

# SOURCES OF MOTIFS IN EL ANATSUI'S PYROGRAPHY

By  
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## ABSTRACT

Nsukka artists have been known, over the years, for their research and explorations of African design motifs. Alongside this, is also a conscious attempt by the Nsukka artists, particularly sculptors, to adopt pyrography, an age long technique of using fire to decorate wood works, in contemporary ways with the aid of power tools. This creative technique of artistic intervention has been in practice at the Nsukka School since El Anatsui, a Ghanaian born sculptor, joined the teaching staff of the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka in 1975.

However, despite serious creative and technical breakthroughs recorded by Anatsui and other Nsukka artists in explorations of African design motifs in sculpture, it has not received adequate scholarly attention which such inventive ventures attract. Therefore, this study discusses the sources of various design motifs employed by El Anatsui, the pioneer of modern Nigerian pyrography. These motifs, in some cases inform the creation of the works, while they appear to be after thoughts and decorative elements in other works.

## Introduction

Pyrography as a sculpture production technique has been practiced by Nsukka artists for over two decades. From its seemingly lowly position as a craft or low art, it has gained a commanding recognition not only within the Nsukka or Nigerian environment but also beyond Africa. This is because of the very impressive milestones achieved by the Nsukka visual artists through their burnt wood exhibitions between 1986 and 2006. In the fierce and competitive art arena where it was a herculean task to break into the international arts scene; in a disadvantaged position, where modern art critics obsessed with Avante-Garde art of the west, paid very little attention to creative efforts of contemporary African art, Nsukka artists defied all the odds and put their unique visual sculptures on the world map. El Anatsui's pyrographic works were the first to go international.

Pyrography refers to the techniques of decorating wood or other materials with controlled heat from fire or any other heat-emitting tool. However, not all burning effect seen on an art material is pyrography. For example, an already burnt wood, but shaped up later by an artist, may not necessarily qualify as pyrography, since the burning was not consciously effected by the artist. For it to become a pyrographic statement, the burning must have been thought out and expressed on the chosen surface by an artist.

This study discusses the sources of various design motifs employed by El Anatsui, the pioneer of modern Nigerian pyrography on his works. These motifs, in some cases, inform the creation of the works, while they appear to be afterthoughts and decorative elements in other works. The calligraphic nature of motif and design interpretation gave room for influences from paintings, drawings, and prints produced by other artists who also depended on traditional African motifs for inspiration. For example, it was very common to see similar design motifs in works by Anatsui, Obiora Udechukwu, Ndididi Dike, Tayo Adenaike,



Barthosa Nkurume, Vincent Amaefuna and other Nsukka artists. Indeed, there was hardly any practising artist from Nsukka who had not used the isi nwoji (head of kola nut) and agwolagwo (spirals) in producing sculpture, drawing, painting, textile and printmaking. However, some artists seemed to have worked harder than others to research on and adapt these African design motifs onto their works. One of them was El Anatsui.

El Anatsui, a Ghanaian of Ewe cultural Area was born at Anyako in 1944. After graduating from College of Arts, University of Science and Technology where he emerged as the best graduating art student in 1969, he also obtained a post graduate Diploma in Art Education from the same university before taking up a teaching appointment with the department of Art Education, University of Winneba Ghana. In 1970, he began his major attempts on decorative pyrography, using red hot metal rods and knives on circular wooden trays. His scorched-in designs consisted of major motifs and local pottery tradition. As a vibrant young artist and a member of Tekarts Group of Exhibiting Artists, Anatsui's art was featured in the Tekarts Expo in Winneba (1972), Arts Center, Accra (1973) and in Winneba in 1974.

In 1975, he became a staff of the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka through the combined efforts (influence) of Vincent Kofi, a Ghanaian sculptor and a one-time external examiner to the Department of Fine and Applied Arts at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka and Uche Okeke, a very versatile and influential member of the teaching staff of the university. At Nsukka, Anatsui met and fraternized with some vibrant artists and writers who further fired up his interest in traditional African motifs and ideas. They include, Uche Okeke, the arrowhead of modern Uli experiment, Chike Aniakor, Vincent Amaefuna and Obiora Udechukwu. His major solo exhibitions titled Pieces of Wood exposed his new technique of pyrography practice which depended on the use of modern power tools like the chain saw machine, drills of different kinds, routers and fire angle grinder as sculptural intervention media.

