

## History of Object text

To define and recognize object text as a writing system, the history of object text must be studied. Fortunately, there is much information that is easily accessible for study. For example, while studying in Africa historians recognized that “there are some [texts] in which materialia themselves may be arranged or modelled [sic] into a message-carrying device” (Kubik 78). Additionally, object text is “messages which the natives in the Yoruba country, West Africa, in the absence of writing, and as a substitute for the same, send to one another in order to indicate and communicate their mind” (Gollmer 169). We have first-hand accounts which exemplify object text by way of the meaning of cowry shells that were used in “text”: two cowries may indicate “relationship and meeting” (Gollmer 170); three cowries may indicate “deceit” (Gollmer 170); forty cowries may indicate “disturbance, trouble, and loss” (Gollmer 172).

Moreover, symbolic letters were used for communication (Bloxam 295). The following image (figure 1) is a message from a native prince of Jebu Ode to his brother who lived abroad. It consists of six cowries turned in the same direction. The quill of a feather is passed through the cowries from front to back. The feather’s shaft is turned back towards the end of the quill, and it is fixed to the side of the cowries. Six in the Jebu language is *E-fa*, which is derived from the verb to draw. A feather is seen by some Africans as the only instrument with which to clean their ears. In this example, the message can be read as the following: “By these six cowries I do draw you to myself, and you should also

draw closely to me.” It may also be read “as by this feather only I can reach to your ears, so I am expecting you to come to me, or hoping to see you immediately” (Bloxam 95-6).

Fig. 1. A symbolic letter used in communication.

And certainly, examples from contemporary societies can be found. For example, there are the Ejagham drums of silence as well as the Sese drum of the Abakua in Cuba, which will be expounded upon later in my paper. But when one writes *his-story*<sup>1</sup> concerning object text, I contend she must consider memory as the primary source of first-hand knowledge within cultural context because history is fallible without an account of the memory of that “historical” account.

The “expression of the correct location an action takes place in *in time* is an obsession running through all of the Romance Languages” (Shlain, 152). In

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<sup>1</sup> In my paper I refer to “his-story” as a story told by a particular individual.

fact, Western schools teach history as documented by Western historians. But once any past event is documented in linear text<sup>2</sup>, it becomes immutable. It is only the interpretations and reinterpretations of these documents, or past events, which are arrested in time that bring different meanings and visions to what once was *in history*, whereby the interpreters' and reinterpreters' documentation become arrested in time. Shlain says that the "linear alphabet and its equally linear comrades-in-arms, the numerals, are loosed like soldiers to destroy the child's belief in discontinuous space and mythical time" (141); therefore, the Western idea of history is certainly slanted to Western views. A separate theory must be taken into account to some African peoples' version of recounting their past.

History is "a narration of (in later use, esp. professedly true) incidents; a narrative, a story" (Brown 1240). So, one individual's<sup>3</sup> version of history is slanted to her satisfaction. In "The Clan of One-Breasted Women" Terry Tempest Williams writes, "my family members were some of the 'virtual uninhabitants'" to the Atomic Energy Commission's (AEC) *his-story* of the land north of the AEC's nuclear Test Site in Nevada. The AEC said the land, where radioactive fallout routinely fell during its nuclear tests thus causing cancer, was "virtually uninhabited" (721). The AEC told his story. Williams, along with many other "uninhabitants," added their memories, and wrote another *his-story*.

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<sup>2</sup> Linear text, such as an alphabet or syllabary, must be read from one direction to another in order to be understood.

<sup>3</sup> In my paper I mean the "individual" can be a person, corporation, government, etc.

William Cronon, too, provides a strong argument against the authenticity of history. Cronon, with the help of two authors<sup>4</sup> who shared “virtually the same subject, had researched many of the same documents, and agreed on most of their facts” (894) concerning the “Dust Bowl” that struck the Great Plains during the 1930’s, shows a disparity between histories. In fact, both concluded their own *his-stories* because “their conclusions could hardly have been more different” (Cronon 894). Additionally, if anthropologists study the history of a “contemporary exotic societ[y]” they should consider the fact that those who wrote the history “may have been taking a different but coherent view of the past” (Davis 25), and this is significant because most historians dealing with writing systems within Africa were Westerners *writing history for and about* other peoples. For example, there are “inconsistencies” and “fluctuations” of creating and sustaining a syllabary (Dalby 4), which is a list or system of characters representing syllables which serves as an alphabet. And the reasons for these inconsistencies and fluctuations is that “many of the available copies and identifications of the scripts have been compiled by European observers, who have often had little or no knowledge of the relevant languages” (Dalby 4), and therefore the Europeans misconstrued history.

