WEST AFRICA

WORD, SYMBOL, SONG

West Africa: Word, Symbol, Song

West Africa is a vast region rich in culture and history. Broadly defined, it comprises 17 nations, with a population of more than 340 million people speaking over 1,000 different languages. For centuries, West African writers, scholars and musicians have harnessed the power of words to build societies, engage in politics, communicate religious beliefs, fight injustice and enslavement, and create art.

This exhibition illustrates the many kinds of writing and symbolic communication invented and used by West Africans. At the same time, it shows the importance of oral literatures, both spoken and sung. These art forms are deeply rooted in history and constantly reshaped in the present. Together, they provide a unique insight into the region, and link the past to the future.

INTRODUCING WEST AFRICA

Introducing West Africa

West Africa extends over more than 6 million square miles. It is bounded to the north by the Sahara desert, and to the south and west by the Atlantic Ocean. From Mauritania in the north-west to Cameroon in the south-east, this exhibition takes in 17 countries. Niger is biggest in size, while Cape Verde, lying off the West African coast, is the smallest. Nigeria has the largest population, estimated at 180 million. It is followed by Ghana, Cameroon and Côte d'Ivoire, with between 20 and 27 million each.

The objects in this section point to the depth and complexity of West Africa's oral cultures, languages and forms of writing. They show how knowledge is stored, guarded and passed on through symbols, scripts and music.

The nsibidi symbolic system

Nigeria, before 1911

This bowl and lid are engraved with characters in a graphic system called nsibidi, which comes from the Cross River region of south-eastern Nigeria. Nsibidi was and is used both for general communication and as a 'secret language' by male secret societies. Women artists are known to have engraved nsibidi characters, which have complex and fluid meanings, onto calabashes (gourds) such as this one.

Archaeological evidence suggests that nsibidi may date back about a millennium. It is one of the many systems of graphic symbols and scripts in use across West Africa.

On loan from the British Museum. Donated by Elphinstone Deyrell

West Africa's many languages

1854

West Africa's people speak over 1,000 languages. Some – like Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba and Wolof – are spoken by millions, while others are understood by a few thousand. Today, English, French and Portuguese, as well as Pidgin and Creole languages, are also widely used.

This book, Polyglotta Africana, is one of the earliest and most significant printed linguistic works on West Africa. It gives translations into English of words in about 160 languages. It was researched in 1849 by a missionary, Sigismund Koelle, who interviewed West Africans living in Sierra Leone.

Sigismund Koelle, Polyglotta Africana; or, a comparative vocabulary of nearly three hundred words and phrases in more than one hundred distinct African languages. London, 1854. 826.l.17

Drum language

Nigeria, 1950s

The use of musical instruments in place of speech is a major part of West Africa's literary history. Variable tension drums such as this one are common and are used to replicate the region's many tonal languages. The drum is placed under the armpit and struck with a hooked stick. The player alters the tension of the drum's skin by regulating the pressure on the laces to raise or lower the pitch as the drum is struck.

This drum was bought from a trader near Ibadan in Nigeria in the 1950s. Drums of this type are still used today to 'speak' praises on special family and official occasions.

Horniman Museum and Gardens

Introductory film

Film soundtrack:
Kaira (Peace) by Toumani Diabaté, from the album Kaira, 1988. Hannibal Records HNBL 1338. 1CD0010823

Film imagery courtesy of:
© Danita Delimont/Alamy Stock Photo
Kwasi Ampene
Bibliothèque Nationale de France
Alexandra Huddleston
Daniela Moreau/Acervo África/São Paulo-Brazil, digitisation by Jorge Bastos
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Lynn Taylor and Nyamoi Fall Taylor

Film created by Fgreat Studio

BUILDING STATES

Building states

Over the last millennium, West Africans have forged many types of societies. They have built cities and villages; carved out a living in semi-desert and forest; and formed kingdoms, empires and city-states. The great empires of Ghana, Mali and Songhai flourished through what was known in Europe as the Middle Ages. The ancient city of Djenné-Djeno in present-day Mali dates back at least 2,000 years.

Stories and symbols, constantly performed and revisited, worked to bind people together in political units, forming the basis of community. Epics told of great heroes, such as Sunjata in Mali or Ozidi in south-eastern Nigeria, who were recognised as the founders of their respective states. Kingdoms such as Asante in modern Ghana reinforced the power of the monarchy using a rich symbolic heritage, which remains important today.

Sunjata and the Mali empire

The story of Sunjata is the most famous epic narrative of West Africa's oral culture. It praises the deeds of Sunjata, the founder of the 13th-century Mali empire, and has been continually performed from its original composition to the present. Different performers – or griots – sing their own versions, but the core events of the narrative remain essentially the same.

The epic is shot through with magical events, heroism and adventure. It nevertheless commemorates an historical figure, whose existence is confirmed by contemporary Arabic writers. Sunjata won the Battle of Kirina in 1235 and went on to lead the expansion of the Mali empire from the Atlantic in the west to the River Niger in the east. A century later, a successor of Sunjata, Mansa Musa, brought scholars and architects to the Mali city of Timbuktu. They helped to transform it into a world-renowned centre of learning and culture.

The epic of Sunjata, the founder of the Mali empire

An image of Sunjata is shown on the cover of this retelling of the epic for a French-speaking West African audience. Once considered purely mythical, Sunjata is now recognised as a historical figure.

Nevertheless, like many other great tales, the story is full of magical events. It begins with the wedding of Sunjata's mother Sogolon to Naré, the Manding king, who marries her in fulfilment of a prophecy that she would give birth to 'the greatest man the country has ever had'.

Adam Konaré Ba, Sunjata: le fondateur de l'empire du Mali. Dakar, Senegal, 1983. YA.1989.a.13698

Sunjata assumes his destiny

This version of the Sunjata story is compiled from interviews made in The Gambia. Sunjata's family is beset with misfortunes. Sogolon, Sunjata's mother, is mocked for her great ugliness. Sunjata is unable to walk, and is ousted from the Manding throne by his half-brother and forced into exile. After 14 years of ill-luck, Sunjata decides to be circumcised. With his great strength, he breaks a pair of iron crutches, but then puts his hands on his mother's shoulders and gets up. Immediately afterwards he eats the fruit of the baobab (shown here), a symbol of worthiness for kingship.

BK Sidibe (ed.), Sunjata. Banjul,
The Gambia, 1980. YA.1988.b.5376

Exile and return

The Sunjata story tells us that, before achieving greatness, Sunjata and his mother face a long period of exile from the Manding kingdom. During this time Sunjata's wisdom, courage and kindness earn him wide respect. Eventually the Manding people call upon him to save them from conquest by King Sumanguru of Sosso.

Meanwhile, Bala Fasake, Sunjata's loyal griot (musician and storyteller), gains Sumanguru's trust. He enchants the King with exquisite music on the balafon (an instrument like a xylophone), even though he is forbidden to do so.

The story is recreated here in the form of a graphic novel.

Justine & Ron Fontes, Sunjata: warrior king of Mali. Illustrated by Sandy Carruthers. London, 2011. YK.2012.a.15026

The Battle of Kirina

The Sunjata epic concludes when the hero leads an army against King Sumanguru. But Sumanguru has formidable magic powers, and cannot be defeated in open battle. It is the griot (musician and storyteller), Bala Fasake, who discovers the King's secret: he can only be killed by the claw of a white rooster.

In this version, written for children, Sunjata is shown firing an arrow tipped with a rooster's claw at Sumanguru. He thus wins the Battle of Kirina – a historical event occurring in about 1235 – and goes on to found the Mali empire.

David Wisniewski, Sundiata: lion king of Mali. New York, 1992. LB.31.b.9883

The Sunjata epic

This extract is from a live performance of the West Africa Sunjata epic that took place in October 2014. The epic praises Sunjata, founder of the 13th-century Mali empire. Since then his memory and deeds have been kept alive by griots (musicians and storytellers) such as those performing in this film.

In the story, Sunjata freed the Mande people from the oppressive power of Sumanguru, and founded the Mali empire, which at its height ruled over some 20 million people and lasted for almost three centuries.

Live performance on 10 October 2014 at Boardmore Playhouse, Cape Breton University, Nova Scotia, as part of the Singing Storytellers Symposium.

Performed by Hawa Kassé Made Diabaté (singer),
Fode Lassana Diabaté (balafon),
Chérif Keita (narrator)
Producer - Marcia Ostashewski
Artistic Director - Lucy Durán
Director of Photography and Editor -
Ely Rosenblum

Courtesy of the Singing Storytellers Public Outreach Program, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada

Kaira (Peace)

Toumani Diabaté (born 1965) is one of Africa's most famous kora players. He was born in Mali into a leading family of griots (musicians and storytellers), whose oral tradition goes back many generations. Kaira was created by Toumani's father, Sidiki Diabaté, in the 1940s and helped to establish the kora as a solo instrument.

Toumani's adoption of the piece demonstrates how traditions are passed down through the generations and constantly reinvented.

From the album Kaira. Hannibal Records HNBL 1338, 1988. 1CD0010823

Kora, an instrument of the griots

The Gambia, 1979

The kora belongs to a family of calabash, or gourd, harps found exclusively in the West African savannah, and is probably of ancient origin. Traditionally the kora serves to accompany musicians or storytellers (griots), and most players have the Sunjata epic in their repertoire. This kora was made in The Gambia by Alieu Suso Bakau in 1979 and was played by the Malian musician Toumani Diabaté on his debut album, Kaira (1988).

Other griot instruments are the ngoni, a small lute with five to eight strings, and the balafon, a xylophone with 18 keys. The kora has far-reaching influence and in southern Ghana a similar instrument, the saperewa, forms part of the Asante king's royal regalia.

Loaned by Lucy Durán, SOAS,
University of London

Griots with their instruments

1825

This is one of the earliest published drawings of West African musicians and storytellers. Griots such as those represented here would have learned and performed the epic of Sunjata, passing it down from generation to generation. Griots could be male or female.

The image comes from the account by Alexander Gordon Laing of his travels in an area including present-day Sierra Leone. Laing was also the first European to reach Timbuktu (in 1826).

Alexander Gordon Laing, Travels in the Timannee, Kooranko, and Soolima countries in western Africa. London, 1825. 1047.h.9

Back of case

This image, originally produced as a postcard, shows a griot with his kora. It is the work of Edmond Fortier, a French photographer who spent nearly 30 years working in West Africa, mainly Senegal, in the early 20th century.

Courtesy of Daniela Moreau/ Acervo África/ São Paulo-Brazil

Image on label

Griots continue to be part of the sight and sound of everyday life in West Africa. Here, a musician plays his kora on the back of a quad bike on the edge of a busy market.

The Gambia, 2003. Photo: Sarah McLaughlin

Timbuktu, city of culture

1830

This is an early engraving of Timbuktu. The city, located in the Mali empire, developed as a centre of scholarship in the reign of Mansa (King) Musa (ruled 1307–?32), a descendant of Sunjata. In 1324, he made a pilgrimage to Mecca, displaying his vast wealth in gold and bringing back Muslim scholars and architects.

This image was published by René Caillié, the first European to reach the city (in 1828) and return alive. Timbuktu was one of West Africa's most important cultural centres in the medieval and early modern periods.

René Caillié, Journal d'un voyage à Temboctou et à Jenné, dans l'Afrique centrale ... pendant les années 1824, 1825, 1826, 1827, 1828. Atlas. Paris, 1830. 10095.i.3

Image on label

This image of Mansa (King) Musa, the Mali emperor (ruled 1307–?32), comes from a Catalan atlas created in 1375. It indicates that Mansa Musa's fame and influence had spread beyond Africa to medieval Europe. A number of other contemporary maps and charts feature different images of the king.

Bibliothèque Nationale de France

Timbuktu today

Timbuktu, Mali, 2007

These photographs were taken in Timbuktu in 2007. They show the Sankore mosque (founded in the 14th century), and women celebrating the Islamic festival of Mawlid.

Timbuktu falls within the northern part of Mali that was taken over by Islamists in 2012. They imposed an extreme version of Islamic law and destroyed some of the city's monuments and manuscripts. Local people resisted with a mass operation to smuggle manuscripts into safe areas. Today, Timbuktu is again under Malian authority and its manuscript heritage, though fragile, is receiving national and international support.

Photographs by Alexandra Huddleston, Photo 1294 (1 & 10)

A millennium of history

This timeline shows the major empires and some of the other states of West Africa, concentrating on the last millennium. In the Sahel, the semi-desert area to the south of the Sahara, empires emerged from around the 4th century and flourished through the Middle Ages. Further south, where conditions were wetter and much of the land was forested, kingdoms rose and fell. Across the region, artists created works of great sophistication, and learning and literature – oral and written – flourished.

Traders established routes across the Sahara from a very early date. At the coast, Europeans first appeared in the 15th century. By the 17th century the transatlantic slave trade was having a deep effect on the region. By 1900, European powers – Britain, France, Germany and Portugal – had divided up most of West Africa and brought it under colonial rule.

Today's borders did not exist for most of West Africa's history. Most modern countries were created in their present form by colonial rule towards the end of the 19th century. On the timeline, the names of modern countries are given alongside older states, where an older state occupied all or part of a modern country. For reasons of space, not all West Africa's major empires and kingdoms are shown here.

Songhai village

There are few surviving early landscape illustrations of West Africa drawn from life. This is a picture of the Songhai village of I'sé, located at the foot of the Hombori mountain range in present-day central Mali. It appears in the work of Heinrich Barth, who travelled between Tripoli and Timbuktu in 1850–55. The image is based on a sketch by Barth, although it was redrawn, and possibly romanticised, by the artist Johann Martin Bernatz.

The picture post-dates the height of the Songhai empire's power, which declined after the Moroccan conquest of 1591.

Heinrich Barth, Travels and discoveries in North and Central Africa. London, 1857–58. ORW.1986.a.786

Preparing cassava

1728

This illustration shows people preparing cassava (or manioc) at Bissau and Kachao (now Cacheu, Guinea-Bissau). Cassava, originally imported from South America, has become a staple food in West Africa.

This engraving shows something of the day-to-day work of ordinary people as they processed cassava into flour and cooked it. The author of this volume, Jean Baptiste Labat (1663–1738), was a French Dominican monk and missionary in the Caribbean. The work is based on the memoirs of André Brue, a French administrator in Senegal, who travelled to Kachao in 1700.

Jean Baptiste Labat, Nouvelle relation de l'Afrique occidentale. Paris, 1728. 978.f.17

Map showing the River Niger

1826

This is a copy of a map given to the British explorer Hugh Clapperton in 1824 by Muhammad Bello of Sokoto (ruled 1817–37), in present-day northern Nigeria. It was probably produced at Muhammad Bello's court.

The thick black line represents the River Niger, which, according to the caption, 'reaches Egypt and is called the Nile'. The map reflects the view of the 12th century Arab geographer al-Idrīsī. Yet in 1824 Bello had also told Clapperton (correctly) that the Niger flowed into the Atlantic. European explorers, long puzzled by the question, came to the same conclusion in 1830.

Dixon Denham, Hugh Clapperton and Walter Oudney, Narrative of travels and discoveries in northern and central Africa, in the years 1822, 1823, and 1824. London, 1826. G.7236

‘Give me back my book!’

Mid-19th century

This letter was written by Muhammad al-Amīn, of Touba, present-day Guinea, to his son in the mid-19th century. Throughout West Africa it was common practice for scholars to lend each other books.

In this case, a book was not returned and when pressed, the borrower demanded payment. Muhammad al-Amīn asks his son to get this book ‘quickly, quickly, quickly’, angrily remarking, ‘I would never agree to buy my own book!’ This letter captures both the interconnected nature of scholarly communities in West Africa, and the value placed on books and their ownership.

Muhammad al-Amīn of Touba to his son, mid-19th century. OR 6473 f. 190r

The kingdom of Benin

1628

The right-hand inset image on this European map of West Africa shows the kingdom of Benin (in modern Nigeria). The king and nobles process on horseback, surrounded by their attendants and musicians, towards the royal palace.

The images, by the artist Baptista van Doetecum, are based on the account of the early 17th-century traveller Pieter de Marees. The picture of Benin indicates admiration of a well-ordered state with a fair judicial system. However, the fact that the people are shown inaccurately as semi-naked indicates the influence of European views on this image.

Effigies ampli Regni auriferi Guineae in Africa siti. Amsterdam, 1628. Maps 64990(9)

Timeline

Djenné-Djeno, Mali

Remains of pottery from this ancient city, which dates back around 2,000 years. © Danita Delimont / Alamy Stock Photo

Terracotta head, Nigeria

From the Nok area of central Nigeria. Nok sculptures date from 500 BCE–200 CE. Werner Forman Archive / Bridgeman Images

Tifinagh scripts in use in West Africa. At least 1,500 years ago

Islam arrives. 8th–9th century

Pot of leaded bronze, Nigeria

Roped pot from Igbo-Ukwu, south-eastern Nigeria, made using lost-wax casting techniques. 9th/10th century. National Museum, Lagos. Photo © Dirk Bakker / Bridgeman Images

Arabic inscriptions. 11th century

Arabic inscription from Essouk, Mali

The top inscription is one of the earliest known from West Africa. It reads 'This is the year four and four hundred'. This means that it was carved in 1013-14 CE. Photograph, 1987, courtesy of P.F. de Moraes Farias

Arabic manuscript cultures develop. From 11th/12th century

Manuscript from Djenne, Mali

Example of an illuminated manuscript, dealing with Sufism. Undated. Courtesy of Alpha Issa Kanta family collection of Arabic manuscripts (1682-1942); Endangered Archives Programme. EAP488/1/31/2

Brass head, Nigeria

Head with a beaded crown and plume from Ife, Nigeria, famous for its brass sculptures. 14th/early 15th century. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Brass plaque, Nigeria

The king with Europeans. One of a series of brass plaques from the Kingdom of Benin (now in Nigeria). 16th/17th century. © The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved.

Timbuktu Chronicles written. 16th century

African languages written in Arabic script. From at least 17th century

Poem in the Wolof language, Senegal

Poem using Arabic script to write the Wolof language (a practice called ajami, still in use today). 1930s–50s. Courtesy of the Amdy Moustapha Seck collection; Fallou Ngom (Boston University); Endangered Archives Programme. EAP334/3/1

Height of Transatlantic Slave Trade. 1700–1850

Religious poetry in Sokoto Caliphate. From early 19th century

Religious poem , Nigeria

Poem in the Fulfulde language, by the Muslim poet, scholar and educator Naana Asmaa'u (1793–1864), daughter of Usman dan Fodio, founder of the Sokoto Caliphate. 19th century. From the collection of Muhammad Bashir Abubakar of Yola in Northern Nigeria; Endangered Archives Programme. EAP387/1/2/4

Invention of Vai script. Probably early 19th century. Liberia

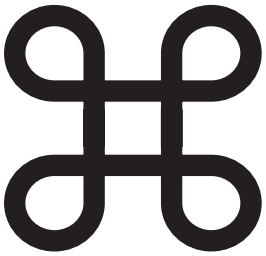
Invention of Bamum script. Late 19th century. Cameroon

Berlin Conference divides Africa among colonial powers. 1884–85

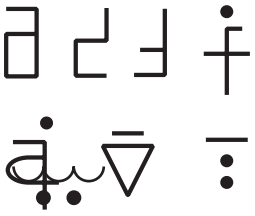
West Africa's rich heritage of symbols and scripts is represented on the walls and pillars of this exhibition, as well as on the objects on display.

The design on this pillar shows two adinkra symbols from Ghana, which are understood to speak of the value of education, quality and knowledge. The smaller characters are from the Tifinagh script, which has been in use in West Africa for at least 1,500 years.

'Woforo dua pa a'
When you climb a good tree, symbol of support, cooperation and encouragement



'Mpatapo'
Knot of reconciliation, symbol of peace-making



Characters in the N'ko script

The Asante empire

At its height, Asante was a powerful West African state that occupied much of the area of the modern country of Ghana. By 1700 the Asante empire was on the rise, thanks to the military conquest of other states by King Osei Tutu. Its wealth was based on strong centralised control of its people, and on agriculture, gold and the slave trade. Asante reached its peak in the 19th century. However, defeat by the British in 1874 was followed by the empire's decline, and in 1902 Asante became a British colony.

The Asante empire was rich in ceremony and symbolism. Its rulers used objects such as magnificient gold ornaments to display their wealth and power.Music, symbols and words reinforced the grandeur of the monarchy, the history of the state and the commonalities binding the community together. Sometimes they also offered a counter-narrative of protest or dissent. The Asante in Ghana today continue to enact these traditions.

In 1957, Ghana became the first European colony to achieve independence. Guinea followed in 1958, and most of the other colonies in the 1960s. Against the background of these events, West Africans have retained, developed and invented a vast range of creative ways of speaking their minds.

Adinkra stamps

Ghana

These are examples of stamps used to hand-print adinkra cloth in Ghana. They show a few of the many symbols available to makers and designers. They are usually carved from a gourd or calabash. Today, the production of adinkra cloth is centred on the town of Ntonso.

1. Adinkrahene, before 1920
   This is considered to be the foremost of the adinkra symbols. It represents leadership and greatness.

2. Ram's horns, 2000s
   This design is called 'Dwennimmɛn' in the Twi language of Ghana. It denotes both strength and humility, thought to be attributes of a ram.

