

THE ANCIENT MANDING SCRIPT

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It is usually assumed that writing was introduced into West Africa by the Arabs. But this view is unfounded because, due to the demands of trade, scripts were invented by African trader-groups in ancient times. This was especially true of the Mande or Manding-speaking peoples who are recognized as the inventors of several scripts.

It appears from the evidence that these writing systems were not recent creations. They were derived from a proto-Mande script invented thousands of years ago by the ancestors of the Mande when they lived in the Sahara at the time it was fertile. This proto-Mande script was used by the ancient Mande to write or engrave inscriptions throughout the Western Sahara. This script was a syllabary similar to the Vai script.

Although D. Dalby,¹ a well known British linguist, is of the opinion that the Manding scripts are of recent origin, I have shown in many articles that this view is incorrect.² An ancient invention of the Mande scripts is not a new theory. In 1899, M. Delafosse, one of the earliest scholars to write on the Vai script, noted the Vai tradition for its ancient origin.³ Prof. K. Hau, in a very interesting article written in 1973, discussed the possibility of the Mande script being invented long ago by traders to keep their business records. "We cannot even guess when this occurred," she wrote, "but it is of great importance to note that almost all the people . . . who possess writing systems, whether syllabic or 'ideographic,' employ languages which belong to the great Mande language family of West Africa."⁴

These scripts, like others, were created by the demands of long distance trade. They were created by merchants to help them keep records of their business transactions and were only later used as a means of preserving religious doctrines and writing obituaries. These written scripts came into being in Africa as a result of the growth of trade centers. These served as the major terminal points for goods supplied by people who usually lived in small villages and practiced agriculture, herding and mining part-time. Among the Mande *Kuma* (which means the word) is considered sacred. As a result, written amulets have long been recognized as containing magical power.

The Mande have long been involved in long-distance trade. The Niger bend area has been important in the transshipment of trade items from the North and

gold from the South, long before the Arabs arrived in North Africa.⁵ Many of these goods were carried along chariot routes which met at the Niger bend.

The chariot trails led from Garama in the Fezzan, which converged at Ahaggar and went through Adrar des Ifora, to Gao on the Niger bend. Another road ran from Morocco, 300 miles inland, parallel to the Atlantic coast. It crossed the Adrar of Mauritania and turned inland in a wide sweep reaching the Niger bend near Timbuktu.

The archaeological evidence suggests that copper and gold were the early items offered in trade by the Mande. According to a Vai tradition told by a Vai prince, his people mined gold early and brought their syllabary with them when they moved to their present place of habitation.⁶ The Mande languages consist of two groups, known to scholars as the *Mande Tan* and *Mande Fu*, after the word for 'ten': *tan* (*tam, tamu*) or *fu* (*pu, bu*), which occur in the various languages. The speakers of the Mande Tan group live mainly in the north. These are the culture bearers of the historic Mande speakers. They are the Soninke cluster, which includes SoSo, Azer, Sarakhule, Khesonke, Bozo, Vai and Dialonke. These people are credited with the founding of Ghana. The second group, *Mande Fu*, includes the Malinke-Bambara-Dyula cluster.⁷

There is a diversity of opinion concerning the age of the Mande languages, but Greenberg⁸ has suggested that around 7,000 years BP (Before the Present) the Niger-Congo (*N.C.*) group, which includes the Mande languages, began to break up. They were practicing a neolithic culture as indicated by the Proto-*N.C.* words for cow, goat and cultivate.⁹

The Mande speakers were part of the ancient *Maa* or Fish Confederation.¹⁰ The *Maa* confederation included the ancient Egyptians, Elamites, Sumerians and Dravidians, in addition to the Mande and other Niger-Congo groups.¹¹ I call these ancient people that lived in the Sahara the Proto-Saharans. At this ancient date, between 8,000-4,000 BP, the Sahara was much wetter.

