



# THINGS FALL TOGETHER

5<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL AFRIKAN DESIGN CONFERENCE

Monrovia, Liberia

June 18, 2017

2:00-8:00pm



Each year the African Design Conference introduces speakers that are influential in the research and application of Afrikan design methodologies. After the monumental success we had at last year's conference, we are excited about the lineup of speakers and workshops we have

in store for the 5th Annual African Design Conference. The theme of this year's conference is African Design within the educational sector. The workshop and speaker series will help commence the process of implementing Africa's graphic design history in educational curriculums around the world.

- Joseph Togba, Moderator

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## Design in Africa

I returned home last year after an absence that totaled twenty years, going to school and then working in the US. I decided to come back home to start ZIVA, a New Media Arts school. ZIVA, besides being an acronym for Zimbabwe Institute of Vigital Arts, is also a Shona word meaning “knowledge.”

At the heart of ZIVA’s mission is a desire to create a new visual language, a language inspired by history, a language that is informed by but not dictated

to or confined by European design, a language that is inspired by all the arts (sculpture, textiles, painting and Afrikan religion), a

language whose inspiration is Afrikan. We are at a crossroads in the history of design right now with the young designers of the Western world rejecting the straitjacket confines of what design is and is not.

It is time that Afrika, the original home of humanity and life itself, rose from the condescending “darkness” into the light. It never ceases to amaze me when in 1999, just a few

months before the new millennium, I still hear of Afrika being referred to, in some quarters, as the “Dark Continent.”

So it is with this realization that only we, Afrikans, could set ourselves free that the idea of ZIVA came about. But how to make one’s ideas have an impact on a continent as massive as Afrika? The answer came in the form of an unexpected request from Jackie Guille, a professor at Middlesex University, who’d been asked by UNESCO to coordinate the first in a series of Arts workshops. She asked me to be one of the trainers for the three week workshop at Makerere University,



Uganda. I could not believe my luck! Here was a golden opportunity for me to put my ideas to the test. I gave them two projects: each one had to design a typeface, and as a group, they made a book out of bark cloth about the process of making the medium. We wanted to create a truly Afrikan book, using natural dyes and inks and some of the new fonts, but we only had ten days, so we opted for silkscreening the text instead. Since I'm fond of saying that Afrikans did not have shapes like squares or rectangles, I insisted that the text be laid out in circles and other organic shapes, with each spread



different. The results were stunningly simple and amazingly effective. Varying style and structure in one unit is also prevalent in other Afrikan arts like music and dance; just listen to mbira music, deceptively simple to the uninitiated ear but extremely complex in structure to an musician. The Afrikan's sense of color and rhythm is unique to the continent. Take for instance

textile design. It was a revelation to learn that in the Congo, where textile design is big, the seemingly "off register" printing on "kitenge" cloth is intentional! That is how the market demands it. One looks at the graphic expression of the deconstructivists where razor-sharp precision is thrown out of the window in favor of looser and more atmospheric work and wonders why we are not encouraging our students to experiment with sensibilities that would come more naturally to them. Take color for instance. Afrikans have their own palettes that have no kinship with the principles of color devised by such schools of thought as the Bauhaus. Why do we ignore those? The rest of the world would love to understand this Afrikan



## Students Work

Zimbabwe Institute of Visual Arts ZIVA student, Lilian Oanjo worked with the Roman alphabet to design a Afrikan Influenced letterform.

sense of color! Tapestries woven by "unschooled" craftspeople grace some of the world's major museums and private collections, stunning testimonials to the Afrikan creative genius. Rhythm comes naturally to the Afrikan artist because of her proximity to nature in everyday life. I saw stunning rhythmic patterns on baskets in Uganda and realized then that when we talk of rhythm in design today, we evoke the work of people like

Piet Mondrian, who was inspired by the jazz music of the Afrikan Americans who in turn brought that stuff with them on their forced journey to the new world. Can you imagine the potency of design work that looks at home for rhythmic inspiration! We could go on and on with the analogies; the fact remains – Afrika is the source of it all. Let us go back to the source. The western world is looking to Afrika again for inspiration. This time they won't simply

walk in and take it (in fact, they don't want to!) – rather, they will learn from us; there will be mutual respect for each other's intellectual and creative property. There will be an equal flow of information and knowledge from north to south and vice-versa. That is the new order, and we are starting to create it now. ZIVA is only a small step in the right direction. We need more people who care to join us.

