

**Dr. Ogonna Anaagudo-Agu**  
**Department of Theatre Arts**  
**University of Calabar**  
**Cross River State – Nigeria**  
[anaagudoagu@yahoo.com](mailto:anaagudoagu@yahoo.com)

**Filling the gap of history: The usefulness of cultivating a common and collective African Experience.**

**Introduction**

Ancient Egypt has left a monumental legacy: “Pythagorean Mathematics, . . . Epicurean materialism, Platonic idealism, Judaism, Islam, and modern science are rooted in Egyptian cosmogony and science” (xiv). What better motive for many scholars since Cheick Anta Diop, working against the grain of the myth of the Dark Continent, to reclaim the history of Ancient Egypt as African history? What better motive for many Africans and African-Americans in search of identities to turned to Ancient Egypt in the belief that the “history of black Africa will remain suspended in air and cannot be written correctly until African historians dare to connect it with the history of Egypt” (xiv)? Whereas we do not dispute the abundance of hard evidence linking Egypt and sub-Saharan cultures in antiquity, we emphasize the West African antecedents of contemporary Africans because our motives are to disclose the historical antecedents of a more radical teleology, i.e. Africans of the continent and throughout the diaspora reclaiming our sub-Saharan, West African identity and homeland and, subsequently, counter-colonizing the continent. In every way this paper is about the civilizations of West Africa, their strengths and weaknesses, bearing and limitations.

Yet, Africa is the mother of civilizations. According to Konrad Tuchscherer, “Africa is not only the Cradle of Mankind, it is the cradle of writing. Over 5,000 years

ago in Egypt, Africans developed their system of hieroglyphic writing, the world's earliest known script" (95). Nevertheless, what is not certain is the extent to which ancient Egyptian civilization penetrated southwards to the West African coastline. It is now known that:

While Egyptian peasants were experimenting in ways of growing food, another large but natural change was taking place to the west of them. The rivers of the Sahara were drying up. The broad Saharan grasslands were becoming a desert... (13).

Basil Davidson concludes: "the drying up of the Sahara did much to isolate most of Africa from the rest of the world."

Of course the known world at the time was the Middle East, centered in Ancient Egypt. From there, through Tigris and Euphrates, it radiated eastward to Asia Minor and, through the mercantile efforts of the Phoenicians, northward to the Mediterranean. Ancient Egypt was not only the centre of culture and learning, it was also the centre of technology in the Middle East, attracting scholars from as far north as Greece: indeed, the Greeks pursued philosophy "to the end of the ancient World" as Finley would say (17). Theophile Obenga has shown that Thales of Miletus, Pythagoras of Samos, Plato and many more went to Egypt to study (83 – 113).

What is interesting in all this is that Ancient Egypt exercised considerable influence in that region of the known world. Rundle Clark is of the opinion that, in spite of the set backs brought about by "foreign conquests and political domination by the Greeks and then by the Romans" the Egyptian religion, at the heart of that civilization, "remained more or less intact" until "Christianity that killed it" (2).

Still, to what extent did Egyptian culture spread to West Africa? If we accept Davidson's assertion that the desiccation of the Sahara resulted in movement of peoples southward, it is probable that aspects of Ancient Egyptian culture penetrated to sub-Saharan West African. For example, Diop has shown that the great tower of Gao Mosque has resemblance to the step pyramid; that the typical braid of prepubescent noble children is comparable with that of black Africa; also the waist beads worn by Egyptian ladies can be linked with that of Negro African sensuality; that in Zimbabwe symbols of the falcon and crocodile are echoes of Egypt; that the Egyptian architecture in hewn stones has its semblance in Zimbabwean Cyclopean Architecture.

Nevertheless, the claims of some national entities to have their origins in the near East, particularly Egypt and Palestine, need to be looked at again with sympathy and understanding. The same can be said of the Igbo. After extensive research on the Igbo, MDW Jeffreys is of the opinion that some cultural artifacts and habits of the Igbo resemble to those of ancient Egypt. Two cultural objects attest to this: the Igbo *ofò*, and *Ikenga* symbols of justice and strength respectively. Writing on 'The degeneration of the *ofò* Anam, Jeffreys Professor Elliot Smith in London have maintained that the Igbo *ofò* resembles Egyptian mummies (172).