The proto-Saharans spoke common languages and had common cultural elements. For example, they had common pronouns:

Common Pronouns

Language	1st Per. Singular	2nd Per. Singular	3rd Per. Singular
Egyptian	<i>ink</i>	<i>nik, nit</i>	<i>nif</i>
Manding	<i>na, n</i>	<i>i</i>	<i>a, e</i>
Dravidian	<i>an, naa, na</i>	<i>i</i>	<i>a</i>
Elamite	<i>u</i>	<i>nu</i>	<i>ri</i>
Sumerian	<i>ga, gal</i>	<i>za, zu</i>	<i>ene</i>

Language	1st Per. Plural	2nd Per. Plural	3rd Per. Plural
Egyptian	<i>inn</i>	<i>ntn</i>	<i>nten</i>
Manding	<i>alu</i>		
Dravidian	<i>ani</i>	<i>a, ar</i>	<i>aru</i>
Elamite	<i>un</i>	<i>nun</i>	<i>r:ir</i>
Sumerian	<i>men</i>	<i>zu, ne</i>	<i>ene-ne</i>

Common Cultural Traits

Language	Chief	Writing	City
Dravidian	<i>cira, Ca</i>	<i>cārrā</i>	<i>ur(u)</i>
Elamite	<i>Sunki, Salu</i>	<i>*talu</i>	
Sumerian	<i>Sar</i>	—	<i>ur</i>
Nubian	<i>Sirgi</i>	<i>Hor/Sor</i>	
Ubaid	<i>Sar</i>		<i>ur</i>
Manding	<i>Sa</i>	<i>Sebe</i>	<i>furu</i>

During the proto-Saharan period they had domesticated cattle in the Western Sahara. This was as early as 5,000 BC, indicated by the appearance of painted slabs portraying cattle with rope leads around their necks.¹² At this time the people practiced a mixed pastoralist-sedentary culture, indicated by the discovery of abundant pottery and grinding stones at habitation sites throughout the Western Sahara.

The Proto-Mande occupied an area extending from the western Sahara to the Fezzan in southern Libya. The Mande influenced the style of western Mediterranean pottery. Archaeologists recognize that Western Mediterranean ware was derived from Western Saharan styles, and that eastern Saharan styles have affinities to Middle Nile ware. But, according to J.B. Clark, even with slight variations, there was "a general cohesion" between the Saharan-Sudanese styles.¹³

McCall is of the opinion that the Mande speakers were established early in the southern Sahara.¹⁴ Welmers¹⁵ has suggested 3,000 BC or earlier for the separation of the Mande speakers into Eastern and Western branches.

Beginning around 2,000 BC a dry period returned to the Sahara, which has continued up to the present. It was during this period that the Mande began to migrate to their present areas of habitation. Around 2000 BC the Mande founded Karkarichinkat and Dar Tichitt.¹⁶ In the Fezzan in the fertile valley between the Ubari Erg and the Erg of Murzuq, in oases spread from El Abiod to Tin Abunda, the Garamantes/Garamande/Mande tribe lived. This was the earliest Mande Empire known to Europeans. The capital city of the Garamantes was located at Jerma.¹⁷

In the western Sahara, Dar Tichitt was an important Mande site in antiquity. Here between 1,500-300 BC the Mande built their cities and cultivated bulrush

millet.¹⁸ Munson suggests that the Dar Tichitt cities were the forerunners of the Soninke empire of Ghana, on the strength of the fact that, in oases in the vicinity of the ruins of Dar Tichitt, the people speak Azer, a Soninke language.¹⁹ The Mande communities in Mauritania at Dar Tichitt and those in the Fezzan communicated with each other by chariots. These carried goods across long established chariot routes which extended from the Niger bend to North Africa.²⁰ To pull their chariots, the ancient Mande used ponies, which are still found in the Sahilian region.²¹

Due to the demands of the Transsaharan trade the Mande invented their own script. This proto-Mande script was also used by other members of the *Maa* confederation including the Egyptians, Sumerians, (proto-) Elamites and the Dravidians of the Indus Valley.²² The Mande have left numerous inscriptions throughout the Western Sahara in the Air, Mauritania and Morocco. These inscriptions engraved on rocks were obituaries and/or talismanic burial sites.