Between the mid-1980's and 2006, Anatsui produced a vast variety of pyrographed wall panels and free standing wood sculptures which were well received and adequately reviewed in Africa, Asia, Europe and America. In his over twelve solo exhibitions, he demonstrated the efficacy of African traditional motifs and design strategy in reaching to contemporary everyday issues for both local and international audience.

In his article, "El Anatsui: The Early Works", Olu Oguibe observes that Anatsui paid close attention to his location and environment, and was attracted to local materials and ideas which dictated the eventual forms and contents of his creations (25). These works serve as metaphors or visual allegories for responding to the world around him. The effect of Anatsui's response to the Sankofa (Return and get it) call could be seen in his early scorched wood works before he relocated to Nsukka. He studied works of local Ghanaian craftsmen; but, his works were first inspired by images and symbols on Ghanaian pots and textiles. His motifs were not limited to things from traditional Ghanaian culture because when he relocated to Nsukka, he discovered in Uche Okeke's Natural Synthesis, what Sankofa was also telling the Ghanaian artists. At Nsukka, Anatsui quickly enriched his design store house with Uli, Nsibidi, and symbols from other African cultures with which he explored his wood burning sculpture technique. In other words, although Anatsui's design



motifs were sourced principally from Africa, his major design sources remained Adinkra, Uli and Nsibidi. This is aptly demonstrated in his 1993 work, *Adinsibuli Stood Tall*. (fig.1) *Adinsibuli* must have represented a creative force or spirit about whom Anatsui made the following comments in 1987:

The same spirit which led the Adinkra symbolists to contrive a visual sign for the Abstract concept: seriousness, or to capture the visual essence of the talons of Okoide; the spirit which led the uli artists to leave the kolanut and get concerned rather with the spaces in-between them [the lobes], or to ruminate over the beauty of the trails of eke or the coils of the ome ji tendrils, the spirit which led the nsibidi artists to graphically encapsulate man in simple curvilinear terms, that kind of spirit I feel, is opening my vision, leading me, to conceive of things not in their vulgar physique but rather delve deeper below the surface of events, people and experiences, in an attempt to seek for visual meanings and truths, to distil essences, to decipher symbolic contents (10).



Fig.1: El Anatsui,  
*Adinsibuli Stood Tall*, wood,  
1995.  
© Museum for African Art

Design influences from traditional Ghanaian pottery were first noticed in Anatsui's wooden plaques, produced in the early 1970s. In them, decorations which are closely related to colour and linear designs of Kente textiles are concentrated on the rims of these wooden plates as decorative elements while major symbols and motifs are placed at the centre of the plates. In *God's Omnipotence* (1974) for example, the Adinkra symbol *Nyame ya ohene* (God is King) which alludes to the supremacy of God, is placed at the middle of the plaque as the principal motif. A careful review of Anatsui's past works reveals his immense admiration and respect for traditional ideas hidden in its ancient motifs and scripts. To build up his



vocabulary, he first depended on Adinkra motifs from Ghana, Uli and Nsibidi motifs from the south eastern part of Nigeria. He also used the Vai and Bamum scripts from Liberia and Cameroun respectively.

### **Adinkra**

*Adinkra* visual symbols (fig.2) of mostly Akan and Gyaman ethnic nationalities of Ghana and Cote D'Ivoire were used for decorating pots and cloths before the European colonization of the area. These motifs which represent popular proverbs, historical events and wise sayings also appeared on traditional gold weights. Adinkra means goodbye while the royal cloths on which these symbols are stamped are associated with funerary and spiritual matters. To create an Adinkra fabric design type, patterns are printed on cloths with carved calabash stamps and vegetable-based dyes that are made from pulverized and boiled stem of the baobab plant. History has it that Adinkra decoration existed before 1817, when Thomas Edward Browdich, an Englishman, collected one of the early documented samples in Kumasi. It is currently in the custody of the British Museum. Another sample was collected by a Dutch military commander, Major F. Last, in 1825. This piece of textile which was probably commissioned for King William I is in the collection of the National Museum of Ethnology, Lieden. There exist, among these early examples, several Adinkra motifs on various Ghanaian magazines and research journals. Having been inspired by traditional Ghanaian crafts and in response to the sankofa call, Anatsui availed himself of these culturally relevant design motifs both from observing the local craftsmen at work and studying finished products as well as available literature on Ghanaian traditional art.