Again, the scholar says that the Igbo ram-headed god, *Ikenga*, representing the strength of an individual, resembles the Egyptian ram-god.

We have referred to Igbo *ofò* and the *Ikenga* cult objects as aspects perhaps, of some cultural traits of an earlier, more intensive and centralized civilization. Two other traits require mention, similarly suggested by Jeffreys. These have to do with the Solar disc tradition of the Igbo, having to do with the concept of the sun-god. Jeffreys

associates the tradition of Igbo facial scarification with the cult of the sun-god. Earlier writers like Northcote Thomas (1913) Basden (1938), Jeffreys, Arthur Glyn Leonard (1906), Talbot (1926) have all suggested that the Igbo, somewhere in remote history, believed in a sun-god by the name of Chukwu. Again, in funeral observances, Thurstan Shaw's important archeological finds at Igbo-Ukwu attests to a time when the Igbo practiced elaborate burial ceremonies in which the king is buried with his earthly possessions in readiness for life after death, as practiced by Pharisaic Egypt. Burial chambers resembling the tombs of the kings of the ancient Egyptians were found, wherein the dead king, dressed in his coronation regalia and propped up on a copper-studded stool, sits surrounded by a vast store of treasures and ornaments (55).

## II

It was Ali Mazrui who, in his Reich Lectures on the African condition, summarized the argument (in the blurb of the publication) through a range of paradoxes:

Africa is probably the first home of mankind, but it is the last to be made truly habitable. Africans are certainly not the most brutalized of peoples and yet they are the most humiliated in modern history...

We may add that (as Tuscherer has noted) Africa was the land of the Book, where the first scriptures were written; but it is the last place where book culture took hold. Consider the burial chamber of King Nri Igbo, where everything necessary to help the king in his journey home was available, except the Coffin Texts as was usually the case with the Pharaohs of ancient Egypt.

The implications for West Africa are many, for the invention of writing brought about an instant cultural revolution in Egypt. Records were kept, and knowledge

preserved in more permanent forms. By contrast, ancient cultures in sub-Saharan West Africa relied upon oral traditions, hence their inability to keep records in a permanent shape. Consequently, as Basil Davidson et. al. have noted; “little is known about [the Igbo’s] distant past” (82).

Thus, while Ancient Egypt built the great libraries, West Africa lived on oral traditions; while Egypt built great monuments in stone, West Africa thrived on baked earth. While Egypt wrote books (on papyrus), West Africa wrote and deposited their knowledge through cultural objects and celebrations – ceremonies, festivals, art and sculpture. As Agbo Folarin would say, “from his first drawing on the walls of darkened caves... man has had the driving need to document, in image, the world about him” (127). One of these media of documentation need to be mentioned. The Mbari houses of the central Igbo group had religious and social implications. Mostly executed in mud, Mbari houses serve as record of the cosmological entities. Also, it served as a record of history. “Once” writes G. Moore and M. U. Beier, “the major deities have been depicted... Favourite figures nowadays are the D. O., the policemen, the court messenger, the clerk (in one house even Ala had her clerk) and the lorry driver complete with lorry. More traditional figures also occur, though sometimes in a stylized form of European dress, including shorts and sun-helmet” (189).

The Mbari houses do not employ conventional writing systems; however, the sculptural pieces have myth, legend and history to tell. Mbari was one of the early forms of documentation which in no way compares with the written system found on the walls of ante-chambers of the dead kings.

The point being that, at least this point in history, West Africa is a captive of books from other lands since, as far as we know, indigenous African texts that could have preserved ancient African languages are non-existent. Hence, the survival of African languages is threatened by the dominance of Arabic, French and English. Moreover, the principal sources of knowledge about the distant past of West Africa are “books written by foreigners.” According to Davidson et. al., these books consist of those “written by North African and Arab travelers and historians who wrote in Arabic. To be specific, much of the information on the ancient African Empire of Ghana comes from an Arab scholar, Al-Bakri and other Arab writers (39). The Moroccan traveler Leo Africanus wrote on the city of Niam in Mali as late as the sixteenth century “after it had long disappeared”. (51). The information we have of Timbuktu in the Tarikh as-Sudan is from Abd al-Roliman as-Sadi in the seventeenth century: Ibn Batuta wrote on Mali in 1352 (162). Much later, Europeans began to write books about West Africa in Portuguese, English, French, Dutch and other European languages” (24). For example, the Dutchman, William Bosman, was the first European to write on Ghana in 1700. Therefore, the information we have on West African history is what foreigners have said. What have Africans said themselves? Even when native West Africans wrote, they wrote in Arabic, the language of religion, commerce and learning. The careers of Kati and Abd al-Rahman as Sadi – both native writers of Timbuktu, are significant. The “two important histories of the Western Sudan were also written by Scholars of Timbuktu (150).