Furthermore devices such as “a notched stick” or “rows of pebbles” are “recording devices” (Ong 84) which are recoverable and repeatable. Such devices would, for the most part, go unrecognized by Westerners because rather than possess a memory of such devices we think of text as only a linear device

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Bonnifield and Donald Worster who authored *The Dust Bowl: Men, Dirt and Depression* and *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930’s*, respectively.

to record ideas, history, etc. The Western notion of history is contrary to indefinitely recoverable and indefinitely repeatable. Sutton says that we cannot alter our memory because of the “multiple constraints of body and culture which leave us unable simply to alter our selves at will” (279), and that memory persists internally through traces (298-317). Therefore, Westerners are provided with a connection to our cultural past, of which non-linear time is not a part. That is, the Western cultural past is based in history, but object text is based in memory.

Memories “are ‘stored’ only superpositionally, and reconstructed rather than reproduced”<sup>5</sup> and is both “a natural and human kind” (Sutton 3). That is, object text is a non-linear text made up of natural objects such as shells, feathers, pepper, etc., based on cultural mnemonic relevance. The reader must put the objects in context, and this allows the reader the chance to reactualize the writer’s text, which is a local archetype. In fact, the “imitation of an archetypal model” as a means of “reactualization of the mythical moment when the archetype was revealed for the first time” (Eliade 76, 1954). Furthermore, there is a “new era” opened every time there is a “construction ritual” (Eliade 76, 1954). That is, the object text must be constructed each time it is “read,” and, therefore, does not lay still in history, but rather, the reconstruction of object text exists in memory.

An example of such a construction ritual is the making of *tusona*. Tusona are sand drawings made with the finger and comprised of geometric shapes made with dots and lines (Kubik 100-110, 1984). Furthermore, they are “a

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<sup>5</sup> This is found on the cover page.

system aimed at visualizing and communicating human thought of a complex and intriguing content” which are “ideographic” and “pictographic” (Kubik 19, 1987). *Tusona* are strictly ephemeral. After the production and reading of the *tusona*, the *mukakusona* (the drawer of *tusona*) wipes away the *communiqué* to make room for the next one (Kubik 100, 1984). And as Eliade says, the production “tends to restore [the reader] the initial instant, the plenitude of a present that contains no trace of history” (76, 1954). So only those present while the *tusona* was produced or read would know the memory of that *tusona*.

The *tusona* exemplify the difference in the way in which time is viewed in the West as compared to some regions of Africa. In various regions of Africa, in fact, time is not a “thing” spread out over distances in space; the people are not a dormant part of history but are firmly embedded in the here-and-now. The West is concerned with time in a linear sense: history is a vessel upon which the West ships its version of *his-story* forward through time. There is little or no connection between the reader of the history and the history itself; in most cases the reader is far removed from the text by the linear measurement of time. Even so, there are instances where linear time becomes irrelevant to Westerners, which will allow us to empathize with those who “read” in non-linear time and realize their text.

For example, U.S. Marine Corporal Ron Szpond, who served in Vietnam in 1966, states that life can take “on a certain cutting intensity during times of extreme danger that condenses all your past and future into a continuing now” (Sasser 196). Furthermore, there exists a “deformed” or “inner time” in relation to

prisoners. For example, prisoners of the Nazi Death Camps viewed “a small time unit, a day, for example . . .” as “endless” while a “larger time unit, perhaps a week, seemed to pass very quickly” (Frankl 79). Moreover, “by its very nature sacred time is reversible in the sense that, properly speaking, it is a primordial mythical time made present” (Eliade 68, 1957). Furthermore “sacred time is indefinitely recoverable, indefinitely repeatable” (Eliade 69, 1957). And since the act of creating object text such as the *tusona* is a sacred time, this time is not linear.

African ideas of non-linear time are exemplified in what Mary Noooter Roberts and Allen F. Roberts call “Body Memory.” The authors specifically refer to the practice of scarification by the Luba people of Zaire (although in a lecture given on 20 October 2000, Roberts suggested that the practice is waning). The body is where others meet and transfer, “where memory is created . . . at the threshold of self and other” (Roberts 87, 1996). It is through scarification that information is encoded, and the “exterior of the body in these ways maps anatomy and makes the body a surface to be read” (Roberts 87, 1996). And as M. Roberts pointed out in her lecture, the scars mimic the beads, cowry shells, etc., on the *lukasa* memory boards, which is another example of a pan-temporal mnemonic device.