3. ‘Someone’s wish is to see my doom’, 2000s
   This symbol represents jealousy or malice, and by using it the wearer encourages people to avoid these emotions.

4. Dɛnkyɛm, 2000s
   This crocodile is associated with the proverb ‘The crocodile lives in water, but it does not breathe water, it breathes air’. Some say the meaning is that God endures; others that human beings should adapt themselves to change in life.

On loan from the British Museum

Adinkra cloth

Ghana, ?1960s

Symbols – written and performed – were of vital importance to the exercise of royal power in Asante. This cloth, bearing symbols known as adinkra, was made in Ghana. Such cloth was originally worn by people of high status, and its symbols were used to proclaim the king's authority.

This example emphasises royal authority with the king's symbol, called adinkrahene (three concentric circles). Other designs include one alluding to the hair-style of the queen mother. The cloth also shows more general virtues, such as aya, a fern-like symbol representing defiance, endurance and resourcefulness.

Kumasi street

This illustration shows Adum Street, close to the royal palace in the Asante capital of Kumasi. It was published in Thomas Bowdich's book on his visit to the Asante kingdom in 1816.

The image shows the adampan, open porches fronting onto the street in which the kingdom's officials carried out their business and received members of the public. The people shown in the street include a weaver and a market woman.

Thomas Edward Bowdich, Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee. London, 1819. G.7211

Trumpets and drums of the Asante king

Recorded at the Manhyia Palace,
Kumasi, Ghana, 2009

Musical instruments, such as the trumpets and drums seen in these excerpts, are part of the Asante king's official regalia. They are symbols of his status and power, like the Golden Stool, swords and adinkra designs, and can be deployed as a substitute for the voice to 'speak' texts.

Musical instruments are used during a variety of royal functions, reciting proverbs and poetry and conveying messages. The melodic and rhythmic patterns are connected with significant moments of Asante history and with funerals for paramount chiefs and members of the royal family.

Edited from original footage kindly loaned by
Dr Kwasi Ampene, University of Michigan, US

Asante celebrates

Thomas Edward Bowdich (c. 1791–1824) visited the Asante kingdom in 1816 and represented Britain in successful peace negotiations. His observant and positive account of this visit reflects the power of the Asante kingdom at its height.

This illustration of the 'first day of the yam festival', properly odwira, shows the splendour of Asante. This annual festival united the Asante state and was held to connect the living with their ancestors and descendants. King Osei Tutu Kwame is shown seated under the umbrella bearing a finial in the shape of an elephant.

Thomas Edward Bowdich, Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee. London, 1819. 146.f.17

Journal of a voyage to Guinea

1678–79

These illustrations of artefacts from the 'Gold Coast' (now Ghana) include musical instruments, a stool, jewellery and weapons. The man in the rather caricatured drawing is shown wearing a cap made from animal skin, worn in battle.

Jean Barbot (1655–1712) was a French slave trader who made two voyages to the coast of West Africa. Despite his occupation, he left valuable accounts and illustrations of the region. The manuscript journal of his first voyage (1678–79), shown here, includes Barbot's original drawings.

Jean Barbot, 'Journal du voyage de Guinée, Cayenne, et Illes Antilles de l'Amerique'. 1678–79. Add MS 28788, ff. 43v-44

Atumpan translations

1923

Robert Sutherland Rattray has attempted to transcribe the atumpan drum language in this volume. He initially notates the drum patterns themselves, then gives the spoken version in the language of Asante Twi, followed by a translation into English. He refers to a male (M) and a female (F) drum each with a slightly different pitch. The translations shown refer to recordings of the 'Drum history of Mampon', which has a similar history to the recording playing here. None of the recordings of the 'Drum history of Mampon' survive.

Robert Sutherland, Rattray, Ashanti. Oxford, 1923.
010094.g.35

Wax cylinder

1921

This wax cylinder is the one used in 1921 to record the drumming you can hear in this section. The American Thomas Edison invented the wax cylinder recorder in 1877. The technology was a vast improvement on laboriously notating music and lyrics by hand as folklorists had previously had to do. The machines were light and portable although the wax cylinders themselves were brittle and prone to melting. By 1890 the technology came to be used in the field to record voices and music around the world. They are valuable documents of languages and oral traditions from the past.

Robert Sutherland Rattray Collection. C176/245

Image on label

This picture shows Kofi Jatto performing phrases of text on the Asante atumpan drums in Ghana in 1921. It was taken by the anthropologist Robert Sutherland Rattray, an early adopter of the phonograph – wax cylinder recorder – as part of ethnographic research.

Royal Anthropological Institute. RAI 35550

Asante ‘talking drums’

Ghana, 1921

In this area you can hear atumpan ‘talking drums’. The drum phrases are performed and spoken by Kofi Jatto and were recorded on a wax cylinder recorder by Robert Sutherland Rattray in Bekwai, Ghana, in 1921. The drums form part of the Asante king’s royal regalia. The king’s atumpan player is responsible for sending the king’s messages across the kingdom. He also plays welcome statements and eulogies, and recites praises and ayan (drum poetry) before and during ceremonies and festivals.

Robert Sutherland Rattray Collection. C176/245

Atumpan drums

Ghana/UK, 2000s

Atumpan drums such as these continue to be played in Asante rituals today. They are used in ceremonies and festivals in Ghana and in diaspora communities. This pair forms part of an ensemble owned by Ghanaian drummers now based in south London.

On loan from Obed Abbey-Mensah of Abladei (UK)

Decorated sheet-brass box

Ghana, before c. 1900

This sheet-brass box, or forowa, is a rare rectangular version of a container most often used for shea butter, and sometimes for valuables including gold dust. The wheeled trolley is probably unique. The box is richly decorated with symbolic designs, including a sankofa bird, referencing the importance of history. It also shows a stool, a symbol of kingship, and a spider, probably a representation of Ananse, the trickster character of West African and Caribbean stories. The lid shows two crocodiles with one stomach – a common motif indicating competition or interdependence.

Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.
1935.56.12

Symbolic gold-weights

Ghana, 18th–20th century

Gold-weights were an important form of sculpture in the Asante kingdom. Made of brass, they were used for weighing gold dust. Most men possessed their own set of scales and gold-weights.

These tiny sculptures are charged with symbolic meaning. Both the stool and the sandal are symbols of kingship. The Golden Stool represents the Asante monarchy and nation, and a king's sandals are part of the royal regalia. The Sankofa bird indicates the importance of history and of learning from the past: 'reach back and get it', in one related saying.

On loan from the British Museum.

Sankofa bird: Donated by the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine.

Golden Stool: Donated by Mrs Margaret Plass

Asante symbols

1821

This black and white engraving, in a publication by Thomas Bowdich, illustrates Asante culture and symbolism. A sample of adinkra cloth is shown in the top right-hand corner, while the sandal is a symbol of royal authority.

These are engravings of objects which Bowdich collected in Asante during his visit in 1816 and donated to the British Museum. The engravings were made by Sarah Bowdich (later Lee), a scientist, illustrator and author (and Thomas' wife).

Thomas Edward Bowdich, An essay on the superstitions, customs, and arts, common to the ancient Egyptians, Abyssinians, and Ashantees. Paris, 1821. 800.k.3.

Manuscripts from Asante

Ghana, before 1875

These pages are part of a devotional poem to ʻAbd al-Qdir al-Jalını, the 11th-century founder of the Qadırı Sufi order. The order has had many followers in West Africa from the 15th century to the present day.

This work is included in a volume of manuscripts from Asante (present-day Ghana). The volume consists mainly of amulets – written texts in Arabic conferring power and blessing – and illustrates the importance of manuscripts in Asante by this date.

OR 6559, ff.151v-152

Amulets for the king

Ghana, before 1896

These small pieces of paper are amulets – written documents in Arabic conferring blessings and good fortune on their owner. They belonged to the Asante king, and would have been purchased at some expense. They show the wide influence of Islamic culture in the region, even though Asante had not converted to Islam. Amulets were popular and worn by many, including nobles and soldiers.

On loan from the British Museum. Donated by the Gold Coast Government

SPIRIT

Spirit

West Africa is home to a wide variety of religious beliefs and practices. People seek contact with the divine in many ways. Indigenous belief systems, Islam and Christianity are all strong in the region. Words – both oral and written – have a central place in all these different ways of engaging with the spiritual world.

The histories of these religions have been chequered with episodes of conflict and periods of peaceful coexistence. Religious practices have developed and changed, and influenced each other. In many instances there has also been strong continuity over the centuries.

Indigenous belief systems

Indigenous belief systems have the oldest roots of any of West Africa's religions. They encompass the worship of gods, ancestors and spirits, and are based on an understanding that the spiritual infuses every aspect of life. Rituals and celebrations such as masquerade are charged with awareness of both the sacred and the secular.

Indigenous religions are particularly strong in oral literature. Words are a powerful force in their own right. Worshippers create and deploy complex oral texts which give each deity or spirit its own praise poems, stories and songs. Believers use incantation, prayer and divination rituals to bridge the divide between secular and spiritual, past and present. Visual symbols, too, have long been used to convey religious meanings. More recently, the praises and poetry of indigenous religions have been written and published in languages such as Yoruba.

Masquerade

1912–13

Public festivals known as masquerades are central to culture, old and new, across West Africa. Figures known as ‘masks’, often believed to embody gods and spirits, parade the streets amid dancing and music. Masquerade has many aspects – celebratory, satirical – but the spiritual dimension is central. These illustrations show masks in different parts of Nigeria and what was then German Kamerun in 1910–12. They were probably painted by Carl Arriens, who accompanied the traveller Leo Frobenius on his expeditions.

Leo Frobenius, Und Afrika sprach: wissenschaftlich erweiterte Ausgabe des Berichts über den Verlauf der dritten Reiseperiode der deutschen Inner-Afrikanischen Forschungs-Expedition. Berlin, 1912–13. 10094.pp.9

Masquerade in Nigeria

Nigeria, 1960s & 1970s

These photographs were taken in the 1960s and '70s by Peggy Harper, a choreographer and dancer who devoted much of her life to the study of Nigerian dance cultures. She was based in Nigeria from 1963 to 1978 at the Universities of Ibadan and of Obafemi Awolowo (formerly University of Ife). She worked with the ethnographic film-maker Frank Speed, with whom she made several documentary films on Nigerian masquerade traditions. These photographs were taken during such filming events.

1. Abakwariga dance, Taraba State Central Nigeria. The Abakwariga are renowned for their elaborate woven textiles, demonstrated on this mask used in burial rituals.

2. Masquerade dancers (possibly Wongam) most likely from the southern escarpments of the Jos plateau, Central Nigeria.

3. Buffalo dancers on the second day of the Gelede festival in Ijio, Western Nigeria. Animal masks in Gelede often express proverbial wisdom in relation to human culture.

4. Gelede, most likely from Ijio, Western Nigeria. Masks in Gelede frequently use satire to comment on local social and political conditions.

Peggy Harper Collection C1074

Ifa divination board

Nigeria, c. 1858

Ifa divination is a Yoruba religious practice with its centre in south-western Nigeria. The word Ifa refers to the mystical figure Ifa or Orunmila, regarded by the Yoruba as the god of wisdom and intellectual development.

Ifa divination relies on a system of symbols. These are derived from throwing sets of palm nuts and drawing on a divination board such as this. The symbols are interpreted by the Ifa priest. The carvings on this Ifa divination board, dating from 1858 or possibly earlier, are thought to accord with Yoruba proverbs or stories.

Horniman Museum and Gardens

Ifa divination cups

1912–13

These drawings show cups used for divination by the Yoruba of Nigeria during Ifa rituals. They were made by Carl Arriens during the expedition of Leo Frobenius to Nigeria between 1910 and 1912. Such cups are used to hold the palm nuts used in Ifa divination. They are elaborately decorated with birds, fish and animals. While the nuts can be kept in a cloth bag, priests who can afford it may have cups like these carved as a special display of gratitude to the god Ifa.

Leo Frobenius, Und Afrika sprach: wissenschaftlich erweiterte Ausgabe des Berichts über den Verlauf der dritten Reiseperiode der deutschen Inner-Afrikanischen Forschungs-Expedition. Berlin, 1912–13. 10094.pp.9

Ifa text

1959

Ifa practitioners in Nigeria make use of a large body of oral literature, full of coded meanings and allusions to Yoruba myth and religion. The importance of this literature in Nigerian culture has inspired scholars and poets to make translations into English. This translation of Ifa poetry was published in Black Orpheus, a ground-breaking literary magazine first published in 1957 in Nigeria. It is illustrated with a silk-screen print by Suzanne Wenger. Orunmila, referred to here, is the Yoruba god of wisdom and divination.

'Yoruba poetry: traditional Yoruba poems', in Black Orpheus: A journal of African and Afro-American literature. Special publication. Ibadan, Nigeria, 1959. X.902/3771

Ifa texts recorded and transcribed

Nigeria, 1965

Robert Armstrong, a British anthropologist based in Nigeria in the 1960s, aimed to document the principal texts of Ifa religious practice. As they only existed in performance, he made audio recordings, then transcribed and translated them with Val Olayemi and other Nigerian colleagues.

The extract you can hear on the soundpoint was recorded in September 1965, with the singer Awotunde Aworinde leading 35 male priests. It is transcribed and translated on the left-hand page of the book in front of you.

Robert Armstrong, Ìyẹrẹ Ifá. The deep chants of Ifá. Ibadan, Nigeria, 1978. X.0951/474

Robert Armstrong Collection. C85/1–3

Gelede mask

Nigeria, before 1932

Making Gelede masks involves a great deal of skill. They carry symbols, sometimes ironic or satirical, which have meaning within the community. The imagery depicts a wide variety of themes and acts as social or spiritual commentary, or documents an aspect of Yoruba experience. The masks frequently feature animals such as the leopard (as this is presumed to be), a symbol of power in many West African communities. This mask probably comes from near Ipokia in western Ogun State.

Horniman Museum and Gardens

Gelede masquerade

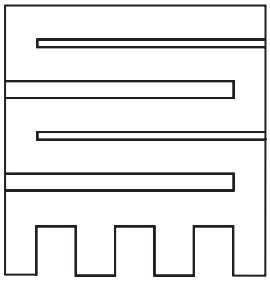
Nigeria, 1960s

The film includes extracts from a documentary on the Gelede masquerade, performed by the Yoruba people of Nigeria. It shows preparations including people consulting the Ifa priest, who helps to communicate with the spirits and decide which songs will be sung during the ritual. The Gelede is performed to pay tribute to the role women play in the organisation and development of Yoruba society. The songs tell of the power of the Great Mother. The film was made by Peggy Harper and Frank Speed in the 1960s.

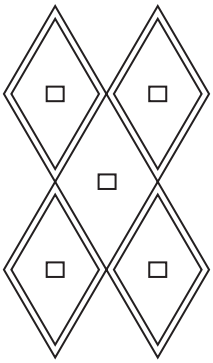
Peggy Harper Collection C1074/41

The pattern on this wall is drawn from symbols including adinkra (from Ghana) and nsibidi (from Nigeria), together with designs from West African fabric and manuscripts. Some of the adinkra symbols recur on the pillars in the exhibition.

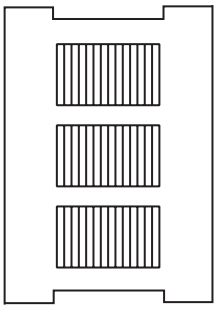
Below we illustrate three of the symbols in this pattern.



'Nkyinkyim'
Zigzag, symbol of dynamism, initiative, versatility and toughness



'Islamic pattern'
Pattern derived from Islamic manuscript



'Owuo atwedee'
The ladder of death, symbolising mortality and fate

Bwa mask

Burkina Faso, before 1970

The great Bwa wooden plank masks are used in masquerade in the southern areas of Burkina Faso and northern Mali. They can be considered signboards displaying a symbolic language that reminds the community of the religious laws, established by the ancestors, that guide them through their lives. The zigzags represent the ancestral path that members of the community should aim to follow. The black and white pattern represents the importance of learning – black signifying the deep knowledge of the elders, and white the lack of knowledge of the youth.

Horniman Museum and Gardens

Bwa masks from Burkina Faso

Burkina Faso, after 2001

This film extract shows Bwa masks being used in performance in Burkina Faso. It is taken from African art as theater: the Bwa masks of the Gnoumou family of the village of Boni, a film by Christopher Roy.

Christopher Roy. 1DVD0010322

Islam

Islam has been influential in West Africa for more than a millennium. Through the Middle Ages and beyond, states and kingdoms have adopted the faith. One such was the Mali empire, where Islam became the court religion in the 13th century. The process of conversion was often peaceful, although sometimes achieved through military conquest.

The Arabic language, both written and spoken, is of central importance to Islam. This is the language in which Muslims continue to pray and worship, and in which the Qur'an is written. As a result, education in the Arabic-language Qur'an, as well as advanced scholarship in Arabic, has spread widely across West Africa. Scholars have developed extensive manuscript libraries in places as far apart as Mauritania and Nigeria. At the same time, believers place a strong emphasis on the spoken word through recitation and performance.

Qur'anic learning in Timbuktu today

Timbuktu, Mali, 2007

These photographs were taken in 2007 in Timbuktu, Mali, where an ancient manuscript culture has survived into the present, despite past and recent conflicts in the area. Qur'an boards, together with the ink and pens, function like 'slates' for today's children to learn the Qur'an in much the same way as their forebears. Women as well as men receive education in Arabic.

Imam Mahmoud Baba Hassèye is shown in the third picture. Members of his family have been scholars and imams for generations.

Photographs by Alexandra Huddleston.
Photo 1294 (6) (12) (11)

Illuminated Qur'an

Late 18th/early 19th century

This Qur'an is typical in style of a wide area centred on the city-states of Hausaland and the Bornu empire (today, northern Nigeria, southern Niger and Chad). This was one of West Africa's many centres of manuscript production. The manuscript is loose-leaf and kept in a leather bag. This allowed individual pages to be read while travelling, or to be lent out and learned by heart. It is divided into four by the large illuminations displayed here. Qur'ans from Bornu were especially sought-after and were exported to North Africa and the Middle East.

OR 16751 ff. 124v-125 & ff.1v, 59r, 121r & 185v

Decorative Qur'an board

Nigeria, 1970–74

Wooden boards were and are used by both girls and boys to learn the Qur'an in Arabic. This boy's writing board is decorative rather than functional.

This kind of board was presented to a student who had learned to recite all the suras (chapters) of the Qur'an. It was made in Zaria, northern Nigeria, and the decoration is in what is known as the Hausa style. The text shows a passage of the Qur'an, written by the scholar Malam Sa'adu.

On loan from the British Museum. Donated by David Heathcote

Qur’an board

Guinea-Bissau, before 1989

Common across West Africa, wooden boards such as this were the equivalent of slates. Students used them to practise writing the Qur’an in Arabic. They then washed the ink off so that they could write new text on the board.

This board – on which is written the first chapter of the Qur’an – shows signs of such washing. Because of the importance attached to the holy word, believers would often drink the water used to wash the board. This was thought to bring spiritual and medicinal benefits. These practices continue today.

On loan from the British Museum

Image on label left

This image shows Samori Touré (c. 1830–1900), the great leader of military resistance to French rule. After 15 years' fighting, he was captured and imprisoned. In this portrait, he is reading an Arabic manuscript.

Edmond Fortier, Senegal, 1899 (photograph), c. 1902 (postcard). Courtesy of Daniela Moreau/ Acervo África/ São Paulo-Brazil

Image on label far left

Children learn the Qur'an, using wooden writing boards.

Photo: Edmond Fortier, Senegal, c. 1910. Courtesy of Daniela Moreau/Acervo África/ São Paulo-Brazil

Ink pots

1. Kano; Nigeria, before 1912

2. Tuareg; Niger, before 1923

3. Fulani; Northern Nigeria, before 1947

West African manuscripts are written in locally produced inks. These three ink pots are from different parts of West Africa and show a variety of forms. Two have pen-holders attached. Scribes used a reed pen with a broad, rounded nib, resulting in the thick strokes that gave much of West Africa's calligraphy its unique appearance. This form of writing, long classified as a type of Maghribi (North African) script, is now recognised as a distinct category of its own, with a wide variety of regional styles such as sūqī and ṣaḥrāwī.

Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford
1. 1913.31.5; 2. 1923.36.105; 3. 1946.6.79

Writing an amulet

1853

Across West Africa, amulets were used for protection and for gaining power. These were texts in Arabic, often verses from the Qur'an, which conferred blessings and called on supernatural powers. P.D. Boilat, a Senegalese Catholic priest, published his Senegalese sketches in 1853, describing a variety of characters and events. This illustration shows a marabout or Muslim religious leader writing an amulet for a widow (identified as such by her lack of jewellery). Boilat tells us that she is asking for a good harvest, good health, and a better husband next time.

P. D. Boilat, Esquisses sénégalaises. Paris, 1853.
10096.h.9

Necklace with amulet

The Gambia, before 1869

Amulets – documents carrying religious writing thought to give power, protection and blessing – were frequently sealed and carried about the body. The power contained in these words did not depend on being read. Often amulets would be folded into a case of leather or basketry, as in this example from The Gambia, and worn as a necklace.

During the era of the slave trade, the amuletic tradition was taken to the Americas. In 1835, enslaved Africans rose in rebellion in Bahia, Brazil. They used amulets in Arabic for strength and protection.

