate that the charge is adultery.
- (e) That the accused is a dissolute fellow.
- (f) Said to represent evidence of previous similar offences.
- (g) Represents a man who is present, and who states that he has nothing to do with the case.

(See also paper by E. Dayrell, J.A.I. vol. xli.)

Other sign languages of a somewhat similar character are recorded from the Wey tribe on the coast of Upper

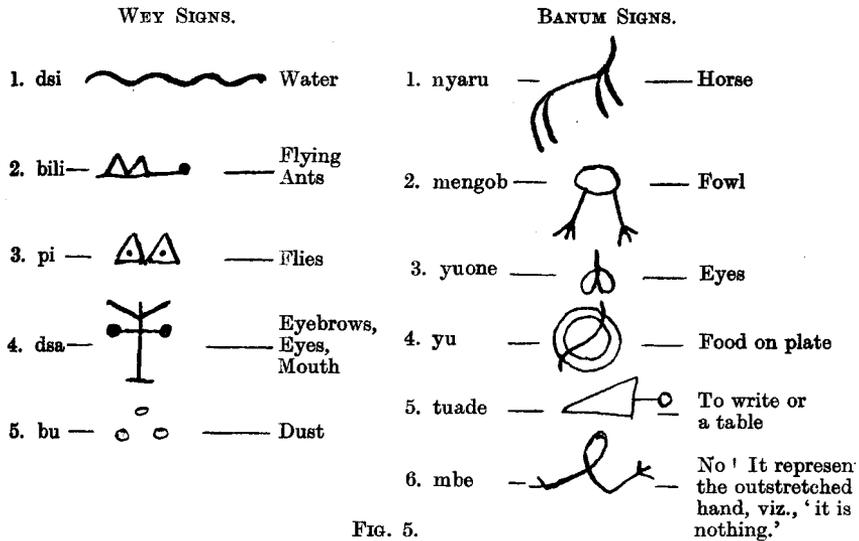


FIG. 5.

Guinea and the Njoja tribe of Banum in the Cameroons. The former is said to have been invented by a man of the tribe as recently as 1834, and Weule considers that it was suggested by the writing of Europeans and Mohammedans.

A few examples are given in Fig. 5.

Like Egyptian hieroglyphs and Chinese ideographs these primitive attempts at conveying thoughts by marks are ideographic, and it therefore appears certain that the mind of primitive man and the savage of to-day work in the same

manner, and that in neither case did written language commence with the invention of an alphabet. Further, it seems certain that ideographic writing cannot survive alongside languages recorded on an alphabet basis, for ideographs fail, to a great extent, in the expression of abstract ideas. The Greek alphabet killed the Egyptian hieroglyphs; and the cumbrous Chinese so-called alphabet, which is ideographic, has, I take it, only survived owing to the long isolation of China. As regards these poor African attempts, they are, of course, doomed to early extinction as elementary European education spreads among the tribes.

The invention of accepted symbols to express the various vowel and consonant sounds of which words are composed was one of the greatest discoveries mankind has made.

Consequent upon this discovery was the expression of musical tones by conventional signs, which was another great stride in mental development, and without which music in its modern sense could not exist.

Much research is still needed in regard to the birth and early development of written language, and it is to be regretted that black Africa does not appear to provide evidence of a more advanced nature than it apparently has up to date. Even with the well-known established languages there are so many questions one asks oneself: Why, for instance, are the languages of the European group written from left to right, whereas Arabic and Persian are written from right to left? And even here there is an inconsistency, for Arab numerals are written from left to right as ours are. Can it be that they borrowed their numbers from the West? Why, again, should the Chinese write in vertical columns? More information, however, undoubtedly remains to be collected, and no opportunity should be missed by residents among tribes which may, as yet, be comparatively untouched by European influences.