The *lukasa* is a “flat, hand-sized wooden object studded with beads and pins, or covered with incised or bas-relief ideograms” (Roberts 37, 1996). The *lukasa* is based on the “spatial paradigm of the Luba royal court . . . which presents a mental geography that maps and orders the universe, the kingdom,

human relations, and the mind” (Roberts 41, 1996). Since the lukasa memory board is the apex of esotericism, the official who can read an aspect of the lukasa must be initiated into a secret society and learn the local definition of the lukasa board. Each lukasa elicits one, some, or all of the aforementioned information, “but the narration varies with the knowledge and oratory skill of the reader” (Roberts 38, 1996); so the lukasa board’s meaning changes according political and social changes. As the royal culture changes, and the meanings amalgamate even deeper into secret meaning in non-linear memory and secret knowledge.

Moreover, some texts of African languages are meant only for a restricted minority and secret. An example of such a text would be the hieroglyphs of the ancient Egyptians. The hieroglyphs were never intended for daily usage, and only those who held “holy” positions, such as scribes and priests, could read the hieroglyphs. Just as our own English language is complicated by rhetorical and compositional rules, so, too, were the Egyptian’s hieroglyphs, and it was not until the discovery and translation of the Rosetta Stone that people could read the ancient hieroglyphs. Even so, we do not have the memory of the secret knowledge.

Historically, secrecy was employed to as a bulwark against assimilation to Western culture and ensured African “freedom.” During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Africans and African Americans escaped their slavery and sought freedom in Florida. The self-emancipated Africans used a secret or a composite of African writing systems to secure and safeguard their freedom as well as for communication

(Ogunleye 30-4). During the Second Seminole war “object scripts such as campfires were also used” by the self-emancipated Africans “in their military strategies and to convey important messages to their communities’ members” (Ogunleye 33). Clearly, those who sought to re-capture the self-emancipated Africans did not recognize or understand the writing system employed by the Africans. And since we know the context in which the language was used, it is clear that secrecy was employed.

Furthermore, the Ejagham drums of silence as well as the Sese drum of the Abakua in Cuba are examples of secret text that crossed the ocean between Africa and Pan-America via memory. Both of the drums are “silent” drums. Both are “an instrument of display, not for use, an instrument of significant silence, not reverberation” (Thompson 237). The speech arises visually through signs written on their skin and the plumage, which stands for prestige and spiritual presence (Thompson 236), and “it [the Sese drum] is material writing, to be read, not heard” (Thompson 237). Without the memory of such a text, one cannot *read* them as they were to be read; she merely *knows the history of a drum*. In fact, Thompson writes that “a black Cuban priest of Abakua,” said that the Sese Drum “is not a drum as the whites understand such instruments” (237).

Additionally, *bocio* figures further exemplify the problem of discerning and *reading* text. *Bocio* figures are wooden figurines that are accumulation of knowledge by the object’s owners and users (Roberts 40). The figures are purchased “freshly carved” and then “the buyer applies organic and inorganic matter for therapeutic purposes, at which point they [the figures] become *bocio*”

(Roberts 40), and alive. The figures' lives "change physically over their lifetimes through continued accumulative usage" (Roberts 40). There are eight *bocio* placed solemnly a case within a museum—arrested in time. The caption below the figures reads, "Bocio figures acquired by foreigners may find their way into museums, where they go on to have another career as works of art or as artifacts" (Roberts 43). These objects cannot be "read" through historical context, and in fact, they have been taken out of the context in which they were meant to live. The objects and the materials that make them up are secret—only those who made the *bocio* know their memory.

A problem of researching the history of object text is the ignorance of Western historians. That is, the "primitives" were not able to communicate to the historian "their" full history, or the "primitives" employed secrecy as a bulwark against Western assimilation. Furthermore, memory should be used in the study of object text rather than history because history is a fallible and a Western notion. And, as Umberto Eco asks, "If every communication process must be explained as relating to a system of signification, it is necessary to single out *the elementary structure of communication* at the point where communication may be seen in its most elementary terms" (32). Whether the case is self-imposed ignorance or secrecy, it must be noted that ignorance is contrary to the fact that it is "necessary to single out" the "elementary structure of communication." And, for the most part, object text failed to be explained as is relevant in the study of "African writing systems" in Western *history*.

## Annotated Bibliography

Bloxam, G. W. "Exhibition of West African Symbolic Messages." Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland 16 (1887) 295-299.

This article gives specific examples of symbolic letters as used by the Jebu tribe in West Africa. J. A. Qtonba Payne, who belonged to the Jebu tribe, donated them to the Institute. The message was from a native prince to his brother residing abroad.

Brown, Lesley, Ed. The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, Volume 1. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1993.