On loan from the British Museum.
Christy Collection

‘Magic squares’

Before 1963

These amulets show ‘magic squares’ and text from the Qur’an. They were collected in West Africa by Christian missionaries from the Methodist Missionary Society (formed in 1932). In sending these items home, they probably hoped to strengthen the case for their mission.

Islamic magic squares (awfāq) are not unlike Sudoku puzzles. The numerical value of any column is the same whatever the direction. Each Arabic numeral represents a letter or word, usually an attribute of God or a prophet. These items are thought to have powerful spiritual properties and are common throughout the Islamic world.

On loan from the British Museum

Lamellaphone with amulet

?Sierra Leone or Guinea, c. 1898

Little is known about this lamellaphone, although it is attributed to the Mandingo people, suggesting that it comes from Sierra Leone or Guinea. While lamellaphones are not common in this area of Africa today, they may have been in the past. The instrument points to the influence of Islam on indigenous cultural practices. An amulet is stuck to it, bearing Arabic words for 'the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful', two of the 99 names of God. Lamellaphones are not usually connected with Islam.

Horniman Museum and Gardens

Pattern-sheet for manuscript illumination

Nigeria, before 1935

This pattern-sheet, drawn on paper, is a sort of sampler of designs for use in manuscript illumination. It illustrates the tremendous artistry that went into the creation of manuscripts. The pattern-sheet was made by Muslims of the Nupe ethnic group in Borno, northern Nigeria. The dominant colours of this sheet – blue and red – are unusual. Green and red is a much more common choice in art of this tradition.

On loan from the British Museum. Donated by H.M. Brice Smith

Illuminated prayer-book

c. 18th/19th century

This is an illuminated manuscript from the same artistic tradition as the adjacent pattern-sheets. It is a loose-leaf book of prayers in Arabic. The main text is written in black or dark brown ink, with important passages in red. To prevent the pages from becoming disordered, the last word of each preceding page (known as a catchword) is written on the bottom corner of the next page.

Manuscripts such as this were written on paper made in Europe and exported to West Africa via Cairo and Tripoli. Scholars often travelled long distances in order to replenish their supplies of paper.

OR 16924, 1v, 31v, 69r, 107r

Pattern-sheet for manuscript illumination

Nigeria, before 1935

This pattern-sheet, drawn on paper, is a sort of sampler of designs for use in manuscript illumination. Manuscripts provided a space in which great creativity and originality could be exercised, as the many and varied patterns illustrate. The lack of symmetry is also typical of West Africa, in contrast to Arabic manuscripts from many other areas.

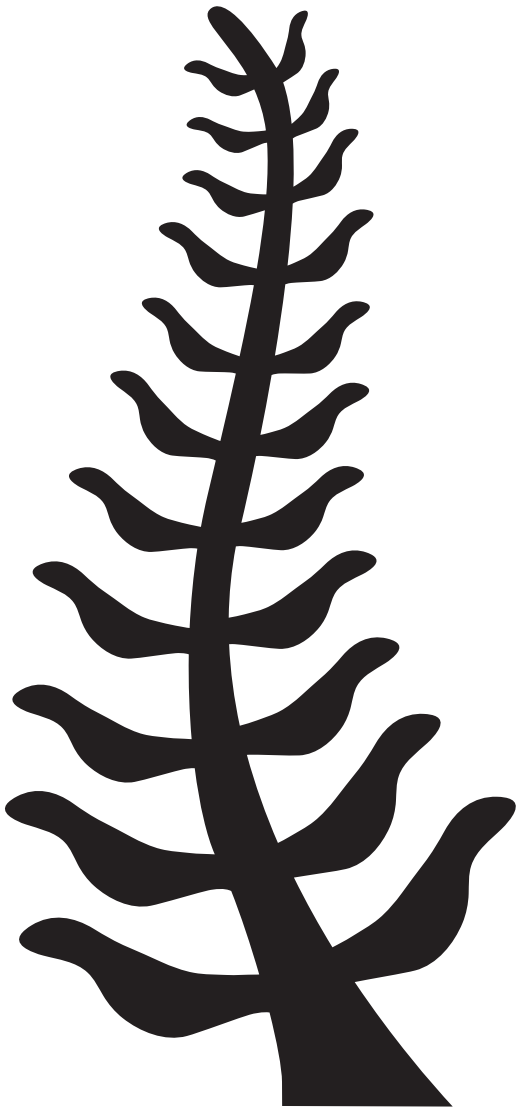
The pattern-sheet was made by Muslims of the Nupe ethnic group in Borno, northern Nigeria. The main colours here, green and red, are common in this artistic tradition.

On loan from the British Museum. Donated by H.M. Brice Smith

West Africa's rich heritage of symbols and scripts are represented on the walls and pillars of this exhibition, as well as on the objects on display.

Nyame nti

By God's grace, symbolising faith in God

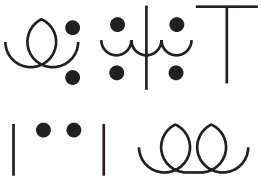


West Africa's rich heritage of symbols and scripts is represented on the walls and pillars of this exhibition, as well as on the objects on display.

The design on this pillar shows two adinkra symbols from Ghana, which are understood to speak of the value of education, quality and knowledge. The smaller characters are from the Tifinagh script, which has been in use in West Africa for at least 1,500 years.

'Adinkrahene'
Chief of the adinkra symbols, meaning leadership, royalty, greatness and charisma

'Nkyinkyim'
Zigzag, symbol of dynamism, initiative, versatility and toughness



Characters in the Vai script

Christianity

Christian mission in West Africa dates back to the 15th century, but it was not until the 19th century that European missionaries came in large numbers. While usually independent of European governments, they often benefited from and supported colonial rule.

The missionaries brought a new sacred text, the Bible, which they expected converts to be able to read and understand for themselves. European missionaries and their African colleagues therefore translated the Bible into a large number of West African languages. In doing so, they created linguistic tools such as grammars and dictionaries. Oral culture – prayer, music and liturgy – is also important in Christian worship.

Missionaries introduced the printing press as a tool to 'spread the word' speedily and effectively. This laid the foundations for West African intellectuals to publish their own views and to take on the colonial powers in print.

‘A sketch of the Foolah language’

1843

Christian missionaries in Africa, from Europe and elsewhere including Jamaica, believed that it was essential for converts to be able to read the Bible in their own languages. They and their African colleagues created dictionaries and grammars for a wide range of West African languages.

This is an early example by the missionary Robert Maxwell MacBrair (1808–74), who worked in The Gambia in about 1836. ‘Fulah’ is used today as an umbrella term for a number of related languages, including Pulaar or Pulaar Fulfulde in Senegal and The Gambia.

Robert Maxwell MacBrair, A sketch of the Foolah language; with a vocabulary, 1843.
Add MS 14327, ff. 23v-24

Grammar of the Wolof language

1858

Father P.D. Boilat was one of the first three Senegalese men to be ordained a Catholic priest. This is his book on the Wolof language (spoken in Senegal). On this page, he explains how the grammatical forms of words change in Wolof depending on the speaker's distance from an object.

Boilat was among many African converts to Christianity who produced tools to understand African languages. In West Africa, Africans were the key players in translating the Bible. They made possible the linguistic work of the missions.

P.D. Boilat, Grammaire de la langue woloffe. Paris, 1858. 12906.ee.17

Printing the Bible

Nigeria, 1907–11

Christian missionaries brought printing presses with them to West Africa in order to disseminate the Bible. These are pages from the notebook of George Townshend Fox (1880–1912), a missionary in northern Nigeria from 1907 until his death from blackwater fever.

His sketch shows a hand-held printing press and its inky consequences for the fingers. His notebook also contains page proofs in Hausa (a major Nigerian language). In the 19th century, larger-scale printing presses had been established elsewhere, for example in Cape Coast and Akropong in Ghana.

Lent by the Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham

The first Yoruba Bible translation

1850

This 1850 edition of the Book of Romans, from the New Testament, is the first book of the Bible translated into Yoruba (a major language of Nigeria).

The translator was Samuel Ajayi Crowther (c. 1807–91), a distinguished linguist, scholar and Anglican bishop who was born in what is now south-western Nigeria. He was the moving force behind the creation of the Yoruba Bible, encouraging other translators as well as working on it himself. Crowther was proficient in other African languages as well as English, Latin and Greek.

The Epistle of Paul to the Romans, translated into Yoruba by the Rev. Samuel Crowther. London, 1850. 3070.c.7

Image on label

The photograph shows colleagues from the Basel Mission working on a translation of the Bible into the Ga language of Ghana. The revised edition of the Ga Bible was published in 1907–09. The second figure from the right is Carl Christian Reindorf (1834–1917), author of the classic History of the Gold Coast and Asante (1895).

c. 1906?. Basel Mission Archives. QD-32.032.0005

The Right Reverend Samuel Ajayi Crowther

1892

On his death in 1891, Crowther's standing was such that he was given this obituary in the Illustrated London news. Based in Nigeria, he had been Bishop on the Niger since 1864 and initiated considerable expansion of the Anglican mission. He had also participated in the unsuccessful British expedition to explore the River Niger in 1841, which was undertaken in the hope that opening up 'legitimate trade' would undermine the continuing slave trade.

Illustrated London news, 1892. PP.7611

Crowther enslaved

1837

Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther endured early traumatic experiences common to many in West Africa. In this letter he describes how, in 1821, he was 'caught [by slave traders] with his mother, two sisters – one infant about 10 months old – and a cousin'. Forcibly taken from his home in the Abeokuta area of south-western Nigeria, Crowther eventually embarked on a slave ship, but was freed by a British patrol and taken to Sierra Leone. He converted to Christianity and was educated both in England and at Fourah Bay College in Sierra Leone.

Samuel Ajayi Crowther to William Jowett, 22 February 1837. Lent by the Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham

The Bible in Arabic

1811

This is a translation of the Bible into Arabic, funded by the British and Foreign Bible Society, which had become aware of the widespread use of Arabic in what is now Senegal. It is among the earliest translations of the Bible for West Africa. The translation was made by J.D. Carlyle and Henry Ford, academics at Cambridge and Oxford Universities respectively.

The Holy Bible, containing the Old and New Testaments, in the Arabic language. Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 1811. 14500.e.1

St John's Gospel in the Hausa language

1899

This is a translation of St John's Gospel into Hausa, a major language spoken in northern Nigeria and southern Niger, and written in Arabic script.

The translator was 'Abd al-Kādir, a teacher in Kano, northern Nigeria. In West Africa, the writing of African languages in Arabic letters is called ajami. The practice has been widely used for other languages including Wolof, and continues to be important today.

Gospel of John in Hausa. London, 1899.
3068.ee.59

A mission teacher with a unique history

Catherine Mulgrave-Zimmerman (c. 1820–91) is seen here (third from the left) with her family. Probably born in Angola, she was enslaved and taken to Jamaica in about 1806, where she became a mission teacher. In 1842 Mulgrave-Zimmerman moved to what is now Ghana, later marrying Johann Zimmerman, the head of the Basel Mission there. The mission authorities reluctantly consented to this controversial 'mixed marriage' partly because they feared losing her services as a teacher.

Mulgrave-Zimmerman's contribution to mission education was significant – and the same can be said of many other women in this field.

Basel Mission Archives. QS-30.002.0237.02

ABC cloth

Ghana, 2000s

This is a modern example of a cloth designed in the late 19th century, which is still popular today. It takes us into the classroom, showing the essential elements of Western education as brought by Christian missionaries: letters, numbers, blackboards and writing instruments.

The cloth was produced by the technique of wax printing. The original design is by ABC Ltd, a Manchester firm. Their designs are now manufactured in Ghana.

On loan from the British Museum

Alphabet stick

Nigeria, before 1947

The 19th-century Christian missions introduced education on Western lines. They taught students, both children and adults, to read and write in the roman script so that they could read the Bible for themselves. This walking stick is actually a writing or teaching aid, showing the letters of the alphabet on one face and the digits 1–10 on another. The other two faces are decorated with geometric carving.

On loan from the British Museum

Christian hymns in West African languages

Music has always been an integral part of religious practice in West Africa. Christian missionaries taught music along Western lines, often suppressing indigenous traditions in favour of hymn singing. By the turn of the 20th century, African Christians were translating Christian hymns into their own languages, and composing their own. These gradually incorporated more local musical elements including melody, harmony and instruments. Today many services are celebrated entirely with indigenous musical practices.

1. 'Jesu olugbala ni mo f'ori funẹ'
   (I give myself to Jesus the Saviour)
   Nigerian hymn in Yoruba with piano, recorded in 1922. Sung by Josiah Jesse Ransome-Kuti. Zonophone 3394. T8357

2. ‘Dola lolo le axanye da’
   (There is a loving angel by my side)
   Ghanaian hymn in Ewe with organ. Sung by Roland C. Nathaniels. Zonophone 3979, recorded in 1927/8. 1CS0063805

3. ‘Eko Akete’
   (In praise of Eko Akete Grammar School
   Nigerian song in Yoruba by the Church of the Lord Choir, Carter Street, Ebute Meta, Lagos. Decca WA 1666, recorded c. 1950. 1CS0043669

4. ‘Awurade Yesu’ (God Jesus)
   Gospel song in Twi by the Baptist Disciple Singers. Ghana from the album The guitar and the gun: A collection of Ghanaian highlife dance music. AFRICAGRAM ADRY 1, 1983. 1LP0154050

5. Extract from a Mass at Mary Queen of Peace Catholic Church, Cape Coast, Ghana. Hymn sung in Dagaare offering thanks to Mary for giving them their Saviour. Recorded by Trevor Wiggins in 1999. Trevor Wiggins Collection. C791/28

Ghanaian Methodist Church skirt and blouse

Ghana, 1961

The cloth of which this costume is made was printed to commemorate the inaugural conference of the Ghanaian Methodist Church in 1961. At this date (four years after the independence of Ghana itself) the church became independent from the British-based Methodist Church.

The cloth illustrates how, although brought by European missionaries, Christianity has become grounded in West Africa. The elephant and palm trees shown on the cloth are common symbols of Ghana.

On loan from the British Museum.
Donated by Miss M. Dawson

CROSSINGS

Crossings

West Africa has always been connected to the wider world. For centuries, traders, pilgrims and travellers journeyed across the Sahara to and from North Africa and beyond. At the coast, European traders initiated the transatlantic slave trade in the 15th century. Over the next 400 years more than 12 million Africans were enslaved and forcibly shipped to the Caribbean and North and South America. Britain, France, Portugal, Spain, Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands, the USA and Brazil were all involved and profited greatly. Some African states also took part in the trade, some opposed it, and others were destroyed by it. Its legacy affected all.

The enslaved Africans, exiled from their homelands, found many ways to resist and rebel, and hold onto aspects of their cultures. Slave uprisings and campaigns by abolitionists put strong pressure on governments. Africans in Haiti led a successful revolution, declaring an independent state in 1804. During the 19th century, both the transatlantic slave trade, and enslavement in the Americas, were abolished in law.

Writing resistance

Up to two million enslaved Africans died during the voyage to the Americas. The majority of those who survived the horrors of this 'Middle Passage' endured backbreaking toil and systematic brutality, and they were often worked to death. Their labour produced the sugar, cotton and other goods on which European and American economies depended.

Out of this dehumanising system, resistance emerged in many forms. A small number of remarkable Africans used the pen to tell their stories. They demanded change and engaged with the literary world, establishing themselves in both Europe and North America. This section looks at how publications by men and women of African heritage influenced British society in particular. The most famous among them was Olaudah Equiano, who bought his own freedom and later campaigned for an end to the slave trade.

Chart of the Atlantic

1779

This chart was published in 1779. In that year, more than 37,000 enslaved Africans were forcibly shipped across the Atlantic to work on plantations in the Caribbean and North and South America.

Many such charts and maps were published in Britain in the 18th century, as navigational tools for ships' crews, or to provide information to the British population about the wider world.

Bowles's New Pocket-Map of the Atlantic or Western Ocean. London, 1779. Maps*977(6)

Thoughts and sentiments on the evil and wicked traffic of slavery

1787

This is the first British publication in which an African writer argues for an end to the slave trade and enslavement – 'that evil, criminal and wicked traffic'. The book's author, Ottobah Cugoano (c. 1757– after 1791), had been captured in Ghana, forced to work on plantations in Grenada, and gained his freedom after being brought to England in 1772.

Cugoano was an active abolitionist. Africans, he wrote, 'are born as free, and are brought up with as great a predilection for their own country, freedom and liberty, as the sons and daughters of fair Britain'.

Ottobah Cugoano, Thoughts and sentiments on the evil and wicked traffic of the slavery and commerce of the human species … London, 1787. T.111(4)

The life of Olaudah Equiano

1789

Olaudah Equiano (c. 1745–97), also known as Gustavus Vassa, is the most famous 18th-century British writer of African heritage. His autobiography tells of his early life in what is now Nigeria, his kidnapping and traumatic transportation to the Americas and his experiences of enslavement and regaining freedom. He was an abolitionist and a businessman.

This is the first of several contemporary editions of his book. In 2007, this volume was displayed in Westminster Abbey in commemoration of the bicentenary of Britain's Abolition of the Slave Trade Act.

Olaudah, Equiano, The interesting narrative of the life of O. Equiano, or G. Vassa, the African ... written by himself. London, 1789. 615.d.8

‘Genius in bondage’

1773

Phillis Wheatley was a literary prodigy who, in 1773, aged about 19, visited London to promote her poetry collection. She was born in Africa, enslaved as an eight-year-old and taken to Boston, Massachusetts. Hosted by the abolitionist Granville Sharp during her London visit, Wheatley secured her freedom soon after returning to Boston. Wheatley’s lyrical, Romantic poetry is typical of the later 18th century.

Her verses are rarely overtly political, but they include this claim to equality, radical for its time: ‘Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain, / May be refin’d, and join th’angelic train’.

Phillis Wheatley, Poems on various subjects, religious and moral. London, 1773. 992.a.34

Cape Coast Castle

1740

From 1664, Cape Coast Castle was among the major European forts on the West African coast, in what is now Ghana. It functioned as the headquarters of the British slave trade in West Africa, and from its dungeons, captives were forced onto slave ships through the 'door of no return'.

This 18th-century diagram was made as part of a survey of forts for the Royal African Company. At this date, up to 1,000 enslaved people were kept underground in a 'slave hole'. In 1777 a new prison was built at ground level.

William Smith, Thirty different drafts of Guinea. London, 1740. 118.d.21

Drawing of the slave ship Brookes

This image was produced to illustrate how captives destined for the Americas were crammed into the hold of the slave ship Brookes. It shows 454 people, the maximum allowed by British law from 1788. In fact, the Brookes carried as many as 609 at one time.

This engraving was published in the 1780s by abolitionists to raise awareness about the horrors of the Middle Passage.

Thomas Clarkson, The history of the rise, progress, and accomplishment of the abolition of the African slave-trade by the British Parliament. London, 1808. G.16302

The ‘new settlement’ at Sierra Leone

c. 1790

The colony of Sierra Leone was founded in 1787 to provide a home to Africans freed from enslavement. The first group of 400 settlers, most of whom died, came from England. In 1792 over 1,000 emigrants from Halifax, Nova Scotia, settled in the new colony. They were Black Loyalists, who attained their freedom by fighting for the British during the American Revolution (1775–83).

This perhaps romanticised illustration shows the Sierra Leone colony. The slave ship in the bay is a sombre reminder of the slave trade.

Cornelis Apostool, A view of the new settlement in the river at Sierra Leone on the coast of Guinea in Africa. London, c. 1790. Maps K.Top.117.100

Letter from Sierra Leone settlers

1793

This is a letter to John Clarkson, former governor of the Sierra Leone colony, signed by Cato Perkins and Isaac Anderson. They were leaders of the Black Loyalists who had settled in Sierra Leone in 1792.

Friction had arisen between the settlers and the Sierra Leone authorities, particularly over broken promises to grant them land. Here, Perkins and Anderson warn Clarkson (who was sympathetic to their cause) that 'things will not go well in the colony unless the people…have justice done them'.

Cato Perkins and Isaac Anderson to John Clarkson. 26.10.1793. Add MS 41263, f.97

Plantation labour

1823

This image of enslaved people cutting sugar cane, published in 1823, is by William Clark (1770–1838), an American traveller and artist. It is taken from a series of ten prints set in Antigua, showing various stages of sugar production.

This scene is set on Delap's plantation and includes a view of a sugar mill in the background. Although romanticised, Clark's work is unusual in showing the labour carried out by enslaved people. In many illustrations of this era, the Caribbean is presented as a rural idyll largely empty of people.

William Clark, Ten views in the island of Antigua. London, 1823. 1786.c.9

Punishment of ‘apprentices’ in Jamaica

1837

This engraving was first published in 1837. It shows prisoners forced to walk a treadmill. On the left a man is being flogged.

Enslavement in the British colonies was abolished in 1834, but it was effectively extended by a period of ‘apprenticeship’ until 1838. This image was used by abolitionists to expose the cruelties of this period. The whole system of enslavement and, later, ‘apprenticeship’ depended on the violence inflicted on those who refused to comply.