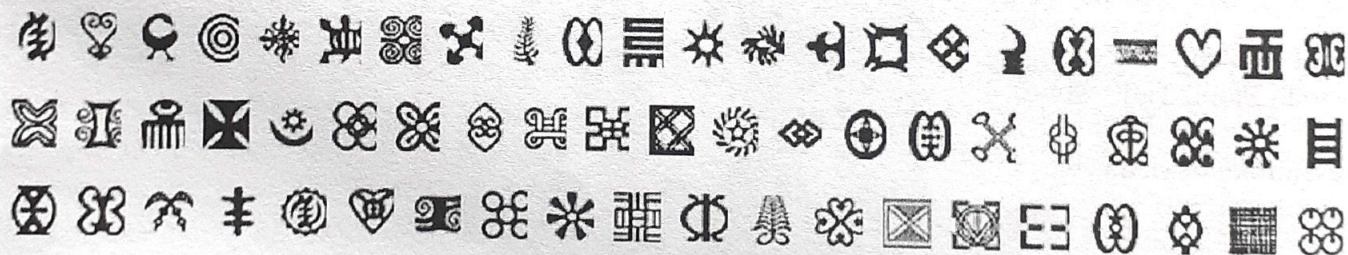


Fig.2. Some Adinkra motifs. © www.welltempered.net

### **Nsibidi**

*Nsibidi* is an ancient idiographic, pictographic and logographic communication device associated with Efik, Ibibio and Igbo cultural areas of South Eastern Nigeria. The word, Nsibidi, believed to have originated from Ekoid language means "cruel letters", suggesting harsh laws passed by the respected and feared Secret society which governs these communities associated with Nsibidi scripts (Marshal 68). They were used primarily for communication by these communities and the Ekpe secret society. Nsibidi comprises two major types; the secular and more commonly seen and used signs and the secret ones that are more



associated with Ekpe secret societies. Many of the commonly used symbols are more associated with love affairs while the ones which bear martial and political information were protected from non initiates of Ekpe (Isichei 68). Although no one knows the exact origin of Nsibidi symbols, the J.K. Macgregor school of thought believes that they were first used by the Uguakima, Ebe or Uyanga sub-group of Igbo people (357). Another, and perhaps a more universally accepted account is that Nsibidi communicative system originated from Ejagham community of South Eastern Nigeria and South Western Cameroun and were also used by neighbouring ethnic nationalities of Ibibio, Efik and Igbo, especially those who are controlled by Ekpe leopard secret cult.

The users of Nsibidi usually draw the signs in the air as gestures, on the ground with sticks or fingers, on skin as painting and tattoos, on walls as murals, on ceramics as incised decorations and on other surfaces such as calabashes, swords, masks and textiles. Among the Ohafia, Arochukwu people Ukara cloths, (figs.3 and 4) used as special ceremonial dresses by the influential members of Ekpe secret society, are designed profusely with nsibidi motifs by young men and old women. Most ukara cloths were custom made, with the owners suggesting the major motifs, laden with personal meanings, to be introduced during its decoration. Indeed, among the Ekpe initiates, the most influential and those who know the deepest secrets and symbols are the mboko, the seventh grade of the cult. Their unwillingness to divulge the meanings behind some of the signs and symbols accounted for diverse and sometimes imagined interpretations given to such signs and symbols. In ukara cloth, for instance, many of the scripts and symbols contained there are nsibidi while some are not.

