

Revisiting the Dogon – This Time Not from the Outer Space.

– Toward the end of the 1970s, the Dogon – an ethnic group living in the central region of the Republic of Mali – that had been previously known mostly to anthropologists and collectors of African art, acquired certain weird notoriety after Erich Däniken, a Swiss writer interested in pre-astronomy, had published his book “Be-weise” (1977). The author claimed that the Dogon possess an extraordinary astronomical knowledge concerning, for instance, the exact location of all components of the Sirius system, which supposedly predated the Western knowledge in this regard. According to von Däniken, it was a proof of an extraterrestrial visit that took place in the remote past, the memory of which survived in the mythology and art (particularly masks) created by that African people.

The Dogon art – or, perhaps better, what Western modernity classified as such – is the main subject matter of yet another excellent “ethnographic” exhibit made available to the public by the *Bundeskunsthalle* in Bonn. The Dogon art consists primarily of anthropomorphic sculptures, examples of which are found in the opening section of the exhibit. They represent figures with raised arms, or *djennenke* (Fig. 1), symbolizing a *nommo* – the ancestral spirit of the Dogon – in its action of purifying the universe, or – and this is another interpretation – a man’s supplication for rain, so important in the semi-desert environment of the Dogon habitat. This latter gesture is frequently seen also in Dogon rituals. Another ancient motif of Dogon sculpture is horseman, which expresses the status of power and high social standing, most frequently associated with *hogons* – semi-divine political/religious leaders of great wisdom, charisma, and military prowess.

Perhaps the most widely known instances of Dogon visual arts are masks. In particular one type – namely, the *kanaga* mask – which was interpreted by von Däniken as a depiction of the helmet of an extraterrestrial visitor, has become an ethnic emblem of the Dogon and even an unofficial emblem of the Republic of Mali shortly after its independence (Fig. 2). Professional students of Dogon culture indentify the *kanaga* as a representation of a rapacious bird with outspread wings or the mythical water insect that implanted in the soil the first seed from which all other seeds sprouted. As such, this type would also belong to the large group of masks that represent animals living in the region: hyenas, lions, hares, and monkeys. Some other students of Dogon culture view in the *kanaga* a visualization of the axis of the world which – like the figures with raised arms – points to both earth and sky.

Another section of the exhibit is devoted to famous among tourists and art collectors sculptured wooden doors of the Dogon, usually composed of two or three panels bound by iron clips (Fig. 3). Precisely because of their popularity among the tourists, however, these doors are today mostly seen in museums, while in their land of origin they became replaced by banal metal doors of corrugated sheet. To the same category of artistically elaborated elements of Dogon architecture belong also the richly sculptured posts that supported a thick, made of millet stalks, roof of *toguna* – the shelter in which men’s assem-



Fig. 1: *Djennenke* Figure. Photo: Don Tuttle (© Robert T. Wall).

blies and councils are held (Fig. 4). The pillars, eight in total, represent eight ancestors of the Dogon. The location of *toguna* is chosen by the headman of the clan, and the village is subsequently built around it. The inside height of the structure is only 1.5 m, not only to offer protection from the sun but also to produce a calming effect on the deliberating men by keeping them seated and hence less prone to taking aggressive stance and/or fighting.



Fig. 2: *Kanaga* Mask. Photo: Thierry Ollivier / Michel Urtado (© Musée du Quai Branly).

The remaining sections of the exhibit contain examples of Dogon metallurgy and textiles. The cast metal figures and other objects demonstrate technical and artistic skills of Dogon blacksmiths, who used a lost-wax technique in order to create small but solid figurines (Fig. 5). Similarly, the cotton textile making, which according to one Dogon myth dates back to the third day of creation, has a long tradition among that people. Still, in comparison with textiles of some neighboring peoples, such as the Fulani, Dogon items display rather limited means of artistic expression, although the meaning of some traditional patterns fits neatly within the Moslem worldview that is being adopted by increasing numbers of the Dogon.

And this is the crux of the matter. Dogon culture is changing and the religious conversion plays a critical role in this process. In the first place, as Islam does not tolerate visual representations, the Dogon sculpture and metallurgy is perhaps not disappearing but undergoing a change of function – they are becoming a source of income in the global market. The Muslim conversion of villages and



Fig. 3: Door depicting three women. Photo: Thierry Ollivier / Michel Urtado (© Musée du Quai Branly).

closure of some of the *togunas* facilitated, for example, the legal purchase and exportation of the posts containing anthropomorphic visualizations of Dogon mythical ancestors. This gives the impression that, as one of my colleagues put it, “the Dogon are selling themselves out,” or – to paraphrase the title of a recently published controversial book by Thilo Sarrazin (“Deutschland schafft sich ab. Wie wir unser Land aufs Spiel setzen,” 2010) – they “do away with themselves” (*sie schaffen sich ab*). I certainly disagree with this judgment: the Dogon are not doing away with their culture; it is being done away with by larger processes in which they, willy-nilly, also participate. Since the time the Dogon territory became part of the French colonial state (1904), and later – since 1960 – of the independent Mali Republic, their socio-political horizon changed decisively. Interestingly, a stylized figure resembling the Dogon motif of a person with raised arms was even placed on the flag of French Sudan, whose territory coincided with the political borders of contemporary Mali (Fig. 6). The state is a form of polity that – political declarations of governments and the will of cultural survival of the affected peoples notwithstanding – sets in motion leveling processes that in the long run, gradually, “do away” with regional, or “tribal” forms of polities. The fact that the Dogon country is today one of Mali’s major tourist attractions is part of that phenomenon, and Von

Fig. 4: *Toguna* in Sangha. Photo: Frank Buchholz (© Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland).



Fig. 5: Metal figurine. Photo: Mark Brandenburg (© Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland)

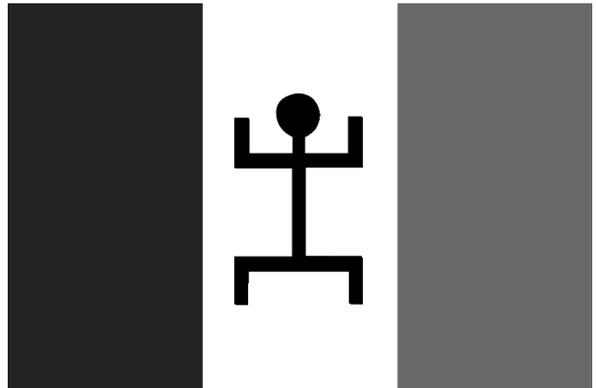


Fig. 6: Flag of French Sudan (<http://www.crwflags.com/fotw/flags/ml.html>).

Däniken’s “extraterrestrial” revelations are only one “cascade” – to quote Arjun Appadurai (“Modernity at Large. Cultural Dimensions of Globalization,” 1996) – that have been contributing to this overwhelming and uncontrollable “flood” of change, in which some of the old elements will disappear and some others, provided with a new meaning, will continue to exist as components of new identities.

“Dogon – Weltkulturerbe aus Afrika.” Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Bonn, Germany, 14th October, 2011 – 22nd January, 2012. Curator: H el ene Leloup. Guidance: Dr. Wolfger Stumpfe. <<http://www.bundeskunsthalle.de/index.htm?ausstellungen/dogon/rahmenprogramm.htm>>

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