James Mursell Phillippo, Jamaica: its past and present state. London, 1843. 1304.h.4

Ayuba Suleiman Diallo, enslaved and freed

1734

Ayuba Suleiman Diallo (c. 1702–?73), known to the British as Job ben Solomon, came from a prominent family of Muslim clerics in the state of Bondu, modern Senegal. In 1731 he travelled to the Atlantic coast to sell two enslaved people and buy writing paper. However, he was himself enslaved and sent to Maryland, North America, to work on a tobacco farm. Diallo's efforts to free himself were assisted by clergyman Thomas Bluett, whose 1734 account includes this pen and ink drawing, a copy of Diallo's portrait by the distinguished painter William Hoare.

Thomas Bluett, Some memoirs of the life of Job, the son of Solomon, the high priest of Boonda in Africa. London, 1734. G.14722

Qur'an scribed by Ayuba Suleiman Diallo

London, 1733

Ayuba Suleiman Diallo (c. 1702–?73), a high-status Muslim cleric freed from enslavement in Maryland, North America, travelled to England in 1733. Here, his gracious personality and learning made him something of a celebrity.

This is one of three Qur'ans Diallo wrote from memory during his stay in London. The right-hand page opens with Qur'an verse 2:79, which criticises anyone tampering with the Qur'an. Next comes the Qur'anic text: 'And who is more unjust than one who invents about Allah a lie'. The first and second chapters of the Qur'an itself follow.

Rami R. El Nimer

A village in West Africa

1738

This drawing of a ‘Pholey’ (Fulbe) village may reflect something of Ayuba Suleiman Diallo’s home state of Bondu, modern Senegal. Diallo returned from England to his home country in 1734. Much had changed: his father had died, one of his wives had remarried and the country was wracked with civil unrest.

Diallo was welcomed by Francis Moore, an officer of the Royal African Company, which assisted Diallo’s return to Africa in the hope that he would support British trading interests against the French. Moore published this drawing in 1738.

Francis Moore, Travels into the inland parts of Africa. London, 1738. 978.h.5

Diallo's letter to his father

?1731–33

'There is no good in the country of the Christians for a Muslim', states Ayuba Suleiman Diallo, in a letter he probably wrote while still enslaved in Maryland. Announcing to 'all the Muslims of Bondu' that he is alive, he appeals to the rulers of the country and his family to ensure that his two wives do not remarry.

However, one of his wives – believing him dead – did remarry. Upon his return, Diallo forgave her, saying: 'I was gone to a land from whence no Pholey [Fulbe] ever yet returned; therefore she is not to be blamed, nor the man neither.'

Ayuba Suleiman Diallo to his father. ?1731–33.
Add MS 20783a

Diallo's letter to Hans Sloane

The Gambia, 1734

Ayuba Suleiman Diallo wrote this letter from James Island (renamed Kurta Kinteh), a British fort on the Gambia River where he disembarked on returning to Africa. In the letter, he sends good wishes to his friend Sir Hans Sloane, founder of the British Museum and its Library (today part of the British Library). In London, Sloane had befriended Diallo, who helped him translate Arabic items in his collection.

Diallo kept in contact with his friends in England until 1744, but thereafter we know no more about his story.

Ayuba Suleiman Diallo to Hans Sloane,
8 December 1734. Add MS 4053 f. 341

1. David Dabydeen puts Sancho into context. Extract from Kaleidoscope, BBC Radio 4, 18 February 1997. H8563

2. Sancho's Minuet 1st in D, performed by the Afro-American Chamber Music Society Orchestra and conducted by Janise White. From the album Minuets and Optional Dances of Ignatius Sancho. Afro-American Chamber Music Society AACMS, 2015. 1CD0345509

3. A reading of Laurence Sterne's 'Poor Negro Girl', which appears as Chapter 6 (Volume 9) of Tristram Shandy. Read by Anton Lesser. From the album Laurence Sterne Tristram Shandy, in the Complete Classics series. Naxos Audiobooks NAX96712, 2009. 1SS0006344

Letter from Ignatius Sancho

1779Ignatius Sancho (c. 1729–80) was born on a slave ship. As a child, he was 'owned' by three sisters in Greenwich, but soon came under the patronage of the Duke of Montagu, who cultivated Sancho's literary talents. Employed as the Duke's butler, Sancho became part of the literary scene, writing music, poetry, plays and letters.

In this letter, written in April 1779, he condemns English politicians. 'I am Sir an Affrican – with two ffs if you please – and proud am I to be a country that knows no Politicians – nor Lawyers…'

Ignatius Sancho to William Stevenson, April 1779. Add MS 89077, f.17

Sancho's letters published

1803

Ignatius Sancho wrote a famous series of letters, beginning in 1774. At this time he left the service of the Montagu family to run a grocer's shop in Westminster with his growing family. The letters were first published in 1782, two years after his death, and later in 1803 by his son, William Sancho, who had turned his father's business into a bookshop and printer's. Their style shows an easy familiarity with the norms of 18th-century letter writing – then a very popular literary form. The volume includes a portrait of Sancho, shown here.

Letters of the late Ignatius Sancho, an African. 5th edition. London, 1803. Add MS 89077

Letter from Elizabeth Sancho

26 May, 1818

Ignatius Sancho and his wife Anne (née Osborne) had seven children, four of whom reached adulthood. This is a letter from their daughter Elizabeth to her father's friend William Stevenson, thanking him for financial support after her mother's death.

Stevenson was a scholar, artist and publisher. The letter shows that Elizabeth Sancho had received an education, and is a very rare example of writing by a Black woman in 18th-century England – at a time when most people were illiterate.

Elizabeth Sancho to William Stevenson,
26 May 1818. Add MS 89077, f.24r

Sancho and Tristram Shandy

1766

In 1766 Ignatius Sancho wrote to the author Lawrence Sterne (1713–68), entreating him to 'give half an hours attention to slavery' in the forthcoming instalment of his popular novel, Tristram Shandy. This is a facsimile of Sterne's reply in his own hand.

Sterne, who was an abolitionist, replied that he was already writing 'a tender tale of the sorrows of a friendless poor negro-girl'. This appeared in volume 9 of Tristram Shandy. The correspondence between the two men contributed to Sancho's fame as a writer.

Laurence Sterne to Ignatius Sancho,
27 July 1766. Facsimile probably made for inclusion in the 1803 edition of the Letters. Add MS 89077, f.37r

Sancho's music

1775

When Ignatius Sancho came under the patronage of the Montagu family between 1743 and 1773, his responsibilities included that of choir and orchestra master. He composed many dance pieces for the family's entertainment at their Boughton House in Northamptonshire and served both John, second Duke of Montagu, and Henry, Duke of Buccleugh. Sancho is recognised as the earliest composer of African descent to publish music in this European tradition.

The publisher of this piece uses the phrase 'composed by an African'; it was thought this would add a sense of the exotic and thus increase sales.

Minuets, cotillons & country dances…composed by an African. London, 1775. a.9.b.(1)

A rebel fighter in Surinam

Enslaved people resisted their captivity by whatever means were open to them. In many cases, they rose in armed rebellion against slave-owners and colonial authorities. This engraving by Francesco Bartolozzi shows a rebel fighter 'armed and on his guard' during a rebellion of the enslaved in the Dutch colony of Surinam in the 1770s.

It was published in the account of John Gabriel Stedman, who fought for the Dutch colonial authorities, and is probably based on an original drawing by the author.

John Gabriel Stedman, Narrative of a five years expedition against the revolted Negroes of Surinam, from the year 1772 to 1777. London, 1796. 145.f.16

The Haitian revolution

Toussaint L'Ouverture (1743–1803) is renowned for leading a successful rebellion of the enslaved in the French colony of St Domingue (now Haiti). 'I was a Slave, I dare to declare it', he writes in this memoir.

Revolutionary France abolished enslavement in 1794, and Toussaint fought with the French to expel the British and Spanish from the island, of which he became governor in 1801. Toussaint wrote this memoir after his imprisonment in 1802 by Napoleon Bonaparte, who brought back the slave system. Toussaint argues here that he is innocent and asks for a trial.

François Dominique Toussaint, L'Ouverture, Mémoires du Général Toussaint L'Ouverture, écrits par lui-même. Paris, 1853. 10880.c.37(5)

Wordsworth writes 'To Toussaint L'Ouverture'

This sonnet, by the English poet William Wordsworth, was first published in February 1803. It celebrates Toussaint L'Ouverture (1743–1803), the governor of Haiti who had successfully rebelled against the French, British and Spanish. Wordsworth, influenced by France's revolutionary politics, celebrates Toussaint's lasting influence, and concludes by praising the power of 'man's unconquerable mind'.

Toussaint died in a French prison in April 1803. But in 1804 Haiti – after years of costly warfare – became the first former colony to successfully resist the slaving powers and gain its independence.

William Wordsworth, Poems, in two volumes. London, 1807. C.58.bb.3

The history of Mary Prince

1831

This modest-looking text was hugely important in the campaign to abolish enslavement. Published in 1831, it is the life story of Mary Prince (1788–1833), who escaped from her 'owners' while on a visit to London. Prince describes her life of extreme hardship in the Caribbean, under a system in which 'mothers could only weep and mourn over their children, they could not save them from cruel masters – from the whip, the rope, and the cow-skin'.

Mary Prince, The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian slave. Related by herself London, 1831. 8157.bbb.30

Emancipation in Jamaica

Enslaved people in British colonies won their freedom on 1 August 1838. This day saw the end of a period of 'apprenticeship' that had effectively prolonged the system of enslavement even after it was made illegal in 1834. Although this illustration is dated 1834, it probably shows the celebrations outside Government House in Jamaica in 1838.

James Phillippo, a Baptist missionary, recorded that the island was in 'a state of joyous excitement', people waving banners declaring 'We are free!'. For most, however, emancipation was the beginning of further struggles against poverty and exploitation.

James Mursell Phillippo, Jamaica: its past and present state. London, 1843. B.42.d.24

Queen Nanny

Jamaica, 1999–present

Across the Caribbean, communities of the escaped – known as Maroons, from the Spanish cimarrón, meaning a wild animal or runaway – established their independence. In Jamaica they fought the British to a standstill and in the 1730s concluded a peace treaty with them.

Queen Nanny was a famous leader of the Jamaican Maroons during the first half of the 18th century. She was declared a National Heroine of Jamaica in 1975 and is depicted on the $500 Jamaican banknote.

$500 Jamaican banknote

The Maroons

These two tracks relate to the Maroons, communities of the escaped who established their independence across the Caribbean during the slave trade era. In the first, Jamaican-born dub poet Jean Binta Breeze performs her poem 'Nanny of the Maroons'. The introduction refers to Nanny – leader of Maroon communities – as being the only heroine in Jamaican oral history.

The second track, 'Shedo', is a folksong of the Maroons. The singers tell the poignant story of Shedo, a Maroon woman who dropped her baby while being chased by British soldiers. The child was eventually reunited with his mother after he was heard singing this song. The drums play in a stylised mode in imitation of human speech.

1. 'Nanny of the Maroons', a tribute in poetry, performed by Jean Binta Breeze at the British Library on 15 August 1999. British Library Events Collection. C927/22

2. ‘Shedo’, a Maroon folksong, from the album Drums of Defiance: Jamaican Maroon Music. The song is considered one of the most powerful reminders for Maroon people today of the trials that faced their ancestors. Smith Sonian Folkways. SFCD 40412. 1CD0065710

Word and music across the Atlantic

Many enslaved people held on to the oral literature, language, writing, art, music, dance and religion of Africa after arriving in the Caribbean and North and South America. They also adopted and adapted cultural practices new to them. By performing and recreating old stories and rituals, people maintained the connection with Africa. At the same time, their new and blended traditions brought new ways of resisting enslavement.

Many of the cultural forms born in the Americas have had lasting worldwide influence, and have found their way to Africa in a 'cultural roundtrip'.

This section focuses on forms of religion, music and carnival that are partly or wholly rooted in Africa. They were developed by musicians, writers and artists in the Americas, and then travelled across the Atlantic, some becoming established in Britain. They acted as vital channels for people to protest, express themselves and connect.

Adopting Christianity

In the Americas, enslaved people continued previous religious practices, despite bans and persecution. They also increasingly adopted Christianity, which, though used by some to justify enslavement, also held for others the promise of freedom and equality.

This lithograph shows the Roman Catholic funeral of a Black man in Bahia, Brazil. It is based on a drawing by J.M. Rugendas, who travelled in Brazil in 1822–25. Rugendas, who opposed enslavement, uses symbols such as the cross and banner to associate the dead man with the sufferings of Christ.

Johann Moritz Rugendas, Voyage pittoresque dans le Brésil. Paris, 1835. 37/649.c.2

Islam across the Atlantic

2005

Muslims enslaved in Africa took their faith with them to the Americas. There, Islam became part of the cultural mix in some areas, and in Bahia, Brazil, inspired uprisings in 1835.

African Islam has continued to influence culture in the Americas. This art book reflects the influence of the Mourides, an important Sufi (mystic) movement in Senegal, founded by Amadou Bamba (1850–1927). Celebration of Sheikh Bamba's life now takes place in both New York and Senegal. Among other things, this text refers to Bamba's detention by the colonial government in 1895.

Peter Bogardus, Touba - New York.
New York, 2005.

Yoruba religion in the Americas

1980

Candomblé, meaning 'dance in honour of the gods', is a religion based on West African indigenous beliefs brought to Brazil by enslaved people. It also incorporates some Catholic elements. The one God, Olodumare, or Olorun, is served by a pantheon of deities called orixás (orishas in Yoruba). It has around two million followers, many of whom live in Bahia, eastern Brazil. Candomblé is an oral tradition, and music and dance are central to the observance. The paintings in this book, by Hector Julio Páride Bernabó (known as Carybé), depict various aspects of Candomblé in Bahia.

Jorge Amado, Iconografia dos deuses africanos no Candomblé da Bahia. São Paulo, 1980.
37/Cup.408.rr.7

Candomblé music

Hector Julio Páride Bernabó, known as Carybé (1911–97), was an artist and historian who collaborated with a number of authors and academics to illustrate aspects of cultural life in Brazil. Here he has illustrated some of the musical instruments used in the observance of Candomblé.

Pierre Vérger, Orixás: 38 desenhos dé Carybé. Bahia, 1955. W20/5527

Candomblé in context

These extracts are from the film Yemanjá: Wisdom from the African Heart of Brazil (2015), narrated by Alice Walker. The film explores the Candomblé spiritual tradition in the Brazilian state of Bahia. The ritual scenes were filmed at the terreiro (meeting house) community of Mãe Filinha-Ogunté, in the city of Cachoeira. The first rite celebrates the Orixá (deity) Omolu, known for healing. The second rite was part of three days of rituals to the Orixá Yemanjá, known as the Goddess of the Sea. The Portuguese voices featured are Candomblé leaders Mãe Stella de Oxóssi and Makota Valdina Pinto.

A Project Zula presentation by Donna Carole Roberts and Donna Read

For further information see http://www.yemanjathefilm.com/

Image on label

Claudia Jones (1915–64) was a Trinidad-born feminist, Black nationalist, human rights campaigner and communist who founded the West Indian gazette in London in 1958. She organised a Caribbean Carnival on 30 January 1959 at St Pancras Town Hall, London.

Claudia Jones Photograph Collection, Photographs and Prints Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

‘Police carnival’

From its inception, there have been struggles over the Notting Hill Carnival in west London. These publications record heavy police intervention in the 1989 carnival. They argue that ‘Carnival is reported, not as a fantastic cultural and artistic achievement, but as a public order problem centred on street crime’ – despite being ‘Europe’s biggest festival of popular culture’.

The term ‘mas’ refers to masquerade or carnival.

‘Police carnival’ 1989: a report on the 1989 Notting Hill Carnival. London, 1989. YC.1991.b.6820

MAS in Notting Hill: documents in the struggle for a representative and democratic carnival 1989/90. London, 1990. YD.2008.a.3781

Calypso music discs

Calypso is a style of African-Caribbean music that orginated in Trinidad and Tobago during the early 20th century. Songs serve as documents of history and social and political critique. Melodisc Records began trading in London in 1949. It issued some of the most famous calypsos of the time and was instrumental in keeping alive the connections between Britain and the Caribbean.

The 'Victory Test Match' discs celebrates the West Indies' first cricket victory over England, in England, in 1950. 'Birth of Ghana' was written in 1957 to mark the country's independence. 'If you're not White, you're Black' by Lord Kitchener shows calypso as a form of social commentary, criticising divisions based on skin colour in the Black community.

'Victory Test Match (England v West Indies, Lords 1950)' by Lord Beginner (Egbert Moore). Melodisc 1133. 1CS0012602

‘Birth of Ghana (6 March 1957)’ by Lord Kitchener (Aldwyn Roberts). Melodisc 1390. 1CS0080541

‘If you’re not White, you’re Black’ by Lord Kitchener Melodisc 1260. 1CS0089966

Notting Hill carnival

After World War II, people arriving in the UK from the Caribbean brought the carnival tradition to cities including London and Leeds. In 1959, Claudia Jones (1915–64), a radical Trinidad-born journalist, organised a Caribbean Carnival at St Pancras Town Hall, London, as an act of cultural resistance to attacks on the Black communities in Notting Hill, west London, and Nottingham.

The Notting Hill Carnival itself evolved from a street festival organised in 1966 by Rhaune Laslett (1919–2002), with the aim of bringing together the local communities of different ethnic backgrounds. The film shown in this installation is from Notting Hill Carnival in 1993 and 1998. The music ranges from calypso, characteristic of Carnival's early days in Britain, to the electronic music and modern sound systems prevalent at Carnival today. It stems from a tradition of celebration combined with protest, wit and parody.

Films:

Mas celebration, BBC 2, 6 September 1993. V2395

Carnival 98, ITV, 31 August 1998. V4542

Track List:

'Rum & Coca Cola' by Calypso Rose, from the album Calypso @Dirty Jim's. World Village WVF 479030, 2012. 1DVD0008881

'London is the place for me' by Lord Kitchener, from the album London is the place for me (Vol 1): Trinidadian calypso in London, 1950–56. Honest Jons, 2002. 1CD0209889

'No carnival in Britain' by the Mighty Terror with Rupert Nurse's Calypso Band. Melodisc 1328, from the album London is the place for me (Vol 1): Trinidadian calypso in London, 1950–56. Honest Jons, 2002. 1CD0209889

‘Calypso music’ by David Rudder, from the album This is Soca with David Rudder and Charlies Roots. LONDON LON DP 43, 1987. 1LP0003534

‘Hello Africa’ by Eddy Grant, from the album Eddy Grant: live at Notting Hill. Ice Records ICELP 22, 1981. 1LP0090352

Renegades Steel Orchestra (Trinidad), recorded by the British Library at the WOMAD festival, Reading, 2007. C203/1271

‘Jab (No pain)’ by Iwer George, from the album Soca Gold 2012. VP Records VPCD 1960, 2012. 1DVD0009145

‘Dub Comfort’ by Jah Shaka, from the album Authentic Dubwise: Jah Shaka Meets Fire House Crew. BEECHWOOD MUSIC BLOWCD04, 2002. 1CD0207819

Carnival costume by Ray Mahabir, 2015

The costume above was commissioned for this exhibition from Ray Mahabir of Sunshine International Arts. It is based on the tradition of Bele or Bel Air, a drum dance and song closely linked to Caribbean history, struggle, freedom and celebration.

Bele was performed in the carnivals of the Caribbean, which began in the late 18th century, most famously in Trinidad. Enslaved workers created their own versions of the balls organised by plantation owners, and infused the festivals with African traditions including masquerade. Carnival also developed from resistance to enslavement and colonialism, and the celebration of emancipation.

The Bele form has origins in the French-speaking Caribbean, and may also be connected with Bele in central Senegal. Women were the most important performers in Bele, choreographing dances and writing (often political) songs. The tri-panelled skirt of the costume blends African, Caribbean and European textiles, reflecting the coming together of cultures. The rich adornment of beads and jewels captures the celebratory atmosphere of the modern carnival.

With thanks to Ray Mahabir, Sunshine International Arts

The akonting, a West African lute

The Gambia, 2015

The akonting is an instrument of the Jola people from The Gambia. It has striking similarities to the banjo in construction and playing style. This akonting was handmade for this exhibition by Daniel Laemouahuma Jatta in May 2015 at the Akonting Centre, Mandinary Village, The Gambia. Although the instrument has a long history, it is part of a living tradition, with instrument-makers still crafting the instruments to the present day.

Back of case

Man playing a banjo, USA, c. 1902.
Photo: V.G. Schreck. Library of Congress
Made by Daniel Laemouahuma Jatta

The origins of the banjo

Musicians and historians have made connections between the various West African lutes and the emergence of the banjo in the southern United States. The early banjo is similar in structure to the akonting, an instrument of the Jola people from The Gambia. Both have an open back, a round sounding-board and a movable bridge and the playing style is similar. Many of the Jola were enslaved on the rice plantations of the American South, bringing knowledge of their instruments with them.

The blues

The Malian musician Ali Farka Toure (1939–2006) was the first West African to adapt northern Mali's repertoires and instrumental techniques onto the guitar. He was inspired by Mali's desert music, in particular the non-standard tunings and finger-picking techniques borrowed from an oblong lute known as the gambari. To this he added echoes of the blues absorbed from albums he listened to in the 1970s and 1980s, resulting in a new category of 'African blues' or 'desert blues'. He found this connection in particular when he first heard recordings of American blues man John Lee Hooker.