# CAREY PIERS

## African Graphic Systems

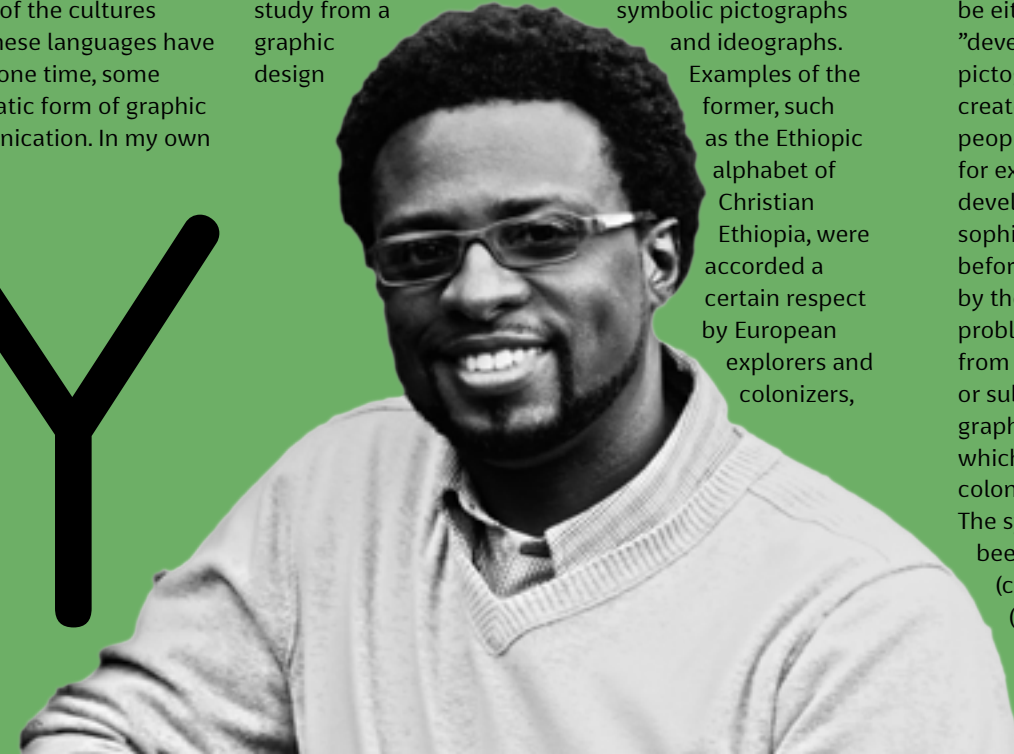
Africa is currently home to approximately 2,000 languages and it is likely that all of the cultures using these languages have had, at one time, some systematic form of graphic communication. In my own