Clifford, James. "Introduction: Partial Truths." Writing Culture, The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography Eds. James Clifford and George E. Marcus. Miami: Norrtun, 1986.

This essay discusses the difficulties in ethnographical studies. Clifford discusses the dichotomy between too much "writing" and too much "participant-observation."

Cronon, William. "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative." Ed. Linda H. Peterson. Norton Reader. 890-896.

This piece discusses the incongruities of historical accounts. Using various examples, Cronon shows that what one reads is usually only a version of history due to the viewpoint of the writer of that particular history.

Coulmas, Florian. The Writing Systems of the World. Blackwell: Oxford, UK. 1989, 1991

This survey text is an account of writing systems of the world from "earliest times" to the present. It attempts to explain the complex ways in which writing systems relate to the language they depict.

Dalby, David. "A Survey of the Indigenous Scripts of Liberia and Sierra Leone: Vai, Mende, Loma, Kpelle and Bassa" from a paper presented at the School of Oriental and African Studies. 1964

This paper is a survey on the above individual "scripts." It addresses the inspiration of the invention as well as elements that added to design and construction of the writings. The paper provides us with modern examples of the development of writing. The writing systems range from graphic symbols such as pictograms to alphabetic characters and diacritics.

Drucker, Johanna. , "The Alphabet in Context." The Alphabetic labyrinth, The Letters in History and Imagination 1995

In this chapter, Drucker focuses on the interpretation of the alphabet as a symbolic matrix. Drucker assumes the alphabets studied are encoded in

their visual shape, and reveal a history of their origin. Drucker's research deals with the "realm of imagination and philosophical speculation" (12).

Eco, Umberto. A Theory of Semiotics. Indiana University Press. 1976 (First Midland Book Edition, 1979).

This text draws on philosophy, linguistics, sociology, anthropology and aesthetics and refers to a wide range of scholarship to explain the theory of semiotics.

Eco, Umberto. Kant and the Platypus, Essays on Language and Cognition. Harcourt Brace & Company. 1997 (English translation by Alastair McEwen, 2000).

This text expounds on Eco's A Theory of Semiotics. This text, too, draws on philosophy, linguistics, sociology, anthropology and aesthetics and refers to a wide range of scholarship to explain the theory of semiotics.

Eliade, Mircea. The Myth of the Eternal Return, Or Cosmos and History. Princeton University Press. 1954 (1991 Ninth printing).

The thesis of this book is that ancient as well as "primitive" man conceived events not as a linear history but as a repetition of cyclic primordial "archetypes" while those who seek to celebrate a "new year" create history.

Eliade, Mircea. The Sacred and the Profane, The Nature of Religion. Harcourt Brace & Company. 1957.

This book traces the manifestations of space, time, nature, the cosmos, and life itself in terms of the sacred and profane from primitive to modern times. The book encompasses philosophical anthropology, phenomenology, and psychology.

Frankl, Viktor E. Man's Search for Meaning, An Introduction to Logotherapy. Simon & Schuster 1959 (Touchstone Edition, 1984).

This text describes the genesis and development of Logotherapy through Frankl's account of his life in various Nazi slave-labor and death camps. It also explains Logotherapy's basic concepts.

Gollmer, C. A., Reverend. "On African Symbolic Messages." Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland 14 (1885) 169-181.

This piece explains the way the "natives" in the Yoruba country of West Africa communicate not with the use of writing but with the use of tangible objects such as shells, feathers, pepper, etc. Gollmer describes in great detail objects and he adds a personal story as examples.

Karp, Ivan. "African Systems of Thought." Africa, Third Edition. Martin, Phyllis M. and O'Meara, Patrick. 1995

Chapter 11 seeks to dispel the myths of Africa's "primitive" systems of thought by comparing them to Western ideas such as medicine. Karp qualifies his research as broad, as there is no specific instances that will exemplify all of Africa.

Kubik, Gerhard. Tusona—Luchazi Ideographs, A graphic tradition practised by a people of West-Central Africa. Wien: Rohreneau. 1987

This text is a study of *tusona*. Kubik relies on his personal research from the late 1970's. Kubik explains the making, meaning, structure and socio-cultural context of the *tusona*. Kubik also discusses the mathematical implications. Kubik also compares literary traditions from Angola. The book is an extensive catalog of *tusona*.

Kubik, Gerhard. African Graphic Systems, with no particular reference to the Benue-Congo or Bantu languages zone. 1984.