1. ‘Aleenum’ (My sister/brother), song with akonting by Daniel Laemouahuma Jatta, July 2015. Daniel Laemouahuma Jatta Collection, no shelfmark.

2. ‘I truly understand, you love another man’, with Shortbuckle Roark on banjo in the clawhammer style, 1928. From the album Going down the valley: vocal and instrumental styles in folk music from the South. New World NW 236. ILP0158296

3. ‘Instrumental’ by Ali Farka Toure on guitar, from the album Niafunké, 1999. World Circuit WCD054. 1CD0162064

4. ‘Guitar blues instrumental’ by John Lee Hooker, from the album. Jack o’Diamonds, 2004. Eagle EAGCD279. 1CD0235217

The gumbe drum

The gumbe drum (also known as goombay, gumbay or gome) began life in the 18th century in Jamaica, amongst communities of Maroons (escaped captives). Original West African drums were often banned as they were known to be able to 'talk' – slave owners were concerned they would be able to incite uprisings – so these large frame drums with four legs became an alternative.

Gumbe drums were taken by Maroons to Nova Scotia in 1796, then 'returned' to Africa in 1800, to the recently established Sierra Leone. Once on African soil, the Maroons introduced their music to the indigenous populations, and it soon became popular throughout the region.

Reggae

Reggae music is perhaps the best-known genre that has made what has been called the 'roundtrip' of African music. Reggae, originating as a musical style in Jamaica, has gone back and forth across the Atlantic, including to the United Kingdom, and has also zig-zagged around the African continent. These musical journeys are ongoing as new popular styles make their impact on both sides of the water. Reggae has a history of carrying strong political messages in its poetry.

1. ‘Paraiso di gumbe’ by Manecas Costa of Equatorial Guinea, on the album Paraiso di gumbe, 2003. Wrasse Records Wrasse 106. 1CD0225943

2. ‘Falla me’, Maroon song featuring the gumbe drum, on the album Drums of Defiance: Maroon music from the earliest free Black communities of Jamaica, 1992. Smithsonian Folkways SFCD 40412. 1CD0065710

3. ‘Get up, Stand up’ by Bob Marley and the Wailers, on the album Burnin’, 1973, reissued 2001. The song is a call to action against oppression. Tuff Gong 5488942. 1CD0196899

4. ‘Bloodshed in Africa’ by Alpha Blondy and the Wailers on the album Jerusalem, 2004. This song from the reggae star of Cote d’Ivoire is his call to politicians to stop the bloodshed in Africa. Frontline CDFL 2034. 1CD0227179

Saharan crossings

Trade across the Sahara flourished from at least the 8th century. Merchants, travellers and pilgrims crossed the desert on camel-back along well-established routes. They took goods, learning and religion, linking the region with the Islamic world and beyond. West Africa was a major exporter of gold. In the opposite direction, traders brought commodities including salt and paper.

West Africa was also linked to regions north and east by a trade in enslaved people. This was never on the scale of the transatlantic slave trade, but it began earlier and lasted longer. In the late 18th century, around 7,000 people per year were forcibly taken from West Africa along these routes.

Map of West Africa

1679

Today, the African continent is often polarised culturally, geopolitically and in academic study between the regions to the north and south of the Sahara. But since time immemorial the Sahara has been a site of exchange for both goods and culture.

This map was made by the French royal geographer Nicolas Sanson (1600–67). It shows the Sahara Desert and the regions to the north and south, and includes important stopping places on the trans-Saharan route such as Agades and Timbuktu. It reflects Europeans' less than perfect knowledge of Africa's geography at the time.

Nicolas Sanson, L'Afrique, ou Libyie Intérieure, où sont le Saara ou desert, le pays des Nigres, et la Guinée. Paris, 1679. Maps K.Top.117.87

Enslaved West African women in Tripoli

This photograph shows two women, described as 'slaves', on their arrival at Tripoli (Libya) after crossing the Sahara. The woman on the right is from Timbuktu, while the other is from somewhere to its east. West Africans enslaved in the course of local conflicts were forced by slave traders to journey on foot across the desert to the markets of the North African coast, where they were often sold on to the Middle East.

Pierre Trémaux, Voyages au Soudan oriental et dans l'Afrique septentrionale, exécutés de 1847 à 1854. Paris, 1852–58. X 893

Scholarship across the Sahara

18th/19th century

This is a copy of a major work on Arabic grammar by the Moroccan scholar Ibn Ājūrrūm al-Ṣanhājī (1273–1323), who put the principles of Arabic grammar into verse form.

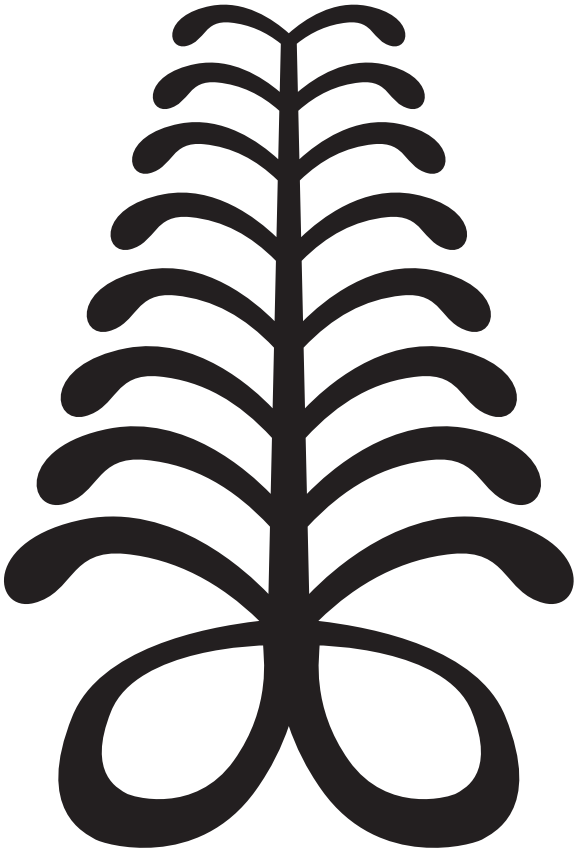
This copy was made by scribes in West Africa. The five lines of large text on each page are the original work. The copious and erudite notation in smaller text was no doubt added by local scholars for teaching purposes. This manuscript is testament to the transfer of knowledge and scholarship across the Sahara.

OR 6953, ff. 268v–269

West Africa's rich heritage of symbols and scripts are represented on the walls and pillars of this exhibition, as well as on the objects on display. The large graphic here shows an adinkra symbol from Ghana.

Aya

Fern, symbolising endurance, resourcefulness and defiance



SPEAKING OUT

Speaking Out

This section shows West African intellectuals, political figures, commentators, musicians and ordinary people speaking out in public from the colonial era to today. In this period, as before, words, symbols and music have been a powerful force in shaping politics and history, and in commenting on everyday life.

Colonial rule came to West Africa over several centuries. From the beginning of the slave trade in the 15th century, European powers gradually encroached on African territory. The Berlin Conference of 1884–5 cemented colonial rule over Africa. By 1922, Britain had possession of what is now Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, The Gambia and part of Cameroon. Portugal held Cape Verde and Guinea Bissau. France occupied the remaining territories, including Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali and Senegal. The only country to retain its independence was Liberia.

Protest and politics

On the West African coast, an educated African elite started to produce printed books and newspapers, in European and African languages, around the middle of the 19th century. They wrote on a variety of subjects – from politics to medicine, history and geography – with varying degrees of radicalism.

In the 20th century, radical thinkers such as J.E. Casely-Hayford challenged the racist norms of colonialism. By mid-century, inspired and charismatic nationalist leaders had come to prominence. They called for independence, and many embraced both Marxism and the Pan-Africanist call for unity among African nations. Writing was an essential tool for these politicians. Some owned or edited newspapers.

Since independence, writers, musicians and other cultural commentators have responded to times often troubled by civil war, dictatorship, poverty and corruption. They have used fiction, poetry and music to reflect on these themes as well as the damage wrought by colonialism and the hopes brought by independence.

Colonial conquest

1874

This is an artist's imagining of the 1873–74 British military expedition against the previously unconquered Asante (Ghana). Under an agreement reached in Berlin in 1884–85, the European powers divided most of Africa amongst themselves. The Berlin Conference was the beginning of the colonial era proper in West Africa, and the colonial powers subsequently pursued wars of conquest to enforce this agreement on the ground. Before 1884, Europeans were already taking over African land. These developments were eagerly followed in Europe and covered in publications such as the Illustrated London news, shown here.

Illustrated London news, 4 April 1874. PP.7611

Seal of the colony of The Gambia

By 1885, Britain was the colonial power for The Gambia, the Gold Coast (now Ghana), Nigeria and Sierra Leone. After World War I, it also gained a mandate to rule part of the former German colonies of Cameroon and Togoland.

This is a proof impression of Queen Victoria's official seal of the colony of Gambia. It shows the British coat of arms, an elephant and a palm tree to indicate The Gambia, and a man reading, perhaps to illustrate British ambitions to 'enlighten' a territory they thought was 'in darkness'.

Seal XCVIII.32

Clerk writing

Nigeria, before 1947

Bureaucracy was essential to the smooth running of European colonies. Colonial authorities in West Africa recruited local people to carry out administrative and clerical tasks. This wooden carving from Nigeria probably represents a Hausa clerk, from northern Nigeria, employed in the colonial administration. It comes from the region of Ekiti, and was made by a Yoruba artist. West Africans acquired Western education in the 19th and 20th centuries, and increasingly used it to challenge colonial rule.

On loan from the British Museum

Book-selling in Sierra Leone

1885

From the 1880s, T.J. Sawyerr ran the only African-owned bookshop in British West Africa. Based in Water Street, Freetown, Sawyerr provided a mail-order service throughout the region. The popularity of his business, which lasted into the 1940s, attests to the reach of education in English – at first limited to an African elite, but increasingly spreading more widely, as African writers and thinkers enthusiastically took up the printed word. Newspapers were especially important, and African journalists and commentators published in English and other languages such as Yoruba.

Sawyerr's bookselling, printing, and stationery trade circular, and general advertising medium. Freetown, Sierra Leone, 1885. LOU.CMISC20

Painting by Twins Seven Seven

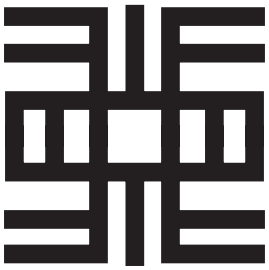
Nigeria, 1968

This painting suggests the power of books, reading, learning and teaching. The artist is Prince Twins Seven Seven (1944–2001), a Nigerian painter, sculptor, dancer and musician, and a prominent member of the Oshogbo school of art. The work was commissioned by the publishing company Longman Nigeria. The artist's given name was Taiwo Olaniyi Osuntoki Oyewale, but he changed it to indicate that he was the only survivor of seven sets of twins. He often painted subjects drawn from Yoruba folklore, and has been described as the 'the great modernist of the Yoruba tradition'.

On loan from Pearson

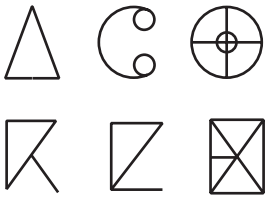
West Africa's rich heritage of symbols and scripts is represented on the walls and pillars of this exhibition, as well as on the objects on display.

The design on this pillar shows two adinkra symbols from Ghana, which are understood to speak of the value of education, quality and knowledge. The smaller characters are from the Tifinagh script, which has been in use in West Africa for at least 1,500 years.



'Nea onnim no sua a, ohu'
The person who does not know can know from learning, symbol of the quest for knowledge and life-long education

'Hwemudua'
Measuring stick, symbol of quality control and excellence



Characters in the Tifinagh script

Image on label

This is a watercolour drawing of the Liberian Senate in session in about 1856, by Robert K. Griffin (born ?1836).

Courtesy of the Library of Congress

Edward Wilmot Blyden, 'father of Pan-Africanism'

From the mid-19th century, a Western-educated intellectual elite developed in West Africa. Among its most historically significant members was Edward Wilmot Blyden (1832–1912).

Blyden was born in the Caribbean and moved to Liberia in 1850 after a US theological college barred him on racial grounds. In Liberia, he became a scholar, politician and newspaper editor. Blyden was a pioneer of Pan-Africanist ideas – that people of African descent share a common history and destiny. In this volume he argues for the positive effects of Islam in West Africa.

Edward Wilmot Blyden, Christianity, Islam and the Negro race. London, 1888. 8156.df.9

A voice from bleeding Africa

1856

This pamphlet, published in Liberia in 1856, is Edward Blyden's rallying cry against enslavement and for the rights of Africans. Blyden was very radical for his time in arguing that people of different races were equal. Less resonant today is his belief in a rigid concept of race and racial difference. In this booklet he wrote that the name 'Africa!...assures [the exile] that, though an outcast among strangers [who are] haughty, insulting and cruel, he has a country of his own, where his own race…exercise uncontrolled sway.'

Edward Wilmot Blyden, A voice from bleeding Africa, on behalf of her exiled children. Liberia, 1856. 8156.b.12

Constitution of Liberia

1848

Edward Blyden was a consistent supporter of the Republic of Liberia and was its Secretary of State from 1864 to 1866. Like Sierra Leone (to which Blyden moved in 1871), Liberia was founded to provide land for Black people emigrating across the Atlantic, in this case from North America. Settlers began arriving in 1820 and the colony of Liberia was formally established in 1838, going on to declare its independence in 1847.

This copy of Liberia's constitution and declaration of independence was published the following year.

S. Greenleaf, The Independent Republic of Liberia; its constitution and declaration of independence… Philadelphia, 1848. 1389.k.15

‘Mista Courifer’

1961

Adelaide Casely-Hayford (1868–1960) was the earliest major female activist and writer to emerge in the male-dominated intellectual elite of British West Africa. Her photograph is shown in the back of the case. Educated in England, she spent most of her life in Sierra Leone. Casely-Hayford wrote a number of short stories. ‘Mista Courifer’ is a light-hearted satire of a father’s unsuccessful attempts to anglicise his son, who ultimately rejects ‘Liverpool suits’ for the ‘pantaloons and the bright loose overjacket of a Wolof from Gambia’. The theme reflects the author’s own adoption of a form of African dress.

Langston Hughes (ed.), An African treasury: articles, essays, stories, poems by Black Africans. London, 1961. W9/6689.

Image courtesy of the Hunter Family

A pioneer in education

1925

This double-page spread, published in 1925, shows the girls' school founded by Adelaide Casely-Hayford in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Casely-Hayford was ahead of her time in promoting education for girls. An active fundraiser on behalf of the school, she went on a speaking tour of the USA in the 1920s for this purpose. Her daughter, Gladys May Casely-Hayford (1904–50), a talented modernist poet, also taught at the school. Her husband, from whom she became estranged, was J.E. Casely-Hayford (1866–1930), author of the ground-breaking novel Ethiopia unbound (1911).

West Africa. A weekly newspaper. London, 1925.
LOU.LON133

Mabel Dove, Ghana's first female Member of Parliament

1954

Mabel Dove Danquah was the only African woman to work as a journalist in Ghana in the 1930s. She wrote mainly for The Times of West Africa. In 1954, she was elected to the Legislative Assembly of Ghana, the first African woman to assume such a role. She joined prime minister Kwame Nkrumah's Convention People's Party, and also edited the Accra evening news at Nkrumah's invitation.

West African review. Liverpool, 1954. PP.1653.fa

The adventures of the black girl

In 1934, the journalist Mabel Dove published a new work: The adventures of the black girl in her search for Mr Shaw. This was a parody of George Bernard Shaw's 1932 satire of colonialism and missionary work, The adventures of the black girl in her search for God. In her own version, Dove admires Shaw's work but mocks his 'black girl' as 'a very old type long gone out of date'. Her 'modern black girl' offers biting criticism of church and colonialism: 'In Africa, men are thinking, and women are doing likewise… We are not going to do things blindly as we did before.'

Shown here is the first edition of Shaw's book together with the wood engraving block of the title page.

George Bernard Shaw, The adventures of the black girl in her search for God; designed and engraved by John Farleigh. London, 1932.
Add MS 74222

Wood engraving block for the title page of The adventures of the black girl in her search for God.
Add MS 71453 (8i)

Cloth celebrating Kwame Nkrumah

Ghana, 1957

In 1957, Ghana became the first colony in West Africa to achieve independence in the 20th century. Kwame Nkrumah was its first president. Across the region, anti-colonial movements had gained strength and become increasingly militant during previous decades. By 1965 all of West Africa, except the Portuguese colonies, was independent.

This printed cloth was produced to celebrate Ghana's independence. As well as a portrait of Nkrumah wearing traditional kente cloth – used to denote high status – it carries Ghana's national motto of 'Freedom and Justice'.

Collet

Autobiography of Nkrumah

1959

Born in the Gold Coast (now Ghana), Kwame Nkrumah (1909–72) returned there from studies in Britain to lead the anti-colonial movement. Imprisoned in 1948 by the British in reprisal for major protests in the country, he subsequently founded the Convention People's Party, calling for 'self-government now'. He became prime minister in 1952 and led Ghana to independence in 1957. He went on to become its first president.

He signed this copy of his autobiography for Mrs Sarah H. Busby, whose husband Dr George Busby was a lifelong friend of Nkrumah's mentor, George Padmore.

Kwame Nkrumah, The autobiography of Kwame Nkrumah. Edinburgh, 1959. On loan from Margaret Busby

How Dr Nkrumah conquered colonialism

Kwame Nkrumah authored numerous publications, from newspaper articles to scholarly books. The first pamphlet shown here attests to his wide influence. It shows 'an inspired reader' of Nkrumah's 'powerful booklet', Towards colonial freedom, also shown here.

In Towards colonial freedom Nkrumah makes a detailed argument against imperialism, calling for 'political freedom, i.e. complete and absolute independence from the control of any foreign government'. He was also a Pan-Africanist, with connections to radical thinkers around the world, and one of the organisers of the 5th Pan-African Congress in London in 1945.

Jno E. Edu, How Dr. Nkrumah conquered colonialism. Accra, 1954. 08157.k.18

Kwame Nkrumah, Towards colonial freedom: Africa in the struggle against world imperialism. Accra [1957], first published 1945. X.708/18351

Forward ever

1954

This publication is of one of Nkrumah's speeches, made in the run-up to independence in Ghana (1957). At this time he faced particular opposition from the National Liberation Movement. In the speech, he urges unity in the quest for freedom.

The illustration shows his party, the Convention People's Party, getting a goal past their opponents. After independence, Nkrumah banned some opposition parties and jailed some of their leaders. His overall achievements, however, mean that he is remembered as one of Africa's greatest 20th-century presidents.

Kwame Nkrumah, Forward ever speech delivered ... on 24th October 1954. Accra, 1954. 8158.bb.1

Kwame Nkrumah's speech

Ghana, 6 March 1957

This is a recording of Kwame Nkrumah's speech on Ghana's independence day, 6 March 1957. It was made before a crowd of tens of thousands in front of the Parliament buildings in Accra.

The voice of Kwame Nkrumah of Africa. Director/ producer Johnny Botchway. ELEGANCE BB 1011, 1974. 1LP 0155946

Political pamphlets

Popular pamphlets such as those shown here became an important means of publishing in West Africa, reaching increasing numbers as Western education spread. Onitsha, south-eastern Nigeria, was a particularly significant publishing centre in the 1950s and 1960s.

Often writing in local forms of English, the authors of these pamphlets aimed to inform, educate and entertain. Their work often carried didactic messages, political or otherwise, and reflected the politics of newly independent African countries – as in the story of Lumumba, the assassinated first prime minister of the Congo, shown here.

Onwudiwe, A dictionary of current affairs and many things worth knowing. Onitsha, 1964.
X.0909/588(59)

Charles Uzoma Uwanaka, Good citizens, good country. A national programme to end bribery and corruption, highway robbery, etc. Lagos, 1964. X.0909/588(282)

Raphael I. M. Obioha, Sylvanus Olympio – the assassinated president of Togo Republic. A dramatic story of the man who laughed at death. Onitsha, 1964. X.0909/588(54)

Thomas Orlando Iguh, The last days of Lumumba, the late lion of the Congo: a drama. Onitsha, c. 1975. X.0909/588(220)

Adegoke Ajiboye, Behind the 'iron curtain'. Yaba, 1967. X.0909/588(38)

Wilfred Izeji Onwuka, The life story and death of John Kennedy. Onitsha, 1964?. X.0909/588(175)

Respect for human dignity

1966

Azikiwe Nnamdi (1904–96), known as Zik, was the first president of Nigeria (1963–66). He was an intellectual and journalist, using his newspapers, including the West African pilot in Lagos, to argue against colonialism and create a vision of a free Nigeria.

This pamphlet publishes the speech he gave on his inauguration as Governor-General of Nigeria in 1960. 'Nigerians believe passionately in the fundamental human rights', he wrote. 'We regard all races of the human family as equal…we shall never admit that we are an inferior race…'.

Nnamdi Azikiwe, Respect for human dignity. Onitsha, 1966. X.0909/588(315)

Cloth with portrait of President Senghor

Senegal, 1975

This printed cloth marks 15 years of Senegal's independence in 1975. It shows Léopold Sédar Senghor (1906–2001), the Senegalese intellectual, poet, politician and president (1960–80).