The cultural receptivity and flexibility of the so called "Cross River Igbo" allowed for nsibidi to co-exist with uli in the same ukara cloth. Some common symbols found in a typical Ukara Ekpe cloth include the python, fish, concentric squares, twin gong, masks, crocodile and leopard whose body decoration is depicted as a checkerboard pattern. Also found in Ukara cloth are the abstract symbols of leopard's claws, which signifies the power of Ekpe cult, turtle, that signifies wisdom and trickery, feathers and manila money which illustrate the cult as wealthy and influential. There exist also, several nsibidi linear symbols which depict objects of various human activities and intimate relationships including love, marriage, procreation, divorce, disagreement, trade, illness and even enslavement.





Fig.3.Ukara Cloth  
in Fowler museum UCLA.  
© H.M. Cole.

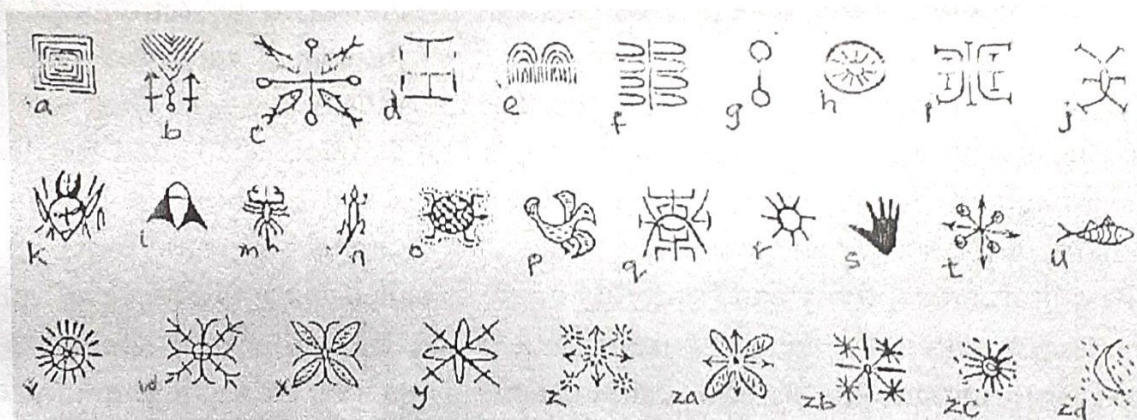


Fig. 4. Some motifs found on ukara cloth (after H.M. Cole and C.C. Aniakor, 1984) (a) House of Ekpe (b) Nsibidi tree (c and d) Palaver or money (e and f) Lots of money (g) slave fetters (h) Nsibidi house (i) Man and woman in disagreement (j) Man and Woman in love (k) Mask (l) Double gong (m) Scorpion (n) Lizard (o) Turtle (p) Bird (q) Marriage (r) Nsibidi house(s) Hand (t) Man who has travelled wide (u) fish (v,w,x y,z,za,) Meanings unknown to Abiriba informants (zb) star (zc) moon.

There is also documented evidence of Nsibidi practice in the Central American regions brought about by the forced relocation of these indigenous people of South Eastern Nigeria during the era of slave trade. Nsibidi practice is called *anaforuana* and *veve* in Cuba and Haiti respectively (Gregory 23-24). The Nsibidi symbols have been documented by both colonial writers and indigenous Nigerian researchers like Richard Marshal, J.K. Macgregor, David Diring, Elizabeth Isichei, Hebert Cole and Chike Aniakor. These symbols were readily available to experimental artists like El Anatsui, Obiora Udechukwu and other Nsukka artists who came after them.



*Uli*

*Uli* traditional design is associated with the Igbo cultural group. It is mostly a linear decorative device painted on the human body by women. It is also associated with female-oriented wall paintings and wood panel carvings by men. Its rendition is devoid of perspective and symmetry and depends on clever manipulation of positive and negative spaces to achieve balance. *Uli* painting is also largely spontaneous and ephemeral. The body painting lasts for a couple of days and the original richness of a mural begins to fade as it reacts to the effects of weather. According to Cole and Aniakor, both the body painting and the mural "share many motifs and principles despite the differences in surfaces embellished and pigments used" (39). The motifs are painted on the body of children, woman or even men with a brownish liquid obtained from crushed *uli* seeds, and applied with stick, fowl feather or a specialized painting knife known as *mma nwuli* while the earth colours are applied to primed walls with locally made brushes. Many patterns associated with *Uli* are abstract but there are other less abstract representations of plants and animals as well as cosmic symbols. *Uli* is mainly an expression of beauty, but it also has strong spiritual and medicinal undertone. Black is the major colour of delivery while other earth colours of reddish brown, yellow ochre and white complete the palette for a typical *Uli* mural painting.