Kubik introduces, through his own investigations made in Tanzania, Malawi, Gabon, Cameroon, Angola and Zambia between 1962 and 1984, and defines the idea of various graphical systems that were designed to express and transmit ideas in Africa south of the Sahara in pre-colonial times. Kubik defines such systems as pictograms, ideograms, phonological, as well as suggesting the idea of object text. Kubik also introduces *tusona*, a form of temporal sand "writing." (101-111).

Martinez-Ruiz, Barbaro. "Mambo Comes from the Soul" from a manuscript for an upcoming book. 2000

This paper discusses in definitive terms the idea of object text. Martinez-Ruiz realizes his work by way of a study of African art and religion with the notion of the object as an imperative to its study.

Mitchell, W. J. T. Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology. The University of Chicago Press. 1986.

This text explores the nature of images by comparing them with words, specifically the verbal language. Mitchell discusses the structural differences between text and image, eye and ear, nature and convention, and space and time using the theories of Nelson Goodman, Gombrich, Lessing and Edmund Burke.

Mitchell, W. J. T. Picture Theory, Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation. The University of Chicago Press. 1994.

This text explores the ways in which pictures function in theories about culture, consciousness, and representation. It also looks at theory itself as a form of picturing. It offers an account of the interplay between the visible and the readable across culture by examples from literature, the visual arts, and the mass medial.

Ogunleye, Tolage. "The Self-Emancipated Africans of Florida: Pan-African Nationalists in the 'New World.'" Journal of Black Studies 27 (1996) 24-38.

This article recounts the history of the flight of enslaved Africans that sought freedom and autonomy from Georgia, South Carolina, Tennessee, Alabama, and Louisiana to Florida in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century when the Spaniards offered asylum to them. The self-emancipated Africans remained in danger of recapture during the Seminole wars, and, therefore, created "writing systems" to communicate messages to evade battle and capture.

Ong, Walter J. Orality and Literacy, The Technologizing of the Word, Chapter 4 "Writing restructures consciousness" 1982

This chapter elucidates the fact that human thought processes do not grow out of natural powers. Instead, the powers are structured by the technology of writing.

Roberts, Mary Nooter. "Does an Object Have a Life?" Exhibition-ism: Museums and African Art. Eds. Mary Nooter Roberts Susan Vogel. Nortuun: Miami, 1994.

This essay discusses the validity of an object that is used for specific purposes in one culture and then taken from that culture to be viewed by a removed and outside "other" in an arena such as a museum or exhibition.

Roberts, Mary Nooter and Allen F., Eds. Memory Luba Art and the Making of History. The Museum for African Art, NY: Prestel, Munich. 1996.

One of the intentions of the book is to correct the misperception that because many African cultures, specifically the Luba, do not write down their history they, therefore, do not possess one. The book expounds on the idea of memory as a valid means of non-written history by examples of oral narratives and performance (118-124, 144-5), object text (32, 37-45, 124-144), and the body as a "vessel" of knowledge (85-112).

Sasser, Charles W. and Roberts, Craig. One Shot-One Kill. Pocket Books: NY. 1990.

This book traces the history of snipers and their training from the advent of the "long-range gun" through historical documents as well as the personal accounts of American snipers.

Scott, Charles E. The Time of Memory. State University of NY Press. 1999.

This book is about remembering and memory's loss. Scott's use of current theory coupled with and against mythological figures shows that this loss often occurs beyond Western persons' grasp because of the West's non-personal nature, that is, our removal from myth.

Shlain, Leonard. Art & Physics, Parallel Visions in Space, Time & Light. Quill William Morrow: NY. 1991.

This book tracks the parallels between art and physics by showing that the correlation of “the time of discovery” between art and physics is too similar to be coincidental. Shlain shows how artists have prefigured physicists throughout history.

Sutton, John. Philosophy and memory traces, Descartes to connectionism. Cambridge University Press. 1998.

This text discusses theories of historical and contemporary memory as dynamic patterns rather than static archives. Sutton adds tells odd tales of the motions and disappearance of fleeting animal spirits to add historical and philosophical “flavor” to cliches about memory. Sutton shows that theories of memory do not have to be blind to society and history without contributing to broad models of cognitive science.

Thompson, Robert Farris. “Flash of the Spirit” 1983

Chapter Five seeks to dispel the myth that Africa is a continent without a tradition of writing. Specifically, the chapter deals with the Ejagham and their developed form of ideographic writing called *nsibidi*. Of interest to me is the idea of the “silent” drum as an example of object script.

Williams, Terry Tempest. “The Clan of One-Breasted Women.” Ed. Peterson, Linda H., Norton Reader Ninth Edition (1996) 717-724.

This essay discusses the personal and historical account of the people who lived in a radioactive-fallout area in the Southwestern United States.