There is certainly a long tradition of Muslim scholarship and writing which “has never ceased in West Africa” that, alas, has continued to the detriment of African

languages and writing systems. It is of critical importance to further develop indigenous West African scripts by using them in scholarly treatises. Tuschcherer has pointed out that “In modern times, Africa has contributed much to advance the art and science of writing.” A combination of wide-ranging cultural contacts, men of genius, and rich traditions of plastic and graphic symbolism have led to the development of many new and ingenious systems of writing. Such systems include the early nineteenth century Via scripts of Liberia and the late nineteenth century Bamum scripts of Sierra Leone, the Kpelle of Liberia, the Loma of Liberia and Guinea, the Bassa of Liberia the Banana of Mali. From the middle of this century are included scripts of the Bete of Cote de’ Ivoire, the Mananka of Guinea, the Wolf of Senegal and two Fula scripts devised in Mali” (56). We have to add to this long list the Nwagu script of Aguleri Igbo, invented by Ogbuefi Nwagu, the insibidi of Cross River basin of Nigeria and the *uli* script of the Nri Igbo.

Therefore, if the story of African has largely *been told not* by Africans themselves, we cannot lay the blame entirely on the inability of ancient West Africans to originate a system of writing and documentation. Rather, in a world where there was no international order, these efforts were bound to misfire, having, as Tuchscherer has noted, a direct impact upon “the treatment of African history at the hands of outsiders” (57). . As the slave trade ushered in the exploration, annexation, and partitioning of Africa, stalling the progress of indigenous Africa civilizations, many of the modern African scripts suffered the same fate at the hands of colonial officials who did not support their usage or who more overt means to repress them.

One such script is the *uli* script of the *Nri* Igbo. Originally used for body adornment and designs for wall murals, it became of interest to scholars at Nsukka, for its

aesthetic qualities. Later was it realized that these characters in an Igbo script. In the early eighties, while doing research in Igbo traditions, I realized that *uli* might have been suppressed with the introduction of Roman scripts, but its march to fullness of form, as a system, cannot be stopped. I began work on designing a system for it, which today has culminated in a script I have called Aka Umuagbara i.e. script resembling the scribbling of “spirit”, that is, the unseen entities.

### III

*Aka umuagbara* is one way, we think, of regaining the initiative to express our thought as a people. This will give rise to a second initiative, which is using Africa’s own writing system to produce a common book of Collective Experience and Wisdom. Let us use as case study two most recent events that happened in the year 2001, one in America and the other in Africa.

On September 11, 2001, the twin towers of New York came down in flames from a series of attacks which shook America to the foundations. On December 30, a similar attack, also unwarranted – saw a quiet African town in Anambra State of Nigeria in flames from an attack by some Christian zealots claiming to be working on God’s behalf.

In both instances, the attacks were unprovoked, instigated, by rather selfish motives though colored by religious undercurrents. The difference, though, is that while September 11 reverberated in all corners of the world, the fire of Nnobi – which saw the Sacred holds looted and destroyed, has remained largely one of those minor events in the annals of history. In America and throughout the whole world, September 11 has become a phenomenon that is celebrated as an occasion to remember in global memory whereas only local residents and relative commemorate Nnobi.

Is it then a surprise that Africans many of whom were complicit in that heinous trade, tell no stories about the slave trade?

Kwado Opoku calls this a culture of silence in an age of forgetfulness (49), hence a gap in our history four hundred years long, a gap that inhibits creative and innovative engagement, a theory supported by a quote from C.L.R. James:

... An important area of research remains uninvestigated... what were the social and moral effects of slaving on the Africans who bought and sold slaves – what did they think of themselves? What has been the long term effects on the African peoples who remained on the continent? Our sources and scholarships are almost entirely Western, and Western thinking has governed our assessment, regardless of whether our standards have been overly racist or antipathetic to slavery. But surely one of the most important areas of study is what Africans themselves thought of the trade, and what effect it has and perhaps lingeringly continues to have on Africa itself. (CLR James 1970: 126).