While running a private studio and gallery in Enugu in the early 1960s following his graduation from the college of Arts and Science, Zaria, and his subsequent training in Europe, Uche Okeke carried out and pioneered an extensive research on *uli* and its adaptation in modern art. When he began to teach in the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, he encouraged a very serious team of vibrant lecturers and students to research and documents the state of *uli* practice in many traditional Igbo societies. This outcome which was in the form of term papers, long essays and major projects comprise what became major resource materials on *uli*. As Uche Okeke, Chike Aniakor and Obiora Udechukwu worked with various traditional painters with the intention of trying to understudy them and carry the dividends into the classrooms, some undergraduate students were influenced by some literature which Elizabeth Willis produced for her postgraduate research on *uli* art practice among various Igbo groups. In this research, partly supervised by Uche Okeke, Willis classifies the types of *uli* traditional practice into Igbo Ozo and Igbo Abamaba (37-49).

According to the research, some areas of Igbo Abamaba, *uli* traditional motifs are used together with *nsibidi* motifs. For example, the leopard paws, represented in the form of repeated triangular and the checkerboard patterns appear both in Arochukwu women's body painting and the *ukara* cloth of the Ekpe (leopard) secret society. Also, the Igbo Ozo corpus, whose design strategy seemed to have been preferred and adopted by some Nsukka artists like Uche Okeke, Obiora Udechukwu, Vincent Amaefuna and Chike Aniakor, also caught the fancy of El Anatsui and other pyrographers after him. It involved a centrifugal compositional technique which favoured economy of space and motifs whose scale within







. etechi (shaded area) and zig zag pattern derived from traditional Awka carved doors. The result of these studies is seen in his 1986 masterpiece shown below. (fig.7)

Fig. 7. El Anatsui, When I last wrote to you about Africa I used a letterheaded parchment Paper. There were many blank slots in the letter ..... I can now fill some of these slots because ..... I have grown older , wood, 1986.

© October Gallery, London

This linear sculpture piece represents a scroll containing numerous Adinkra, Uli and Nsibidi symbols, which are laid out with a strong influence of Adinkra design strategy of positioning design motifs within rectangular segments. In this work alone, the researcher has identified over

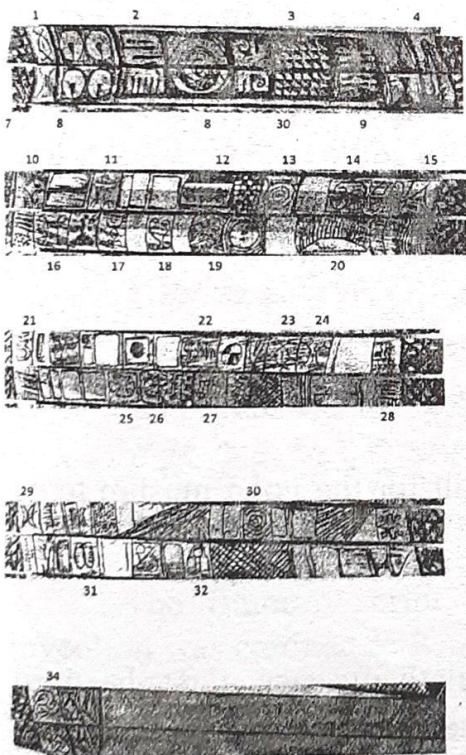
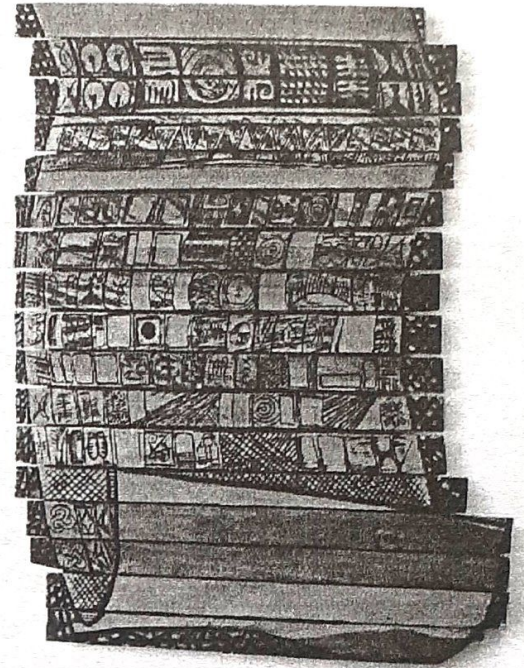
thirty different motifs taken from these three major art cultures. Figure 8 below shows graphic details of major motifs