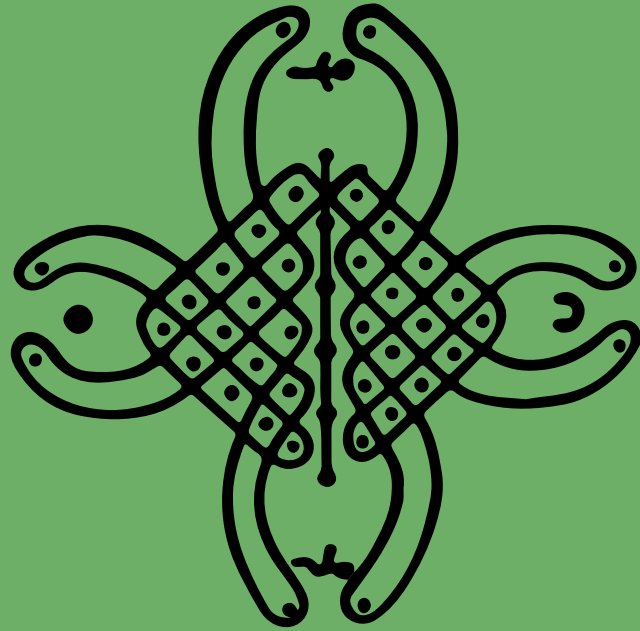
research, I have identified over 80 such systems, a figure certainly incomplete. Saki Mafundikwa (2004) has also written on these systems in the context of the African diaspora in his book, *Afrikan Alphabets*, which I believe is the first such study from a graphic design

perspective. Forms of graphic communication include alphabets and syllabaries, easily recognizable as comparable to those used in European or Indian cultures, as well as collections of less comprehensible symbolic pictographs and ideographs.

Examples of the former, such as the Ethiopic alphabet of Christian Ethiopia, were accorded a certain respect by European explorers and colonizers,

particularly for religious reasons. Pictographic and ideographic systems, unfortunately, were often misunderstood or rejected as being part of “primitive” cultures, which, in the colonial ethos, were to be either suppressed or “developed.” The complex pictographic system created by the Bamum people of Cameroon, for example, was developed into a sophisticated syllabary before its suppression by the French. Part of the problem also stemmed from the use of forms or substrates in African graphic communication, which were unfamiliar to colonial era Europeans: The systems might have been inscribed on wood (carvings), the ground (sand diagrams),





## Tusona

The Luchazi of North-western Zambia and related peoples used a complex style of geometrical diagrams called Tusona. This example represents the cosmological relationship between God, Mankind, and the natural world.

cloth, or the human body (as body painting, tattooing, or scarification) and Because of these dissimilarities, European writers often failed to recognize these systems as texts; nonetheless, they fulfilled that function in their own cultures. A graphic text might be described as limited to those forms that are produced by the use, within a particular culture or society, of a systematized group of conventionally rendered and recognized marks on a surface. The graphic systems and codes found throughout the African continent fit this definition. Graphic design itself could then be defined as: the set of visual and technical skills required to render these marks both attractive and effective as communication in the society concerned.

Using this definition, the history of graphic design should expand to cover all such mark systems, visual and technical skills, and relevant modes of communication throughout human history. Given the vast amount of material this understanding encompasses, selections would have to be made; but such selection could then be recognized for what it is, and the motivation for the selection could be made explicit. If an emphasis is then laid on graphic design for commercial or any other specific purposes, the bias inherent in such a decision would be more easily identified and, if necessary, contested. Students of the history of graphic design in different countries or cultures would then have a more consistent framework on which to

base their selections. The interrelationship between graphic design, culture, and communication, and the need to understand the first two to accomplish the third, is established. According to this logic, African graphic systems are clearly situated in the history of graphic design. They embodied meaning in the culture that produced them, by graphic means. To the level it was culturally acceptable, these systems could be "read" by the

## Faik-Nzuzi

Chiefs of the Ndengese of the DRC used to wear scarified symbols and patterns such as these to represent their attributes and duties. The symbols and patterns were also carved on statues to represent the chief's authority.



"literate" in the given society, and so could communicate effectively according to their design. Their study is also important as one small means of validating the history of African societies and cultures and of helping to destroy the myth, still to be found in Western society, that Africa had no writing or history. African societies are changing rapidly, with the result that many of these traditional systems have become


extinct or devalued. However, even in such circumstances, their "ghosts" linger in contemporary societies and affect the society's understanding of the present. Where the culture has maintained the graphic or symbolic system, of course, the influence is easier to identify and work with, but even a dead system still has influence.