The proto-Mande script was probably invented sometime before 4,000 BC, because by 3,100 BC the proto-Saharan tribes separated. In the western Sahara, wherever these ancient signs are found, the Mande totem sign Kangaba often appears. The earliest Mande inscriptions found so far were located at Oued Mertoutek which has been dated to 3,000 BC by Wulsin.²³ These signs are identical to the Mande inscriptions located in the Grotte de Goundaka.²⁴

The ancient Mande wrote on stone, wood and dried palm leaves. Ink was made from soot and liana.²⁵ The Bambara claim that they once carved their royal inscriptions/archives on tablets of wood.

Using the Vai syllabary but reading the signs in Malinke-Bambara I have been able to decipher the proto-Mande inscriptions found in the Western Sahara. The proto-Mande script has around 200-350 signs and around 40 different forms. It is not an alphabetic script as many scholars assume. It is syllabic. Due to the early date assigned to the Oued Mertoutek site, we can infer that the Manding had writing long before the Phoenicians arrived in north Africa circa 1,200 BC. Up to this day the Manding writing is used by members of the Manding secret societies.²⁶

The inscriptions are read from right to left or top to bottom. The language was written in a syllabary due to the high frequency of disyllabic roots of the kind: CVCV (Consonant/vowel/consonant/vowel) CVN (consonant/vowel/nasal) or CVV (consonant/vowel/vowel). The monosyllabic roots of CV seem often to be the result of the reduction of disyllabic roots.

In the Manding scripts the same sign can be used to represent different phonetic sounds. Therefore we find several characters which represent different phonetic values: → *mbe* "act, deed," *ke* "to cut," *fo* "to make furrows with plough."

Although Malinke distinguishes nine vowels, we find, in the inscriptions soon to be discussed, only six vowels used in the syllabary: a, e, ɛ, ɔ, ɔ̃, ɔ̄. The labiovelar consonants *kp* and *gb* occur in most of the inscriptions, e.g., *gbé* 𞤎, 𞤍 "to hunt, purity, etc" and *kpe* 𞤎, 𞤍 "to thrust, to push in."

The most common syllabic forms in those *American* inscriptions which I have shown elsewhere to be related to the African, are monosyllabic. They consist of CV types: *Ba* 𐀀 "mother," *ka* 𐀁 "to cut"; *go* 𐀂 "river"; *di* 𐀃 "to give." The other common type is syllabic nasal: *n/m*, e.g., *ngbé* 𐀄 "favorable." There is also the CCV form, as in *gbe* 𐀅, 𐀆 "pure, to hunt, etc." The CVV form occurs but it is rare and usually results from the writing of two characters to form a new character, thus: *ga a* 𐀇 "this hearth."

Compound nouns are not much in use in the script. But derivative nouns and adjectives are formed by suffixes, which may have originally been independent words: *di* "give," *di-la* 𐀈 "giver" or *tege* "cut," *tege-na* 𐀉 "cutting tool."

The major suffixes used in the inscriptions were *ka* 𐀁 the suffix of possession, or nationality, which is joined to a name or serves to form names and verbs; *la* 𐀂 a suffix to augment value joined to certain pronouns; *to* 𐀃 a locative suffix, as well as *bi* 𐀄 the affirmative suffix, which denotes action that is either completed, continuous, or repeated. Other affirmative suffixes which denote action are *ye* 𐀅 and *nu* 𐀆. *Nu* also features as a habitation sign.

The personal pronouns are all written in the second and third person singular, *i* 𐀇 or *a* 𐀈 respectively. The first person singular forms for *ne* and *ni* are sometimes shortened to *n*.