Senghor was born in Senegal and received his university education in France, where he became a professor of African languages and civilisation. In 1946 he was made one of Senegal's deputies in the French National Assembly. He was elected president at independence in 1960. In office, Senghor advocated a democratic form of African socialism.

Collet

Senghor as poet

1969

Léopold Senghor, the first president of Senegal, was a distinguished poet. Together with other writers from Africa and the Caribbean whom he met in Paris in the 1930s, he founded the hugely influential Negritude movement. This aimed, through the arts, to reclaim Black identity, history and culture, oppose colonialism and assert racial equality.

This seminal anthology, edited by Senghor and published in 1969, brings together poets from the Caribbean and Africa including Madagascar. The introduction is by the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre.

Léopold Sédar Senghor, Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française. Paris, 1969. X.909/19986

Amílcar Cabral, anti-colonial leader in Portuguese colonies

In West Africa, only Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde were under Portuguese colonial rule. They gained independence in 1974 and 1975 respectively, after years of conflict and guerrilla warfare. The opposition was led by Amílcar Cabral (1924–73), a political activist, military leader and intellectual who in 1956 formed the African Movement for the Independence of Guinea [-Bissau] and Cape Verde.

Cabral, who was assassinated in January 1973, was a radical Marxist thinker who argued for the importance of African culture in resisting colonialism. This is a collection of his speeches and articles.

Amílcar Cabral, Textos políticos. Porto, 1974.
X.700/17009

Ahmed Touré, first president of Guinea

1977?

Ahmed Sékou Touré (1922–84) was a radical thinker and trades unionist who organised the first successful strike in French West Africa. He was elected to the French National Assembly in 1951 (although at first barred from taking his seat). At independence in 1958 – two years before the rest of French West Africa – he became Guinea's first president.

This publication discusses development strategy, anti-imperialism and a 'United States of Africa', which he advocated. He backed a union of Ghana and Guinea, although this was not implemented. Touré's government became increasingly dictatorial from 1971.

Ahmed Sékou Touré, The United States of Africa. Conakry, Guinea, 1977? YD.2011.a.254

Syliphone records

Music publishing began to flourish in newly independent West Africa. Guinea's first president, Sékou Touré, established Syliphone as the first state-funded African record label. He intended to advance his cultural policy of authenticité, an ideological and political movement intended to revitalise a sense of nationhood. The programme established a network of regional performance groups to tour throughout Africa and abroad to promote West African culture. Artists were encouraged to draw on local themes and styles in new work and Syliphone recorded and disseminated their work locally and internationally. The label closed down after Touré's death in 1984.

Bembeya Jazz National. Authenticité 73. Parade Africaine. Bolibana.
SLP 39. 1LP0159782

Bembeya Jazz National. Regard sur le passé. SLP 64. 1LP0159790

Les Amazones de Guinée. Au cœur de Paris. Spécial show au Théâtre de la Mutualité, Paris, 6 avril 1983. SLP 76. 1LP0159793

Bembeya Jazz

Bembeya Jazz was one of the first regional bands to become a national exponent of the modernisation of indigenous African music. Originally recorded in the 1960s, this song modernises a griot song reserved for warriors - Duga - with the inclusion of a brass section and electric guitars playing the traditional balafon xylophone parts. The lyrics were also changed, now praising the army as defenders of the population.

'Armée Guinéenne' by Bembeya Jazz International, from the album The Syliphone Years: hits and rare recordings, Volume 1. STERNS AFRICA STCD 302122. 2004. 1CD0237990

The Nigerian Civil War

The Nigerian Civil War or Biafran War (1967–70) blighted the early years of Nigeria's independence and resulted in over a million deaths, the majority among civilians. The conflict began when, after a series of coups and massacres, the south-eastern region declared itself the Republic of Biafra. By 1970 Nigeria had won the ensuing bloody civil war. Biafra was home to most Igbo, one of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria; most members of the other two major groups, the Yoruba and Hausa, lived in the Nigerian Federation.

Christopher Okigbo

1964

Christopher Okigbo (1932–67) was a modernist poet and one of the foremost writers of early independent Nigeria. A passionate supporter of Biafran independence, he joined the army and was killed in action near Nsukka in one of the first battles of the Nigerian Civil War (Biafran War).

This collection of poems was published in 1964, before the war broke out. It is a publication of the Mbari Club, an association of writers, artists and musicians founded in Ibadan, Nigeria, in 1961.

Christopher Okigbo, Limits. Ibadan, 1964.
X.908/18811

Aspects of the Nigerian Civil War

These two pamphlets reflect different aspects of the conflict. The Ahiara Declaration was made by Biafra's National Guidance Committee after two years of war. It includes a call by the Biafran leader General Odumeguwu Ojukwu (1933–2011) to the 'proud and courageous Biafrans' to stand firm.

Last days of Biafra is a play, in the Nigerian pamphlet tradition, describing the conflict and Nigeria's determination not to allow secession. This image illustrates the mass starvation that resulted from the blockade of Biafra.

Emeka Ojukwu, The Ahiara declaration: the principles of the Biafran revolution. Geneva, 1969. C.S.C.742/3

Thomas Orlando Iguh, Last days of Biafra. Onitsha, 1973. X.0909/588(290)

Forty-eight guns for the general

1976

Eddie Iroh sets this dramatic story of war and double-dealing in the Biafran War. The story centres around 48 foreign mercenaries, ostensibly flown in to assist the Biafrans but, in fact, loyal to no one but themselves.

Iroh was a journalist and publisher. Here, he draws on his experience on the War Reports Desk in the Biafran War Information Bureau, during which he witnessed some of the battles in person. This is one of many works of fiction through which writers attempted to understand the war after it was over.

Eddie Iroh, Forty-eight guns for the general. London, 1976. 012212.e.1/189

Wives at war

1980

Flora Nwapa (1931–93) was a pioneer of African writing and publishing. Her novel Efuru (1966) was the first major West African novel in English by a woman. After the Nigerian Civil War she became commissioner for health and social welfare in Nigeria's East Central State.

This collection of short stories, published by Nwapa through her own publishing house, explores the experience of the Nigerian Civil War for women in, as Nwapa put it, 'hell on earth'. As the title of Nwapa's other book on the war succinctly put it: Never again.

Flora Nwapa, Wives at war. Enugu, 1980.
YA.1988.a.411

Destination Biafra

1982

Buchi Emecheta (born 1944) explores women's experience of the Biafran War in this novel. Her protagonist is Debbie Ogedembge, who attempts to push forward peace negotiations between the Nigerian Federation and Biafra, in the context of murky politics and Britain's continuing influence on Nigeria.

The novel deals with women's potential for active combat, and their experience of rape during the war. Emecheta is also concerned with individuals killed and communities massacred when caught between opposing forces. Many of her other novels also focus on women's experiences, both in West Africa and the UK.

Buchi Emecheta, Destination Biafra. London, 1982. On loan from Margaret Busby

Half of a yellow sun

2007

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's second novel is set in the Nigerian Civil War, mainly in Biafra. It gives a telling and moving insight into the progression of events from the initial euphoria of independence to the trauma and starvation that followed. The 'half of a yellow sun' of the title denotes the red, black and green Biafran flag, with a semi-circular sun rising in the centre.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Half of a yellow sun. London, 2007.

Civil war soliloquies

1977

In this collection of poems, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Nigeria's first president, reflects on his hopes and losses and the experience of war. It includes a long work, 'Refugees', about Azikiwe's flight from Nsukka, south-eastern Nigeria, as troops advanced on 9 July 1967. Azikiwe here expresses hope for the reinvigoration of Nigerian national identity rather than support for Biafran independence.

Nnamdi Azikiwe, Civil War soliloquies: more collection of poems. Nsukka, 1977. X.950/30954

Stories of war and peace

1971

These stories, Emmanuel Obiechina writes in the preface, come 'out of an experience red-hot with the memories and physical wounds of a most excruciating civil war'. The anthology ranges over themes in the Nigerian Civil War, including criticism of politicians and the political system, the agony of war, conscription, and the experience of defeat. The editors include Chinua Achebe, the author of Things fall apart (1958), whose pro-Biafran There was a country was published in 2012.

The insider: stories of war and peace from Nigeria. Enugu, 1971. X.909/26920

Sozaboy

Ken Saro-Wiwa (1941–95) was a writer who believed literature should expose injustice and advance political causes. Sozaboy deals with the fictional Dukana people during the Nigerian Civil War. Biafran independence created tensions between the majority Igbo group and the many smaller ethnic groups, including Saro-Wiwa's own Ogoni people, in Biafra.

Sozaboy is written in experimental English, which Saro-Wiwa described as a 'mixture of Nigerian pidgin English, broken English and…good… English'. This edition was published by Saro-Wiwa himself. The cover shows displaced elements of the Nigerian flag as a metaphor for the chaos of civil war.

Ken Saro-Wiwa, Sozaboy, a novel in rotten English. Port Harcourt, Nigeria, 1985.
On loan from Ken Saro-Wiwa Jr and Ken Saro-Wiwa Foundation

Ken Saro-Wiwa writes from prison

July, 1994

The execution by the Nigerian government of the writer Ken Saro-Wiwa in November 1995 shocked the world. Saro-Wiwa, accused of murder, had been a high profile campaigner for the rights of the Ogoni people and against the devastating environmental effects of oil extraction in the Niger Delta region.

In this letter, written from prison, he faces the possibility of death: 'I'm at peace with myself, my conscience and my God…and I believe that the Ogoni and other oppressed minorities will secure justice in time as a result of the arguments I've made.'

Ken Saro-Wiwa to Ken Saro-Wiwa Jr, 4 July 1994. On loan from Ken Saro-Wiwa Jr and Ken Saro-Wiwa Foundation

Image on label

Ken Saro-Wiwa making a speech.

He was the founder in 1990 of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP).

Ken Saro-Wiwa Jr and Ken Saro-Wiwa Foundation

Fela Kuti's albums

This is a selection of LPs of Fela Kuti's music. Most of the artwork for Fela's original LPs was created by the Nigerian artist and designer Lemi Ghariokwu. Lemi expressed his reaction to the songs and their politics in his album design and paintings, adding a new dimension. In recent years the United States-based record label Knitting Factory Records has re-released Fela's albums with the original artwork.

1LP0234372, 1LP0238525, 1LP0232764, 1LP0236389, 1LP0236385, 1LP0238535, 1LP0238524, 1LP0236386

Fela Kuti

Fela Anikulapo Kuti (1935–97) is one of Africa's best-known and most influential musicians. Flamboyant, maverick and heavily influenced by the Black Power movement, he was radical in his music and politics. He invented a new musical style, Afrobeat, and sang in Pidgin to communicate widely his revolutionary ideas.

Fela was beaten and imprisoned for his fearless opposition to Nigeria's military governments of the 1970s and 1980s. The writer Wole Soyinka, his cousin, called him the 'scourge of corrupt power, mimic culture and militarism'. He was also a Pan-Africanist, a polygamist and a practitioner of Yoruba religion.

These extracts are from the 2014 film Finding Fela and include the song 'V.I.P.', by which Fela meant 'Vagabonds in power'.

Film

Finding Fela: Music is the weapon, a film by Alex Gibney. Jigsaw Productions in association with Knitting Factory Entertainment Okaplayer and OkayAfrica, 2014. 1DVD 0010241

Dear General Babangida

Fela Kuti was an eloquent communicator in his songs and in discussions held at his club in Lagos, the Afrika Shrine. This letter demonstrates his eloquence as a writer too. Addressed to General Ibrahim Babangida, Nigeria's president from 1985 to 1993, and copied to a host of international human rights organisations, the 'patriotic report' highlights some of the issues for which Fela fought. It challenges the General to listen to the people and change his policies.

Fela gave a copy of this letter to his personal friend, Carol McLeod, while in the UK on tour in 1989.

On loan from Carol McLeod

African women arise

1954

Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti (1900–78) was an anti-imperialist activist and a founder of the women's movement in Nigeria. She was also the mother of Fela Kuti. In 1954 she authored this pamphlet, a polemic against child poverty, colonialism and racism. 'The peoples of Africa', she wrote, 'accuse the colonial powers and financial interests that are opposing their march towards progress, prosperity and liberty'.

Ransome-Kuti was tragically killed when Nigerian police stormed Fela Kuti's Kalakuta Republic in Lagos and threw both her and her son from a third-floor window.

Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, That they may live: African women arise. Berlin, 1954. YD.2009.a.3253

Script and symbol

West Africa today is heir to numerous means of messaging and communicating. Physical objects and encoded speech – played on a range of musical instruments – carry messages across long distances. People use symbols to express complex meanings in public, or to keep knowledge secret from general view.

West African symbolic systems and scripts have a long history. The Tifinagh alphabet is around 2,000 years old. In the 19th and 20th centuries, African societies began to develop new methods of writing such as Vai (in Liberia), Bamum (in Cameroon) and N'ko (in Guinea). In a region increasingly dominated by the roman script, the creators of these new systems wanted to assert a different, autonomous vision of what it meant to write. The scripts remain in use or are being revived even in today's digital environment.

Mask with nsibidi symbols

Nigeria, before 1950

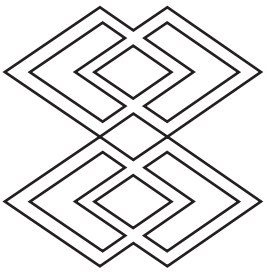
Nsibidi, a graphic system from south-eastern Nigeria, was and is inscribed, painted, drawn and written on numerous materials, including textiles, pottery, paper and the human body. Nsibidi symbols can be seen on this ritual object, a mask in the shape of a bird's head.

The uses of nsibidi have included communicating over long distances, keeping knowledge secret, and making records. During the era of the slave trade, enslaved men in Cuba revived the nsibidi symbolism, costumes, ritual and music of the secret societies to which they had belonged in Nigeria. They called this Abakuá.

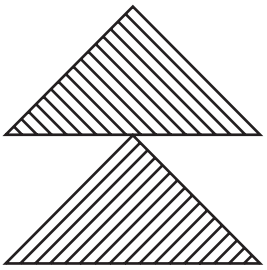
On loan from the British Museum. Donated by Percy Amaury Talbot

West Africa's rich heritage of symbols and scripts is represented on the walls and pillars of this exhibition, as well as on the objects on display. This pattern is drawn from symbols including adinkra (from Ghana) and nsibidi (from Nigeria), together with designs from West African fabric.

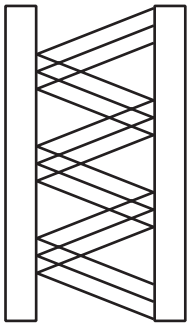
Below we illustrate three of the symbols in this pattern.



'Epa'
Handcuffs, symbolising enslavement, equality and justice. Adinkra symbol from Ghana.



'Leopard'
Leopard skin or spots, signifying leadership. From the nsibidi leopard symbol, from south-eastern Nigeria.



'Owo foro adobe'
Snake climbing the raffia tree, steadfastness and diligence, bravery, achieving the impossible. Adinkra symbol from Ghana.

Everyday commentaries

In everyday life, people in West Africa use a wide range of creative techniques to talk about the world as it is, and as it should be. They use symbols and signs shown on cloth, vehicles and other media to express their identity, praise and celebrate people and occasions, and pass on educational and political messages.

Proverbs, stories, songs, pamphlets and other forms of oral and written literature also allow people – whether performers such as griots or rappers, or ordinary women and men – to praise, parody, describe, criticise or influence individuals and society.

Cowrie-shell letters

Nigeria, before 1888

These are three different messages in the Yoruba àrokò messaging system, which was created for long-distance communication and sometimes to keep information secret.

The meaning of the first, made of six cowries and a feather, depends on a pun. The Yoruba word for six is efà and the verb fà means to draw, so the sender's intention is to draw the recipient to himself. The second message, composed of six cowries in pairs, face-to-face, indicates friendship, while the third, in which the cowries are back-to-back, is a rebuke for non-payment of debt.

Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.
1887.10.1, 2, 6

Message of peace

This illustration shows a message of peace and goodwill sent by the King of Ìjẹ̀bú to the King of Lagos on the occasion of his restoration in 1851. It is an example of the àrokò system of messaging among the Yoruba people in Nigeria, recorded by the missionary Sarah Tucker. Each element in this string of cowries and seeds has meaning. For example, the kernel in the middle indicates 'what is good for me is good for you'. The àrokò message next to it is not quite identical to the illustration and is probably a copy of the original.

Sarah Tucker, Abbeokuta; or sunrise within the tropics: an outline of the origin and progress of the Yoruba Mission. London, 1856. RB.23.a.20458

Nigeria, before 1888. Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford. 1887.10.5

Inventing writing in Liberia

19th century

A new way of writing, a script for the Vai language, was invented in Liberia, probably in the early 19th century. Mọmọlu Duwalu Bukẹlẹ later explained how, on the basis of a dream, he invented a full syllabic script – that is, each character represents one syllable.

A British naval officer, Lieutenant Frederick Forbes, came across this script in 1849 and sent these two documents to the British Museum. The first is written entirely in the script, while the second gives the English equivalents for the characters. Forbes described it as 'of the utmost importance to African civilization'.

Document in Vai script. c. 1849.
Add MS 17817B, f.3

Table of Vai characters with English equivalents. c. 1849. Add MS 17817A, ff.1v–2

Image on label

A page from the History book of the Bamum kingdom (c. 1910), part of a large archive in the Bamum script held at the Royal Palace at Foumban, Cameroon.

The archive has been digitised with funding from the British Library's Endangered Archives Programme, funded by Arcadia, and is available online.

Inventing writing in Cameroon

At the same time as Edward Blyden was using English to challenge colonialism and enslavement, King Njoya, of Bamum in Cameroon, was inventing a new script and a language, called Shü-Mom, that was initially secret. This was used for government and education, and to record his people's history and culture.

This book, on Bamum history and culture, is of great importance for the Bamum people. This is a copy of the original, made by the scribe Nji Mfopu in 1936–38. Today, the script is being revived in Bamum.

Libonar Pantü Dusang Konik Snak Rifum (History and culture of the Bamum), vol. 1 (Bamum, c. 1911–1918; this copy scribed by Nji Mfopu, 1936–38). Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford. Jeffreys Papers

Inventing writing in Guinea

2004

This history book is written in a script invented in about 1947 by Souleymane Kanté, from Guinea. Kanté aimed to counter claims that Africans were inferior because they had no writing of their own. The script is called N'ko ('the clear language') and is used for the Maninka, Dioula and Bamanan languages, spoken by approximately 9 million people.

In Guinea, which became independent in 1958, its rapid spread expressed a new spirit of cultural nationalism. Although it was not accepted as an official medium of education, it was and is widely used.

Fode Souleymane Kanté, History of the pre-Manding kingdoms and surrounding, part 3. Cairo, 2004.

Feminine Power

Nigeria, 2002

In this painting, two contemporary Nigerian artists bring a tradition of motifs and symbols on cloth into a modern artistic context. Tola Wewe (born 1959) is responsible for the outline shapes and geometric forms. Chief Nike Davies-Okundaye (born 1951) has executed the detailed design and pattern, drawing on her artistic training in textile production and adire design. Other motifs based on this Yoruba tradition include the fish, a symbol of fertility; the elephant, indicating strength and vigour; and the gecko (lizard) standing for love, care and sensitivity.

Nike Okundaye-Davies and Tola Wewe, Feminine Power Series 2002. Loaned by the Gallery of African Art on behalf of Nike Okundaye-Davies

Sonic symbols

Many of the languages of West Africa are tonal: pitch and inflection are used to create different meanings or grammatical distinctions. For example, the same word said with different pitch patterns can mean different things and may indicate a noun or a verb. Musical instruments – such as flutes and whistles and a variety of drums – are often used in West Africa to carry messages and express meaning.

1. Whistle, flute and horn follow a translation in the Kabiyè language from Togo. From the album Togo - Musique Kabiyè, 1984. OCORA 558640. 1LP0158533

2. Sentences spoken on the bata drum from Nigeria. The four phrases in the Yoruba language are: Owo laiye mo (The world only knows money), Aiye mo juba (World I praise thee), Ola Di Pupo (Wealth is Plentiful), and Ise ni wura (Work is gold), 2010.

3. Sentences spoken on the dundun drum from Nigeria. The four phrases in the Yoruba language are the same as in track 2. Tracks 2 and 3: From Amanda Villepastour Ancient text messages of the Yoruba bata drum: cracking the code. EMC.2010.a.349

Brave warrior's belt

Mali, c. 2014

In West Africa, textiles display messages in a huge variety of ways. This bogolan cloth from Mali carries a traditional design, two parallel zigzag lines with four dots in between, meaning 'the brave warrior's or man's belt'. The zigzags represent the belt that a warrior puts on before going into battle. Fastening the belt creates pleats, which are shown in the rows of lozenges (diamonds). When the belt is untied the man may father children, represented by the dots. The cloth is dyed with natural substances – black from mud, ochre from leaves and terracotta from tree bark.

Private loan

Proverbs in miniature

Ghana, 18th–20th century

Proverbs are culturally important across West Africa. They offer a vocabulary of wisdom and a means of interpreting the world. But their meanings are not always straightforward. They may need to be teased out, with the help of prior knowledge, and there are often different interpretations, depending on the context and the interpreter. These brass weights, made for weighing gold dust, encapsulate a whole variety of proverbs as well as other themes such as folk-tales.