used by Anatsui on When I last wrote to you about Africa I used a letterheaded parchment Paper. There were many blank slots in the letter ..... I can now fill some of these slots because ..... I have grown older.

Fig. 8. Major motifs in When I last wrote to you about Africa I used a letterheaded parchment Paper. There were many blank slots in the letter ..... I can now fill some of these slots because ..... I have grown older (Adapted by Chijioke Onuora).

### Key

1. Intimate relationship and divorce. nsibidi
2. Sankofa (Return and get it) adinkra
3. Obilikipokpa (cut as it in slices one way) uli
4. Abuba Ukpaka (oil bean leaf) uli
5. Ntupo (dots) uli
6. Nkpachi (hemming) uli
7. God of Guidance
8. Etechili Etechi (filled with shaded area) uli
9. Duafe (wooden comb) symbol of good feminine qualities. aditinkra





10. Isi oji (head of kola nut) uli
11. Denkyem (crocodile) signifying adaptability adinkra
12. Abuba Ukpaka (oil bean leaf) uli
13. Akuru aku (concentric circles) uli
14. Akoko nan (Hen's feet) symbol of protectiveness and parental discipline adinkra
15. Epele (name given to variety of triangular shapes) uli
16. Metapo (Knot of reconciliation) adinkra
17. Ngwele (Lizard) uli
18. Sankofa (return and get it). adinkra
19. (zig zag pattern) derived from carved doors. uli
20. Aziza (broom) uli
21. Akobeh (war horn) call to arms. adinkra
22. Ekperekpe (representation of grated cassava) uli
23. Intimate relationship. nsibidi
24. Divorce or separation. nsibidi
25. Krapa (sanctity) symbol of Good luck. adinkra
26. God of supreme. adinkra
27. Mkpulu (pin motif) uli
28. Nkyimkyim (twisting) versatility, dynamism and toughness. adinkra
29. Okwa nzu (wooden chalk-bowls) symbols of purity uli
30. Akumaku (concentric circles) uli Se ne Tekrema (enclose compound) symbol of growth and interdependence. adinkra
31. Ogene (Twin gong) uli
32. Ukramo bone amma (the good muslim makes it difficult for the good muslim to be noticed) adinkra
33. Onwa tulu atu (first phase of the moon) uli

Anatsui's sourcing of Uli motifs and symbols was relatively easy. First, he lived among the Nsukka artists whose major preoccupation at the time of his arrival was a massive study and experimentation of uli body painting tradition. While Uche Okeke had a corpus of documented uli drawings, Obiora Udechukwu was already beginning to employ them in his drawings. Massive documentation of traditional motifs was also evident in the research projects, term papers and long essays by the students of the Department of Fine and Applied Arts of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Therefore, the Department of Fine and Applied Arts library contained numerous unpublished literatures on traditional Igbo art, from which Elizabeth Willis produced a comprehensive lexicon of Igbo uli motifs in 1987 (92-120).