What then is the Africans' own memory, not only of the slave trade, but of creation, wars (first and second world wars for example) exploration of Africa, colonialism, independence, and so on. These are the stuff on which a sacred book of memories can be built similar to the Judeo-Christian Bible. What is important to note is that the sacred writings of the Hebrews are indebted to ancient Egypt, where they learn art and science of writing. Moses, the author of the Torah, was brought up to read and write (being the adopted prince of the Pharaoh) in Egyptian mystery schools, skills that he used to liberate his people from what he might have considered the ideological power of Africans. The same can be done today, to reverse the hold of the West on Africans by rejecting the Bible and instituting African book of sacred Experience and Wisdom – even though we might have all been socialized in western schools and churches. What it calls for is

ideological restructuring, or indeed, ideological questioning of the mind to be refreshingly free of western prejudices and impositions.

Toward that end, this writer has inaugurated an era for the development of African texts in theology with the completion of an epic of creation titled the Book of Creation – *Akwukwo Okike*. The gods of Nnobi may have been destroyed but they have been plumbed deeper for life.

*Akwukwo Okike*, or *Book of Creation* satisfies the urge to understand how the world of the Igbo was created and the role of the gods as they are engaged in the drama of Creation. To a large extent it is concerned with philosophy, i.e., ways of explaining how and why the world was created and how and why it has developed” (152). Above all, *Akwukwo Okike* is told in Igbo language using “much moral and practical wisdom” found in the traditional sayings or proverbs of the Igbo” (152). Apart from the Book of creation, the Odinaani Texts, which make up the body of a new Igbo theology consists of 1). *The Book of Songs*, the book of songs composed for worship; 2). *The Book of Invocations*, which deals with chants used in ushering in a new day; 3). *The Book of Light and Day* containing the philosophy of creation as embodied in the mystery of life, and so on. On the whole about Twenty books have been lined up, including the *Book of Battles*, the *Book titled Elders*, the *Book of Teachers, Prophets and Medicine men*; and *The Book of the Beauty of Life and Death*. The new Igbo Theology recognizes the fact that “every people is the fruit of its forefathers, of its past, of its own history” (8).

## Conclusion

We have so far traced the connections between cultural traits of West Africa South of the Sahara to that of Ancient Egypt. Whereas Egypt represented an epitome of African aspiration, modern African states represent depths of despair. It appears that West Africa will never be truly independent intellectually and spiritually until it slips the yoke of Moslem and Christian cultures.

We question why, in the present day, Africans must leave their history to be written by foreigners in a foreign language, in spite of the fact that the evolution of writing systems began in Africa and are still here with us. We find that there is a gap in West African history which must be filled, a historical gap co-extensive with the lost connection between indigenous and diasporan Africans. We propose the revival of the indigenous African scripts and in the development of culture of the *Book* in African languages, beginning with the scholarly effort to compile the *Akwukwo Odinaani* a book of Igbo cultural ideology written in the *Uli* script of the Nri Igbo. Beginning with the Igbo epic of creation, it attempts, in its own small way, to revive and spread an African view nearly lost after the burning and destruction of Nnobi shrines.

Ultimately, Africa must resist the hegemony of imperialists and their agents in Africa by celebrating African genius, and preserving its sacred heritage between the covers of books. The spectrum of experience must “colonize” all hearts and minds.

The revolution must start in Africa and join all Africans of Diaspora in what Ali Mazrui had referred to as counter penetration of the Western world (6). In every home, African texts must be the fortress of the displaced. We the younger generation who are to

bring this revolution about might be far removed from the dawn of creation, but the facts of history are ever here with us. African cultures must not become a curio displayed in Western museums. They must live with us as our shadows, as our memories retrieved and reshaped to serve as living experience, history, or testament. This is, in fact a call to Africans and African Americans “to be keepers of the useful myths”, as Carl Becker would say (409). Indeed, to say the least, it is a call to put our collective wisdom and experiences between covers of a sacred text that we might call our own Bible and symbol of our identity.

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