1. The two-headed crocodile can represent conflict and greed, particularly in the family. The crocodiles fight over food even though they share one stomach. This motif also indicates cooperation and interdependence

2. Proverbs relating to the crocodile and mudfish include 'If a mudfish grows fat it is to the crocodile's advantage'.

3. Two old friends, Amoako and Adu, meet again after many years of separation. This is a well-known story in Ghana. In some versions, both men have met misfortune and lost everything, while in others, one has become poor and the other rich.

4. This gold-weight shows two fish biting each other's tails, and represents a 'tit for tat' message: 'If you bite me, I will bite you.'

5. There are numerous proverbs associated with leopards. They include 'The rain wets the leopard's spots but does not wash them off' and 'The leopard that prowls about under the thicket causes it to shake greatly'.

6. The snake with a bird in its jaws alludes to the pointlessness of trying to escape debts owed to the chief.

On loan from the British Museum.
1. Donated by T.R.O. Mangin
2 & 3. Donated by Mrs Margaret Plass
4, 5 & 6. Donated by Capt Robert P. Wild

‘The monkey leaps only as far as it can reach’

Ghana, before 1920

This banner features a proverb which carries roughly the same message as the English ‘look before you leap’. Such flags, from Ghana, were made and carried by Asafo companies, military groups of the Fante people, in a tradition dating back at least to the 17th century. As well as proverbs, the flags often showed battle scenes. The design shown here can be interpreted as a warning to the company’s enemies. The Union Jack in the top left-hand corner indicates that this banner was made before independence in 1957.

On loan from the British Museum

What is a good marriage?

These two works use drama to discuss ideas about marriage in a changing society. In both, a young woman's traditional parents try to force her into marriage, leaving a virtuous or educated lover behind. Toko atolia (1932) is written in the Ewe language of Ghana. Its author, Ferdinand Kwasi Fiawoo, was one of a number writing in African languages in the first half of the 20th century. The play Veronica my daughter was the most popular pamphlet ever published in south-eastern Nigeria, selling a quarter of a million copies.

Ferdinand Kwasi Fiawoo, Toko atolia. London, 1947. 12912.f.27

Ogali A. Ogali, Veronica my daughter: (a drama). Onitsha, 1977?. X.0909/588(260)

How to live

Nigeria and Ghana have lively traditions of pamphlet publishing. From the 1940s, authors with a Western education – mainly young men – started to publish cheap, widely read pamphlets. Those shown here give moral and practical advice and warnings. These include the supposed perils of consorting with young women, and ways of fulfilling ambitions in life. Joseph Oduro's novel Seanteɛ uses the Ghanaian Twi language to tell a moral story in which a spoiled child becoming a criminal. There is also a vigorous tradition of religious pamphlet publishing, which continues today.

J. Oduro, Seanteɛ: a novel in Asante Twi. Accra, 1958. X.908/83563

Okenwa Olisah, Life, money and girls turn man up and down. Onitsha, 1979?. X.0909/588(263)

Emman N Eleonu, Money is good but hard to get: old money and new money which is the best. Alaenyi Ogwa, Owerri. 1973. X.0909/588(223)

R. O. Ability, A new guide to good English and correct letter-writing. Onitsha, 1975. X.0909/588(251)

Alhaji A. D. Ajijola, Short suras, verses from the holy Qu'ran and some du'a for daily need. Kaduna, 1995. On loan from Insa Nolte

Emmanuel Oghenebrorhie, Not enough reason [i.e. to disobey God]. Ibadan, Nigeria, 2005. YP.2014.a.3455

Women singing as they work

Women in West Africa often sing while carrying out their daily work of preparing food. This is an opportunity for them to express views and to comment on their experiences. In this recording we first hear the song of a Kabiyè woman from Togo singing while crushing millet. She relates an ordinary occurrence – the refusal of a woman to respond to a summons from the chief to answer for some offense she is accused of. This is followed by a group song as eight women gather around a mortar to pound the millet into flour.

From the album Togo - Musique Kabiyè, OCORA 558640, 1984. 1LP0158533

Women in Sierra Leone

1988

Women's work songs provide one means of commenting creatively on moral and social matters. This photograph shows women pounding rice, an everyday activity which, in many places, women accompany with songs. It was taken in Kainkordu in eastern Sierra Leone and captures a sense of a 'time and place before war', as the photographer puts it. In 1991, the country was plunged into a civil war which lasted for over a decade.

Michael Katakis, 'Women husking rice, Kainkordu', 1988. Photo 1202/3

Writing rap

Rap music is extremely popular throughout West Africa and provides a powerful vehicle for communication, especially amongst the youth. Increasing numbers of rap artists are producing what can be called 'conscious rap', designed to raise awareness of social issues, impart knowledge and comment on everyday experience. While electronic beats may be used as musical backing, artists frequently 'indigenise' the music by introducing local instruments or rhythms. The poetry is normally sung in a mixture of local languages and either French or English Pidgin to reach the widest possible audience within the region and throughout the diaspora.

1. 'Senegal' by Djoloff uses a local narrative musical form and the kora (calabash harp) together with a rap overlay in French and Wolof. This song criticises Senegal's leaders for perpetuating the colonial past. From the album Lawane EMMA 159498-2, 2000. 1CD0347203

2. ‘Visa connection man’ by DJ Ritchy Pitch featuring Reggie Rockstone and M3NSA fuses Ghanaian highlife music with hip hop and other genres. This song, in Twi, English and Pidgin, comments on the corruption and bureaucracy encountered when attempting to travel. From the album Ye fre mi Richy Pitch BBE 118ACD, 2010. 1CD0314708

Wearing messages

Ghana, 2000s

These ‘fancy print’ cloths are widely worn in Ghana and other West African countries. Cheaper than the more upmarket wax prints, they are generally imported into Ghana and given names and meanings in the Twi language by the market women who sell them.

You are welcome to touch these cloths.

On loan from the British Museum. Donated by ABC Wax

‘You treat me as if I were a snail’
‘Wa fa me kwa/ngwa’

This design alludes to a saying indicating unhappiness in a relationship.

‘Your eyes can see, but your mouth cannot say’
‘Weni behu naaso w’ano enntumin nnka’

This cloth references a proverb meaning that some subjects are unsuitable for general discussion.

‘If you would gossip about me, then better find a chair’
‘Wobeka meho asem a, pe akongwa’

A warning against gossip.
The truth will always come out.

‘Good husband’
‘Okunpa’

An older design still used today, this is often given by wives to their husbands to express their love.

‘Ask questions before you get married’
‘Woko aware a, bisa’

Prospective wives should be wary – they should look before they leap.

‘Do not put your gold around the neck of a guinea fowl’
‘Wome oda sika kowla na vetekle o’

A warning to keep valuables safe.

‘A woman of substance’ or ‘a good woman’
‘Obaa pa’

This cloth honours women.

Primary health care

Ghana, 2000s

The government of Ghana used this cloth as part of a major campaign to protect its citizens against Guinea worm, a water-borne parasitic disease. The cloth shows how to prevent the disease, for example by filtering drinking water.

This public health campaign has been highly successful. In 1989, Ghana had nearly 180,000 cases of Guinea worm. In January 2015, the World Health Organisation declared the country free of the disease.

On loan from the British Museum. Donated by Ghana Health Service

Wedding cloth

Nigeria, before 2009

This is a woven cloth called ‘aso oke’, a Yoruba tradition. Today, aso oke is used for ceremonial occasions. This bridal cloth carries writing in Yoruba and Arabic, and includes a prayer for good fortune to spread. The Arabic text reads ‘In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful’. Among the motifs are crocodiles and Qur’an boards.

On loan from the British Museum

‘God bless the owner’

1988

Across West Africa, drivers personalise their cars, lorries and buses with significant words – sayings, proverbs, admonitions, prayers – and images. This taxi was photographed in rural Sierra Leone by Michael Katakis in 1988. The driver has used his signs to ask for blessings, and as advertising space.

Michael Katakis, ‘Drivers’ helpers waving to the photographer as they pass’. 1988. Photo 1202

‘Touba’

1999

This is a photograph, taken in Dakar, Senegal, of a car rapide or minibus. Its decoration shows the influence of Sheikh Amadou Bamba, a Muslim Sufi leader who is widely honoured in Senegal. The place-name ‘Touba’ above the windscreen is not the bus’s destination, but Sheikh Bamba’s place of burial, and a centre of pilgrimage for his Mouride movement. The Arabic word ‘Alhamdoululahi’ means ‘thanks be to Allah’.

The photographs at the bottom of the windscreen are of holy people whose images, like that of Bamba himself, are believed to convey ‘baraka’ or blessings.

Photograph by Doran H. Ross.
Dakar, Senegal, 1999

Signs seen on buses in Ghana

1958

In 1958, Sir John Gilbert Laithwaite, British permanent under-secretary of state for Commonwealth relations, visited Ghana on a diplomatic mission. At the end of his official report, he recorded two pages of the signs he had seen on buses during his visit. These ranged from religious slogans such as 'Fear God and do good' to philosophical statements – 'The world changes' – and admonitions such as 'Mind your own business'. One driver states simply, 'I have nothing to say'.

Papers of Sir John Gilbert Laithwaite, Report on tour of Ghana and Nigeria, Mar–Apr 1958.
Mss Eur F138/112

STORY NOW

Story Now

For most West African states, the decade from 1957 saw the achievement of independence. At the same time, there was an outpouring of creativity in literature and art.

West African literature has seen many changes between independence and the present day. In the 1950s and 1960s, great literature broke open colonial modes of thinking. Today, authors are experimenting with new digital forms. At the beginning of this period, female authors were the exception to the rule. Now they are numerous, and widely read and admired.

This section illustrates the many ways in which stories are remembered, told, created and recreated in modern West Africa.

The independence generation

In 1952, the Nigerian writer Amos Tutuola published The Palm-wine Drinkard, and with it began a flowering of African writing in English. Literature in French also began to thrive, supported by the influential journal and publishing house Présence Africaine. Written literatures also flourished in major African languages such as Yoruba and Hausa, as well as in Portuguese. All these literatures built on earlier foundations.

Many of the works produced in the 1950s and 1960s were to become classics. Their authors called into question the basis of European domination, and used powerful counter-narratives, often taken from African myth and religion, to undermine racist ideas. They also dealt with the conditions of life for Africans and revealed social contradictions.

Fagunwa, a giant of Yoruba literature

1961

Daniel Ọlọrunfẹmi Fagunwa (1903–63) wrote in the Yoruba language, becoming the most distinguished and popular author of Yoruba novels and also publishing short stories, folklore and memoirs. His first book was Ògbójú ode nínú Igbó irúnmalè (The forest of a thousand demons, 1938). This is his last novel, Àdììtu Olódùmarè (The mysteries of God). It recounts the adventures of the hero Adiitu as he, and later his wife, Iyunade, triumph over numerous hardships. Fagunwa's work is strongly imbued with ideas and images from Yoruba oral literature, and with Christian morality.

Daniel Ọlọrunfẹmi Fagunwa, Àdììtu Olódùmarè. Edinburgh, 1961. X.989/465

The palm-wine drinkard

1952

This 1952 work, published six years before Achebe's Things fall apart, gained international acclaim and was a major landmark in the history of the West African novel in English. Building on Fagunwa's work and drawing on the Yoruba spirit world, Amos Tutuola (1920–97) tells a fantastical, surreal tale of a journey through the lands of the living and the dead. His chapter-titles give a flavour of these events: 'On our way to the unreturnable Heaven's Town'; 'Investigation to the Skull's family's house'; 'An egg fed the whole world'.

Amos Tutuola, The palm-wine drinkard and his dead palm-wine tapster in the Deads' Town. London, 1952. YP.2015.a.3310

An orphan in the forest

The Atọka photoplay magazine was created in Nigeria in the late 1960s. Through a sequence of posed photographs, the magazine captured the plays of the popular Yoruba-language theatre of the time. This play is the story of an orphan called Kuyẹ, who is deaf and unable to speak. He is driven by cruel treatment into the forest. In this scene, Kuyẹ encounters two spirits, seen fighting each other over a calabash of food on the right. By the end of the story he can hear and speak, and is wealthy and married to a princess.

'Kuyẹ', Atọka magazine. Lagos, before 1969. Based on a novel by J.F. Ọdunjọ; performed by the Oyin Adejọbi Theatre Company. On loan from Karin Barber

Senghor collaborates with Chagall

Paris, 1973

In French-speaking West Africa, one of the most important poets of the independence generation was Léopold Sédar Senghor, president of Senegal from 1960–80. He wrote these evocative and poignant love poems – among his most private work – to his wife, Colette (née Hubert). They reflect the loneliness he experienced as president, and evoke both the beauty and troubled history of Africa.

In 'Vertige' ('Vertigo'), shown here, the speaker imagines himself flying from Europe to Africa. The illustrations are by the artist Marc Chagall (1887–1985), whose work was exhibited in Dakar in 1971.

Léopold Sédar Senghor, Lettres d'hivernage. Original illustrations by Marc Chagall. Paris, 1973. Cup.406.d.45

Black Orpheus

1958–59

These are early issues of Black Orpheus, the ground-breaking 'journal of African and Afro-American literature' that began publication in Nigeria in 1957. Its founding editor was the university teacher Ulli Beier, and the journal was edited among others by Wole Soyinka and the South African writer Es'kia Mphahlele. Black Orpheus published poetry, art, fiction, literary criticism and commentary, and took inspiration from older African artistic and literary traditions. Other contributors and editors, including Léopold Senghor, Camara Laye, Andrew Salkey and Léon Damas, reflected its Pan-African reach and ability to attract writers of distinction.

Black Orpheus. Ibadan, 1958–59. PP.8002.xm

Picasso and Présence Africaine

1956

Présence Africaine, the highly influential journal and publishing house, was founded in 1947 by the Senegalese intellectual Alioune Diop. This poster was produced for the First Congress of Negro Writers and Artists, held in Paris in 1956 and organised by Présence Africaine. It shows an etching from Pablo Picasso's Corps perdu collaboration with the poet Aimé Césaire. Picasso also, on Diop's request, chose the quotation from one of Césaire's poems that appears beneath the image. This poster is one of the original 500 lithographic prints made at the Mourlot workshop in Paris in 1956.

Pablo Picasso and Aimé Césaire, Présence Africaine. Paris, 1956. BLWA 142

‘Moremi’ – a Yoruba story of conflict, betrayal and peace

These aluminium relief panels were made by the Nigerian artist Asiru Olatunde (1918–93). They show scenes from the ancient Yoruba story ‘Moremi’, recast by the writer Duro Ladipo as an opera (published in 1967). The panels are read left to right, as follows:

Top row:

Three scenes in which the city of Ife is afflicted by Igbo raids. Moremi, in the centre (in a long, ungirdled robe), is a widow of great virtue and beauty.

Second row:

Moremi offers her help to the Ife king, and seeks the advice of a river goddess. In the last scene, she herself is captured.

Third row:

The Igbo king falls in love with Moremi. She persuades his dibia (diviner/healer) to reveal the secrets of the Igbos' power. She then escapes and enables the people of Ife, with magic leaves and incantations, to defeat the Igbos.

Fourth row:

With the Igbos defeated, Moremi has to sacrifice her son to the river goddess, as she had earlier promised. Despite this, she pleads for peace between the warring parties.

Fifth row:

Peace is granted and the Ifes and Igbos are integrated. The last scene shows the players taking their bow.

'Moremi', Asiru Olatunde, Aluminium relief panels, 1968. On loan from Pearson

Chinua Achebe

Chinua Achebe (1930–2013) was one of the greatest African writers of the 20th century. He was the author of the famous novel Things fall apart (1958), as well as numerous other works of fiction and non-fiction.

The interview shown here was filmed in London in 1986. The praise song for Achebe, shown with it, was composed and performed in 2014 by Professor Akachi Ezeigbo of the University of Lagos, Nigeria, to celebrate his life.

Chinua Achebe in conversation with the Somalian writer Nuruddin Farah. Filmed at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 25 July 1986. Unedited version of interview released in ICA 'Writers in conversation' series. ICA Video Masters Collection. C280/67

Cloth commemorating Chinua Achebe

Nigeria, c. 2013

This cloth was printed to commemorate Achebe's life. Cloth of this design was worn by Akachi Ezeigbo when performing her praise song for the writer, shown on the screen. The cloth was donated by her to the British Library for this exhibition.

Things fall apart

First published in 1958, Chinua Achebe's Things fall apart is the story of Okonkwo, a man of wealth and standing in south-eastern Nigeria whose world is undermined by colonial conquest. With this seminal work, Achebe reshaped the African literary novel and gained major international recognition for African literature in English.

This is the first edition of Things fall apart. It is shown together with the 1962 paperback edition, which was the first book in the Heinemann African Writers Series – famous for publishing numerous major African writers.

Chinua Achebe, Things fall apart. London, 1958.
NNN.11724

Chinua Achebe, Things fall apart. London, 1962.
YD.2008.a.9574

‘I get strong heart’

1988

In this letter Achebe writes to Andrew Salkey, a writer, editor and broadcaster from the Caribbean and major cultural figure in post-war London. Achebe playfully uses Pidgin to express solidarity and friendship with Salkey: ‘…I get strong heart that one day we go reach bottom of this hole and begin climb out again.’ Achebe, widely admired for his versatility with language, wrote his novels in a literary form of English resonating with the cadences and expressions of the Igbo language. This letter is part of Andrew Salkey’s archive, held by the British Library.

Chinua Achebe to Andrew Salkey, 16 May 1988. Deposit 10310, Andrew Salkey archive

Things fall apart in translation

Chinua Achebe's first novel has been very widely read, and translated into at least 45 languages. These examples come from Africa and India. Also included is an edition intended for secretarial training in shorthand.

The book owes its wide appeal partly to the fact that it portrays an African society from the inside, and gives a powerful insight into the experience of colonisation. Readers continue to talk about the revelation of opening a book that speaks of their own experience.

Chinua Achebe, Citaivukal. Nagarcoil, India, 1998. In Tamil - SAC.2002.a.1786

Chinua Achebe, Kwafa gula linamasi. Johannesburg, 1995. In IsiZulu - YF.2010.a.4743

Chinua Achebe, Things fall apart. London, 1978. In shorthand - X.909/43084

Chinua Achebe, Okambiri kondenya. Windhoek, Namibia, 2002. In Otjiherero - YP.2010.a.2896

Achebe writes for children

1972

Chinua Achebe wrote for children as well as adults. This book, written in 1967 with John Iroaganachi, uses conflict among animals as a metaphor for a country descending into civil war. It was published in 1972, after the end of the Nigerian Civil War. This page includes a poem by the poet Christopher Okigbo.

The book's last lines sum up the complexities of politics in newly independent Nigeria, expressing the hope that 'the animals will make peace among themselves some day…Then they can keep away the hunter who is their common enemy'.

Chinua Achebe and John Iroaganachi, How the leopard got his claws. Enugu, 1972. X.990/3557

Things fall apart – the 50th anniversary

2008

This is a special edition of Things fall apart, celebrating 50 years since the book's first publication in 1958.

This quotation marks the point in the story at which the central character Okonkwo's gun explodes, accidentally killing a young man. As a result Okonkwo and his family must go into exile for seven years. As the story continues, missionaries arrive, converting one of Okonkwo's sons to Christianity. Achebe gives a vivid portrait of the effect of encroaching British colonialism on village life. Okonkwo's opposition to these events remains undiminished and the book ends in tragedy.

Chinua Achebe, Things fall apart: illustrated. Ibadan, Nigeria, 2008. LP.31.a.737

Ama Ata Aidoo

2014

Ama Ata Aidoo (born 1942) is a Ghanaian playwright, novelist and poet who first won fame with a play, The dilemma of a ghost (1965), and an experimental novel, Our sister Killjoy (1966). She is a pioneer of women's literary writing in English in Africa, and is the most prominent among a small number of women whose careers began in the years after independence. Her works grapple both with colonialism and modernity, and with women's particular circumstances and choices.

The Art of Ama Ata Aidoo, Fadoa Films, 2014. Directed by Yaba Badoe.

Anowa and Changes

Anowa is Aidoo's second play. Set in what is now Ghana shortly after the British conquest of 1874, it tells the tragic story of Anowa and her husband Kofi Ako, whose marriage breaks down – in part because they disagree on the morality of owning enslaved people, in part because they have no children. Aidoo incorporates language and ideas from oral literature to create this English-language exploration of the complexities of history, colonialism and gender.

Changes is one of Aidoo's later works, a novel dealing with the dilemmas faced by women as they try to balance career and marriage.

Ama Ata Aidoo, Anowa. Harlow, 1970. X.908/20281

Ama Ata Aidoo, Changes: a love story. London, 1991. H.91/965

The eagle and the chickens and other stories

'The eagle and the chickens', the title story of this children's book by Ama Ata Aidoo, is an allegory of colonialism. In 'Rain', shown here, a young girl, Aba, is sent to fetch water during a storm. Aba has to contend with the unfairness of a heavier domestic load than her brother. At the same time, she has a disciplined but loving relationship with her grandmother, beautifully illuminated by Aidoo. The word 'Nana', used here for the grandmother, is a term of respect in Ghana for both female and male elders.