Her work complimented earlier writings by K.C. Murray and M.D.W. Jeffreys on uli painting in Bende (n.pag.) and Awka (219-229) respectively. It is interesting to note the remarkable similarities between many of the uli motifs which are contained in Anatsui's sketch book and Elizabeth Willis's publication of 1987. For example Ajaba (zig-zag pattern), aziza (broom), mputu (pin motif), Ngwele (lizard), Nkata (basket) and several types of isi nwoji (head of kola nut) motifs were represented and commented on almost exactly the same way Willis documented them. Although Anatsui's sculpture under examination preceded Willis's publication, it still suggests a close collaboration between Anatsui and Willis who was a masters degree student in the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, in the early 1980s and later a painting lecturer at the University of Maiduguri, Nigeria. Indeed, Anatsui's aggressive study and application of traditional African motifs in his artistic expression, around the middle of the 1980s, manifested in some prints produced by the artist in 1986 and 1987, respectively which included an aquatint version of *When I Last wrote to you about Africa*.

### Vai and Bamun Scripts

Anatsui's interest on traditional African symbols, was not limited to Adinkra, Nsibidi and Uli alone. He also ventured into the Vai and Bamun syllabic writing scripts of the Jundu and Bamun ethnic groups of West Africa. Vai syllabary is associated with the Jundu people of Liberia.

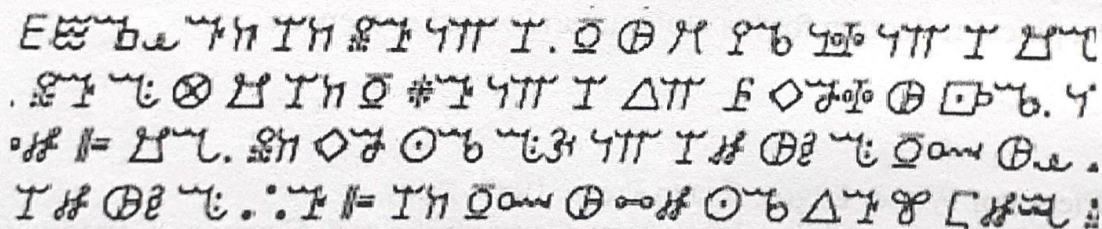


Fig. 8. Example of the vai script from Liberia. © SIL International.

The Bamun script is associated with the Bamun people of Cameroun. Its invention was credited to King Ibrahim Njoya, the ruler of the Bamun kingdom in 1896. He claimed that he was inspired in a dream to create a script for his people and was influenced by both the vai and Arabic scripts. Bamun scripts were first used for administrative purposes and the chronicling of the Bamun history and culture. It soon became the secret court language. The symbols were both pictographic and ideographic (Gohring Manfred 41). King Njoya opened schools where these scripts were taught. Also with the scripts, he produced a book which contained a volume of the history and customs of his kingdom, a book of rules for use in his court and a documentation of the Bamun traditional drugs as well as the mapping of his kingdom. The study of the Bamun scripts was first frustrated by both the German and French colonialists and was eventually banned by the French colonial govern-



ment after the death of King Njoya in 1933. Despite this setback there has been renewed interest in its study by the contemporary Bamun scholars.

In many of Anatsui's sculptures he made use of these traditional African motifs. An example of such sculpture is Erosion, a giant free-standing wood sculpture, produced during his Earth Summit art residency in Brazil in 1992. In Erosion, detailed and repeated motifs, particularly the Adinkra, created very busy patterns on the body of this massive wood pillar before sections of it were 'eroded' with the aid of power-driven chain saw. The 'eroded' parts of the main wood block, together with their pyroengraved surfaces were left at the base of the stem as part of the general composition. One of the many significant motifs on this sculpture piece is stylized human figures which are taken from some cultures of Africa. These figures have also been used in many of his Migration series.

As was mentioned earlier, Anatsui's motifs were taken mostly from the Ghanaian and the South Eastern Nigeria cultural environments. In his work, *When I last wrote to you about Africa...*, many motifs from different cultures were employed by the artists while in some others like the Leopard Cloth, Sagging Pants and A Chip off the Old Block, two major motifs were repeated over and over in order to create pleasant patterns. Anatsui was very meticulous in his choice and use of motifs. Though they were very fascinating to behold, they were essentially figures of speech in Anatsui's numerous pyroengraved statements on wood. Playful and sometimes childlike as they may seem, they contain monumental statements and ideas meant for serious philosophical reflection for his multicultural visual audiences.

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