JAMILLA  
OKURO

"I believe that each person in a collaboration has something fresh to offer and to create, and when you combine them, the end result is refreshing."







## six questions with Jamilla

### Where does your inspiration for textile designs come from?

I am heavily inspired by my background culture and experiences in life. My mother is from North Carolina Washington, D.C. and my father was born in Kenya, but grew up in the United Kingdom. I'm also inspired by music, fashion, books, nature, and things I discover during my regular research studies.

### Why did you decide on textile design rather than on working with another medium?

I will always be a fine arts illustrator but I focused primarily on textiles design because of my passion for fashion, and the idea of a 2-dimensional print being used in versatile ways. There are so many mediums that you can work with within the realm of textiles and many ways you can bring textiles to life, whether it is on clothing, furniture, architecture, or digital art.

### How do you see your work in relation to other textile artists today?

I am still learning about Textiles and the Textiles world, but from what I have seen so far from other textiles artists, there is a wide range of different styles, and I haven't found a category to put myself into. In relation to other textile artists I think my prints are heavily influenced by traditional fine arts. I don't always follow the typical repeating method.

### Why is it important to interact with people who are appreciates and support your work?

I personally think it is really important for me to interact with my followers because I am just like them. I am no different, I am just as curious as they are. I create what I learn, feel, and experience. I learn from them, which is a gift, and then I create something based off of what becomes my inspiration.

### How are ways that designers in general can collaborate to create something new?

I believe that each person in a collaboration has something fresh to offer and to create, and when you combine them, the end result is refreshing. Anyone with an idea can collaborate with another artist or designer. It is the willingness to learn and grow that makes the collaboration new.

### What is next on the horizon for you?

At the moment I am getting ready to start Spring semester, which I am stoked about. But, as far as personal projects I am working on another illustration series for Black History month which I will release in February. I am also hoping to bring the illustrations from the series to life, by making the garments and a lookbook. Besides those two projects I am just focusing on my school work right now.

## six questions with Mr. Walker

**Tell us more about yourself and your journey so far?**

I started as a professional designer in 1976 Hand painting fabric swatches for SA Clothing in gouache with a ruling pen for the warp/weft. Nearly killed me. Took six months to get paid so I learned early. Art school was bliss and my (to this day) lasting friendships started there. Best three years of my life really. Then came Soweto and everything changed.

**Growing up, was there ever any indication that you'd be doing what you are now?**

I was useless at school and failed standard nine. So 'varsity' wasn't on the cards. But I could draw a bit and knew that becoming the 'doctor/lawyer/physicist' my mother wanted wasn't gonna happen. A Star newspaper Summer School offered an aptitude test, which suggested Architecture or Industrial Design as a career. Graphic Design was the easier to access with my dismal academic record. So I did that.



**How did the idea to begin ijusi originally come about? What did you envision it to be?**

The idea started in 1994 but the first issue came out in 1995. Simply, I had no clients and lots of time. So I decided to design a 'design' magazine. As I had a collection of local tribal craft, I started with that as the basis. The idea was to celebrate South African indigenous design and craft, as I believed it to be as good as anything elsewhere

**What influences and informs your work?**

I'm a bit of a maverick, so never been good at following the herd. The biggest influence is 'everything out there'. It's that simple. Mostly the stuff created by the common man for his own use or enjoyment. I'm not really swayed by the big 'design' names but design history has been very influential in my work.

**What observations or insights can you offer with regards to the design industry?**

Real graphic design will return when people realise that digital looks bad. Technology may change, but human nature doesn't. In the end, graphic design is what I do. It's a way of life, not a job. It's a calling.

**Are you working on anything else at the moment?**

I've been a fanatical photographer all my life, so I'm always taking photographs. My work is project based and I'm doing some interesting things right now. But this is Durban, so economics always play a role. Really, all I want to do is keep going. I have to (school fees and all that). It's dealing with the shit, day and day out, that keeps us going. Stop, and you're dead. It's what I am.