Ama Ata Aidoo, The eagle and the chickens and other stories. Accra, 1989. YA.1995.a.10431

Ousmane Sembène

2004

Ousmane Sembène (also known as Sembène Ousmane) was a giant of literature and film in West Africa. Born in Senegal, he fought for France in World War II, and spent time working in both countries on the docks and railways. He began publishing novels in 1956, later turning to film for its power in storytelling and in communicating his radical politics.

These extracts are from a film he made in 2004, Moolaadé. It tells how women and girls in a small village resist female genital cutting. In the first scene shown here, four girls flee an excision ceremony. A woman called Collé gives them protection, or Moolaadé, symbolised by a rope across the compound entrance. In the last scene, Collé denies entry to the salindana (the women in charge of the rite).

Moolaadé, Artificial Eye, 2004. Directed by Ousmane Sembène. 1DVD0010324

L'Harmattan

Sembène's 1964 novel L'Harmattan is set in an unnamed African state, in the uncertain times leading up to independence. Through a large cast of characters, he outlines the realities of life for most, advocates collective organisation, and addresses the harshness of women's lives. His novels also include Le docker noir (The Black docker, 1956), a hard-hitting portrait of workers in the French city of Marseille, and Les bouts de bois de Dieu (God's bits of wood, 1960), based on a strike on the Dakar–Niger railway in which Sembène himself participated.

Ousmane Sembène, L'Harmattan: référendum. Paris, 1980. X.958/3843

Ouagadougou film festival

Sembène was a founding figure of African cinema. His first feature film La Noire de… (Black girl, 1966), dealt with the tragic life of a young Senegalese domestic worker in France. He became a strong supporter of FESPACO, Africa's largest film festival. This was founded in 1969 and is still held biannually in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso.

This programme from the 1979 festival features an in-depth interview with Sembène, who discusses the relationship between his socialist politics and his film-making.

Sixième festival du cinéma africain: Ouagadougou, du 2 au 10 février 1979.Ouagadougou, 1979.
YA.1987.a.10886

Wole Soyinka

Filmed 8 May 2014

Wole Soyinka (born 1934), one of Africa's greatest writers, was the first African to win the Nobel Prize for Literature (in 1986). His prolific output includes plays, novels, memoirs, poetry and works of politics and philosophy. Soyinka is also an academic and political activist, and was detained by the Nigerian government at the time of the Nigerian Civil War. In this extract, he explains how he came to write his poem Idanre. The manuscript of this poem is to your right.

Manuscript of Idanre

This is a typescript of Soyinka's long poem Idanre. It was commissioned for the 1965 Commonwealth Arts Festival, and published in a revised form in Soyinka's Idanre and other poems (1967). The poem deals with Ogun, the Yoruba god of war, iron, the hunt and the road and the patron saint of blacksmiths. Ogun is able to link the worlds of the dead, the living and the unborn. Soyinka has made drawings on some of the pages, including this one. Elsewhere he has written instructions for music to accompany the poem's performance.

Wole Soyinka, Idanre (before Sept 1965). Typescript, with autograph revisions, drawings and musical directions. Add MS 53785, f.8

The lion and the jewel

1963

Wole Soyinka is perhaps best known as a playwright. This is one of his early works, a comedy in which a young woman chooses between marriage to a traditionally minded chief and a Western-educated schoolteacher. His plays also include Death and the king's horseman (1975), a tragedy focused on ideological and personal conflict during the colonial era, and A dance of the forests (1963), which foreshadowed the difficulties post-colonial Nigeria would face.

In this and in many of his works, he draws on the deep complexities of Yoruba myth and spirituality.

Wole Soyinka, The lion and the jewel. London and Ibadan, 1963. 11517.r.46

Performing The lion and the jewel

Nigeria, 1964

These are photographs from a production of The lion and the jewel at the Ibadan Arts Theatre, Nigeria, in 1964, directed by Wole Soyinka. Ibadan, which lies about 90 miles north of Lagos, is home to one of Nigeria's foremost universities. Over the course of the 1960s it grew to become a cultural powerhouse, inspiring and publishing many works of literature and art. Soyinka was at the heart of this movement.

Peggy Harper collection, Photos 12 (8–10)

The Mbari Club

1963

The Mbari Club, founded in 1961, was part of a thriving cultural scene in the city of Ibadan, Nigeria. It published numerous works by writers and artists who were, or were later to become, famous. 'Mbari' is the Igbo word for a sacred house dedicated to the goddess Ala and filled with painted sculptures. The founding members of the Mbari Club included the writers Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo, J.P. Clark and Es'kia Mphahlele, and the scholar Ulli Beier.

In Three plays, Soyinka publishes The swamp-dwellers, The trials of Brother Jero and The strong breed.

Wole Soyinka, Three plays. Idaban, 1963.
X.909/25371

Fighting apartheid from Nigeria

1963

The Mbari Club published books by Africans, and those of African descent, from far beyond Nigeria. There was considerable support in Nigeria for the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. This work is the first publication of Dennis Brutus (1924–2009), the South African activist and poet, who was banned from publishing his work in South Africa. 'Time may be running out', he writes here. 'House arrest looms, and it is never sure how much rope(!) one has.' In fact, Sirens, knuckles and boots was published after he had been detained by the South African regime in 1963.

Dennis Brutus, Sirens, knuckles and boots.
Designed and illustrated by Denis Williams.
Ibadan, 1963. X.909/23450

Rediscovery – Ghanaian poetry in the Mbari Club list

1964

This is the first collection to be published by the Ghanaian poet and academic Kofi Awoonor (1935–2013). His early poetry drew on Ewe tradition, exploring themes and imagery from African myth and religion. Awoonor was imprisoned without trial in the 1970s, but later became Ghanaian ambassador to Brazil, Cuba and the United Nations. He was killed in the terrorist attack on Nairobi's Westgate shopping mall in 2013.

Kofi Awoonor, Rediscovery, and other poems. Ibadan, 1964. X.908/18848

El-Salahi published by the Mbari Club

1962

In this work, the Mbari Club published early drawings by Ibrahim El-Salahi, the Sudanese artist who has since attained international acclaim, with major retrospectives in London and New York in 2013. The drawings were exhibited in Ibadan in November 1961, and all but three were published here for the first time. One of El-Salahi's main sources of inspiration for these works was Arabic calligraphy, whose sweeping lines are suggested in 'Silent dreams of the full moon', shown here. He also drew on Sudanese traditional patterns on calabashes and baskets.

Ibrahim El-Salahi, Drawings. Ibadan, 1962.
X.415/1533

African songs of love, war, grief and abuse

1961

The poet Léon Damas (1912–78) came from French Guiana, and, with Léopold Senghor and Aimé Césaire, founded the Negritude movement in Paris in the 1930s. This aimed, through the arts, to reclaim Black identity, history and culture, oppose colonialism and assert racial equality.

Writing in French, Damas moved towards a new poetic style, incorporating Caribbean speech and rhythm into his language. He is one of the more established writers to be published by the Mbari Club, having published his first book, Pigments, in 1937.

Léon Damas, African songs of love, war, grief and abuse. Designed and illustrated by Georgina Betts; translated by Ulli Beier and Miriam Koshland. Ibadan, 1961. Cup.22.m.57

Tales by moonlight

Between the 1970s and 2000, West African writers engaged with the dynamics of postcolonial society. Colonialism and racism remained strong topics, but the disappointments of the postcolonial world – war, poverty and inequality – were examined by a new generation of authors. Female writers also took up these themes while at the same time giving voice to the experiences of women.

Traditional stories remained popular in this period. In rural West Africa, storytelling and singing were often staged at night, in the compound, after the day's work was done. In 1980s Nigeria, the television series 'Tales by Moonlight' offered city-dwellers the experience of this tradition in a new medium.

In this area of the exhibition, we offer a variety of storytelling from the late 20th century. You are welcome to spend time reading, and listening to live recordings of poetry, stories, plays and songs.

Track list

Marriage of Anansewa. Extract from a play by Efua Sutherland. Based on a folktale about the spider trickster, Ananse. Ghana

'New face Old Bill'. Poem about London life by Iyamide Hazeley. Sierra Leone/UK

The tragedy of Kwata. Extract from a musical comedy in Pidgin English. Ghana

Search, sweet country. Extract from a novel by Kojo Laing. Ghana

'A woman called Bele'. Extract from a folktale in the Vai language, performed by Boa Kiahon and audience. Liberia

'Converging city'. Extract from a short story by Ben Okri. Nigeria/UK

Fakoli. Extract from an epic narrative of the Mande people. Guinea

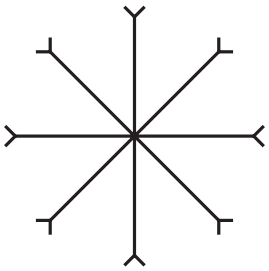
‘My guilt’. Poem by Maya Angelou. US poet who lived in Ghana soon after independence.

Second class citizen. Extract from a novel by Buchi Emecheta. Nigeria/UK

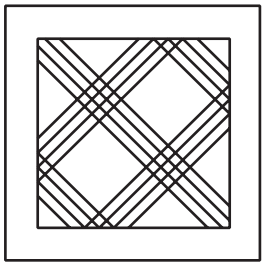
‘Lament’. Extract from a dramatised reading of a poem by Kofi Awoonor. Ghana

This pattern is drawn from symbols including adinkra (from Ghana) and nsibidi (from Nigeria), together with designs from West African fabric. The pattern draws together many of the symbols used through the exhibition, and suggests how the stories of today draw on the heritage of the past.

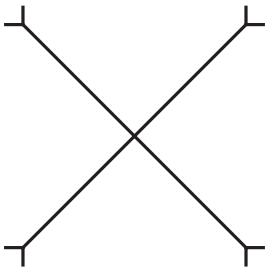
Below we illustrate three of the symbols in this pattern.



'Words'
Words, speech and meeting. Nsibidi symbol from south-eastern Nigeria.



'Nkyimu'
Lines made on adinkra cloth before stamping, symbolising skilfulness and precision. Adinkra symbol from Ghana.



'Love'
Love and unity. Nsibidi symbol from south-eastern Nigeria.

Present and future

In the 21st century, West African storytelling has entered a new period of dynamism. Literary writing has flourished, partly through encouragement from African and international prizes. New technology has spurred writers to experiment with digital forms.

Authors now use a wide range of media – from pamphlets to radio to the internet – to disseminate their stories and ideas. They also, as in the past, use a mixture of European and African languages. Publishing and broadcasting continue to be powerful forces for expressing and challenging ideas – perfect for capturing and catalysing the ferocious pace of change in this hugely creative region.

Nollywood posters

2014–15

The posters displayed above advertise recent Nigerian film and television programmes. The Nigerian film industry, dubbed 'Nollywood', is extremely popular, active and fast-moving. In terms of films produced, it is the second biggest film industry in the world. In 2014, the industry was valued at $3.3 billion. The films, which are usually low-budget, have dramatic and often comic plot-lines involving history, tradition, love, betrayal, revenge and crime. Film industries also exist in other parts of West Africa and the biannual FESPACO festival held in Burkina Faso continues to reward high artistic quality.

Children's books

Children's literature is a flourishing genre in West Africa. Ifeoma Onyefulu's photographic book, Ikenna goes to Nigeria, shows a British child visiting his Nigerian family. Award-winning children's writer Meshack Asare's story of finding a lost heifer in northern Ghana beautifully illustrates village life. Véronique Tadjo retells and illustrates a story of the water spirit Mami Wata for young children. Tadjo is one of the foremost writers of Côte d'Ivoire. Her decision to write for children as well as adults indicates the importance she places on children's literature.

1. Ifeoma Onyefulu, Ikenna goes to Nigeria. London, 2007. YK.2009.b.119

2. Meshack Asare, Meliga's day. Accra, 2000. YA.2001.a.9717

3. Véronique Tadjo, Mamy Wata and the monster. London, 2000. LC.31.a.14825

Comics from Nigeria

West African writers are experimenting with many different forms. These comics are from Nigeria. Most are written for adults, and deal with action themes similar to those favoured by graphic novels and comics internationally. Taboo contains stories of horror and the supernatural, while Central attack follows a crack secret unit tasked with preventing terrorist attacks. Jim Iyke is incorruptible is an action story told in photographs in which the actor Jim Iyke plays a hero, Kamsi, fighting corruption. D-team is a school story written for children.

4. Adeniyi Adeniji, Uhuru: Legend of the windriders. Nigeria, 2013. YP.2014.b.375

5. A. Adeniji, Taboo. Art by Nsikak 'Paps' Ifet and Dayo Animashaun. Nigeria, 2013?. YP.2014.b.376

6. Ayodele Elegba, Central attack. Art by Segun Oluwayomi and John Oporiopo. Lagos, 2012?. YP.2014.b.372

7. Emeka Okpala, Jim Iyke is incorruptible. Nigeria, 2013?. LP.31.b.1135

8. Veta Salubi, D-Team. Art by Henry Ezeokeke. Lagos?, 2012. YP.2014.b.373

‘Filtered memories 1977–81’

This art book is by Otobong Nkanga, whose work explores identity, memory, place, history and the environment through drawing, painting, sculpture, installation and performance. Her Nigerian childhood is remembered in a sequence, shown here, referring to ‘home, security, loved ones and the loss of innocence’. The title of the book, No be today story-O!, means that ‘the story is not of recent times, but it still has not been resolved’.

From left to right, starting with the back row, the pieces are entitled:

‘Home’, 1977, Yaba, Lagos

‘Reduced to ashes’, 1978, Yaba, Lagos

‘Teargas’, 1978, Yaba, Lagos

‘Blackout’, 1978, Yaba, Lagos

‘The loss in black bubbles’, 1979–81, Festac, Lagos-Ikono, Akwa-Ibom

Otobong Nkanga, No be today story-O! Amsterdam, 2010. ORB.40/1072

West African literature now

Filmed 4–5 July 2015

This short film was made at the Africa Writes festival at the British Library in 2015. Readers talk about what West African literature means to them, and how it's changing. And they try to answer our most difficult question: can you sum up West African writing in three words?

A joint project with Afrikult. With thanks to the Royal African Society.

1. Aya of Yop City

2009

The 'Aya' graphic novels are set in 1970s Côte d'Ivoire. The 'Yop City' of the title is the town of Yopougon-Koute, which forms a lively urban backdrop to the stories of its people. Their lives are narrated through the eyes of a young woman, Aya. This volume involves Aya's friends in a paternity dispute, a lover's deception and a beauty pageant. At the same time, Aya is learning that her own father, Ignace, is not all he seems. In this scene, Ignace's bosses discuss his future.

Marguerite Abouet, Aya of Yop City. London, 2009. YK.2010.a.9063

2. Stories in Hausa

The tradition of pamphlet publishing for a wide audience continues today. These are novellas published since 2000 in northern Nigeria, in the Hausa language. Many of the authors are women. Many hundreds of such volumes of popular fiction have appeared since 1987, with titles like A love marriage (Auren so). The authors deal with current issues such as love and loss, early and arranged marriages, divorce, co-wife rivalry, overbearing husbands and unfair treatment. Other stories are about action, adventure, the rich and the poor, corruption, crime and revenge.

Ahmed Yusif Amo, Gumbar dutse. Kano, 200?. YF.2010.a.28026

Habib ibn Hud Ahmad Darazo, Fargaba (Fear). Kano?, 2008?. YF.2010.a.21917

Maryam Kabir Mashi, Kasaita (Importance). Kano, 2005. YF.2010.a.28024

Bilkisu Muhammadu, Alkawarin miji (A husband's promise). Kano, 200-?. YF.2010.a.28028

Hadiza Kabir Ringim, Badi'at 1 (The beginning). Kano City, 200-?. YF.2010.a.28027

Aunty Sakina, Auren so (A love marriage). Nigeria, 200-?. YF.2010.a.28031

3. Satire

This cartoon tells a story of poverty and corruption in today's Benin Republic in order to argue for change. 'Give me a bit more', says the poor man, 'I'm hungry! Take pity!' 'You again!', replies the rich man. 'Do you want to remain dependent for life, or what?' The cartoon is published in a book on the politics of Benin. The author calls for 'a worthy, responsible political class, respectful of human rights and the fundamental values of democracy'.

Charlemagne Kêkou Akan, Amours et désamours politiques: se rassembler pour construire l'avenir, 50 années après les indépendances africaines. Cotonou, Bénin, 2010. YP.2012.a.4978

4. The literary scene

Literary writing is thriving today in West Africa. These four recent works, by authors from Nigeria, Senegal and Sierra Leone, give a taste of the many books published by West African writers since the turn of the millennium. In West Africa and beyond, this dynamism finds expression through numerous literary festivals and prizes. Port Harcourt in south-eastern Nigeria was declared UNESCO World Book Capital 2014, 'in recognition of the quality of its programmes to foster the promotion of books and to encourage reading'.

Teju Cole, Open city. London, 2011. H.2012/5973

Fatou Diome, The belly of the Atlantic. London, 2006. H.2007/3609

Aminatta Forna, The devil that danced on the water. London, 2003. Private loan

Lola Shoneyin, The secret lives of Baba Segi's wives. London, 2010. H.2010/7813

5. Science fiction writing

2013

The short stories in this collection of science fiction, published in Lagos, are full of (in the editor's words) 'robots, amphibious speed trains, psychedelic drugs and highly trained security operatives with conflicts of interest…'. Scientists try to solve climate change problems, and Lagos campaigns for independence. Science fiction, the editor argues, liberates the mind and frees writers to think about change in a country 'bogged down in the present, enslaved to its past and quite shy of the future'.

Ayodele Arigbadu (ed.), LAGOS_2060: exciting sci-fi stories from Nigeria. Lagos, 2013. YP.2014.a.3524

Women's writing in the new millennium

These extracts give a flavour of the power and reach of women's writing and literary activity since 2000. The writer and theatre director Were Were Liking talks here about choosing theatre in order to share with others. In the theatre, 'you cannot succeed alone… you have to be many'.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is one of today's leading African writers. This extract is from her first novel, Purple hibiscus. Sefi Atta won the inaugural Wole Soyinka Prize for Literature in Africa in 2006. These extracts are from a short story about a photograph of a 'starving girl', taken somewhere in Africa and published in a US magazine.

1. Interview with Were Were Liking, June 2005. L'Afrique littéraire – 50 ans d'écritures, Radio France Internationale with l'Institut national de l'audiovisuel, produced by Elikia M'Bokolo and Philippe Sainteny. 1CD0346863

2. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie reading extract from Purple hibiscus at the Orange Prize for Fiction British Library shortlist readings, 7 June 2004. 1CDR0025409

3. Extracts from Sefi Atta, 'The photograph', adapted by Jennifer Bassett, in Cries from the heart: stories from around the world. Oxford University Press, 2008. 1CD0286518

Poetry from Nigeria

Poets are public figures, even stars, in West Africa today, working in different forms and through new and old technologies. In creating original works, they draw on the African past and on international influences. Wana Wana (Wana Udobang) is a contemporary performance poet, working in English, who is also a writer, blogger, popular broadcaster, and gender and healthcare campaigner. Al-Haji Chief 'Lanrewaju Adepoju is a distinguished Yoruba-language poet.

1. 'Love is…' by Wana Wana, from the album Dirty laundry, produced by Bigfoot for MicWorx, no date. 1CD0347201

2. 'Fáyemí ń dábirá' by Olanrewaju Adepoju, from the album Fáyemí ń dábirá' Ewi Hot Hit 92, 2012 Lanrad Records Ltd LAPS 178, 1CD0347202

Poetry from Nigeria: ‘Lanrewaju Adepoju

Al-Haji Chief ‘Lanrewaju Adepoju’s career as a Yoruba-language poet and radio broadcaster has been long and distinguished. Many of his poems are in the ewì form, a modern genre drawing on oral literature, which he has been influential in developing. His work often comments on political matters, and he also composes religious Islamic poetry. Adepoju reaches a wide audience by recording his poetry on CD and cassette tape as well as publishing in book form. The poster displayed here promotes his 2012 CD.

Olanrewaju Adepoju presents Fáyemí ń dábirà (Selfless service and leadership without overlordship)’. Poster advertising CD. Ibadan, Nigeria, 2012. ORB.99/157

Olanrewaju Adepoju, Fáyemí ń dábirà. Ewi Hot Hit 92. Lanrad Records Ltd, Ibadan, Nigeria 2012. 1 CD 0346500

Olanrewaju Adepoju, Ayé ń siwèrè Ewi Hot Hit 59, Lanrad Records Ltd LALPS 161, no date. 1CA0035647

Olanrewaju Adepoju, Orírun Yorùbá. Ibadan, Nigeria, n.d.

Radio drama

Radio has long been hugely important for storytelling in West Africa, and continues to be very effective in reaching large audiences. This item is from Story Story, an awareness-raising drama broadcast to 20 million people across West Africa. The plotlines focus on how corruption, conflict and a lack of political accountability affect ordinary people.

This extract features two men, Ejike and Linus, who try to steal electricity by connecting their own cable to overhead power lines. Despite being caught by a man named Bugugu who threatens to call the police, they continue their attempt, which does not end well.

'Super Linus gets electrocuted', Story Story, 2015, made in Nigeria by BBC Media Action

Courtesy of BBC Media Action, the BBC's international development charity