The most common verbs in these texts are *bè* 𐀉 "to lie down, to sink"; *bwè* 𐀊 "to put down, to free"; *ka* 𐀁 and *ta* 𐀋 "to go"; *gā* 𐀌 "to warm, to cook"; *fo* 𐀍 "to speak"; *pé* 𐀎, 𐀏 "thrust, to push in" and *tā* 𐀐 "fire."

The attributive verb "to be" can be expressed in the Manding text as either *ye* 𐀅 or *bé* 𐀑 — *a ye fi-ma* "he is back," *a ye lu ka gbe* 𐀒 "he has cut the family hearth well." In most cases I have used the *bé* form in my transliteration of the text, as well as *ye*. The verb of negation is usually the word *té* but in the inscriptions I found that a form of the word *tī* 𐀓 was used instead.

The major nouns found among the inscriptions deal with death (𐀔) and burial customs, or agriculture. Some are talismans. There is much use of the sign *kyulyu* 𐀕, 𐀖, 𐀗, 𐀘 "large hemisphere sepulchre or coffin." The term *gyo* 𐀙, 𐀚 for "talisman or cult" is also used.

In agriculture we frequently find the following signs: *gé* 𐀛 "to sprout"; *kyè* 𐀜 "beans (kidney)"; *kā* 𐀝 "Maize"; *gyi* 𐀞 "water"; *gbā* 𐀟 "land of tillage"; *ku* 𐀠 "yam"; *fo* 𐀍 "make furrows with a plough"; *Pé* 𐀎, 𐀏 "strike the ground", or *pwe* 𐀐, 𐀑 "flat land, level land"; *mè* 𐀒, ... "surface, area"; *pi* 𐀓 "plants in the ground"; *dé* 𐀔, 𐀕 "land of inundation." Other nouns deal with habitation sites: *ga/gba* 𐀇, 𐀈, 𐀉 "hearth"; *yu* 𐀊, *nu* 𐀆, 𐀇, 𐀈, 𐀉, 𐀊, 𐀋, 𐀌, 𐀍, 𐀎, 𐀏, 𐀐, 𐀑, 𐀒, 𐀓, 𐀔, 𐀕, 𐀖, 𐀗, 𐀘, 𐀙, 𐀚, 𐀛, 𐀜, 𐀝, 𐀞, 𐀟, 𐀠, 𐀡, 𐀢, 𐀣, 𐀤, 𐀥, 𐀦, 𐀧, 𐀨, 𐀩, 𐀪, 𐀫, 𐀬, 𐀭, 𐀮, 𐀯, 𐀰, 𐀱, 𐀲, 𐀳, 𐀴, 𐀵, 𐀶, 𐀷, 𐀸, 𐀹, 𐀺, 𐀻, 𐀼, 𐀽, 𐀾, 𐀿 "family habitation."

PROTO-MANDE SIGNS

- +, X *ngbe*, favorable, purity
 /// *gyu*, foundation, take root
 //, = *gyo*, talisman, amulet
 U, U *yu*, hemisphere, sepulchre
 UU *to*, the abode
 ++ *kyu*, coffin
 ○ *ko*, ridge, back, word, to say, behind, river, in the absence of
 W, : *pè*, flat lands, to fix, to hit
 ^ *fe*, vacant
 ○ *ta*, place
 . . . *mè*, area
 □ *mbo*, residue
 ⊕ *da*, landmark, wild terrain
 I *ga*, hot, hearth, habitation of family
 I *naa*, to come, to be pleasant, to bring
 V *su*, dead, home, night
 Z, S *kaa*, to cut, term of respect, to go
 ⊗ *taa ngbe*, place of righteousness
 ⊗ *gba*, hearth, glow, terrain of cultivation, to plant
 III *sè*, realize
 Y, ○ *taa*, place
 +, X *gbe*, lay down, purity
 • *lii*, indeed
 — *ii*, thou, you
 □ *kpo*, superlative of white, clean

⊕, ∞ gè, to sprout

∧ iii, to break

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