

# The Encyclopedia of Religion



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## Traditional African Iconography

Africa is enormous, and the diversity of peoples and complexities of cultures in sub-Saharan black Africa warn against generalizations, especially when discussing visual images, the significance of which is inextricably linked to local religious and aesthetic sensibilities. Hence, in order to understand the iconography of traditional African religions, one must use a comparative approach. Only by examining the religious iconography of a variety of cultures can one fully understand how visual images represent distinctive ways of experiencing the world for the peoples of sub-Saharan Africa.

**Ancestors and Kings: Two Case Studies.** On the granary doors of the Dogon people of Mali, rows of paired ancestor figures called Nommo stand watch over the precious millet stored within. Similar figures, at times androgynous, are placed next to the funeral pottery on ancestral shrines of families and on the shrine in the house of the *hogan*, the religious and temporal leader of a clan. Their elongated, ascetic bodies and proud, dispassionate faces image the Dogon's myths of origin, as well as their perception of themselves when life is filled with spiritual vitality, *nyama* (see figure 1).

Oral traditions recall a great drought in the fifteenth century that occasioned the migration of the Dogon in



FIGURE 1. *Dogon Primordial Couple, or Nommo; Mali.* Differentiation and complementarity as means of creation and order dominate Dogon iconography.

two successive waves from southwestern regions to the area of the Bandiagara cliffs and plateau. There they displaced the Tellem people, whose shrine sculpture they retained and used, and established themselves in small villages, often situated in pairs. In an environment largely devoid of permanent watercourses, the Dogon dug wells to great depths, cultivated subsistence crops of millet, and fashioned houses, shrines, and granaries of a mud-masonry architecture using the geometrical forms, such as cylinders, cones, and cubes, that can also be seen in Dogon wood sculpture.

The Dogon trace their descent to the "four families" who made the legendary migration, but this history of origins is inextricably intertwined with an elaborate creation mythology, which profoundly informs their social and religious life. The variations in the myth, as in the sculptured forms expressing it, reflect the strong sense of individuality that each Dogon village possesses. It also permits the free play of the sculptor's imagination, whose work then generates new mythological interpretations. [*For further discussion of this creation myth, see Dogon Religion.*]

Dogon myth, ritual, and iconography express a view of life in which, through a process of differentiation and pairing of related beings, called Nommo, an ordered, fruitful world is to be created. But the creative process of complementarity or twinning contains within it the potential of opposition and conflict. The primordial being, or Nommo, who was a blacksmith, stole iron and embers from the sun and descended to earth within a well-stocked granary. It was he who led the descendants of the eighth Nommo in civilizing the earth. Thus creation involves human participation through ritual actions that restore life and maintain an ordered world. Among the materials of the ritual process are village shrines representing a set of twins; shrine sculpture, as well as granary doors with their bas-relief of paired figures, snakes and lizards, zigzag patterns, and female breasts, all symbolically associated with the creation myth; geometric patterns or "signs" on shrine walls, which refer to the basic ontological properties of the world; funerary masquerades and dances through which the deceased is transformed into a venerated ancestor; and secret languages through which the incantations and texts describing the creation of the world and the appearance of death are conveyed from one generation to another. These are the means by which the Dogon can act effectively in their world, strengthen the creative process, and at the very least provide a momentary stay against confusion.

Among the Edo people along the coastal forest of southeast Nigeria, the iconography of the Benin kingdom reflects a culture with a very different spirituality,



one shaped by a monarchical tradition. The present dynasty traces its origins to the fourteenth century, beginning with Ọba Eweka I, who was fathered by Oranmiyan, son of Oduduwa (Odua), the Yoruba creator god and first king of Ifẹ (although, according to oral tradition, even before Eweka, the Benin kingdom was said to have been ruled by the Ogosi kings). Thus, for centuries the political and religious life of the Edo people has focused upon the person and powers of the *ọba*, or king.

The magnificently carved ivory tusks projecting from the top of the bronze memorial heads on the royal ancestral shrines (until the British punitive expedition of 1897) symbolized the powers of the king—his political authority and his supernatural gifts. While his authority depended upon statecraft and military conquest, it was by virtue of his descent from *ọbas* who had become gods and his possession of the coral beads, said to have been taken from the kingdom of Olokun, god of the sea, that the *ọba* had *aṣe*, “the power to bring to pass,” the power over life and death.

Over the centuries the royal guild of blacksmiths created more than 146 memorial bronze heads of deceased *ọbas*, queen mothers, and conquered kings and chiefs; and the royal guild of carvers portrayed on 133 ivory tusks the king, his wives, chiefs, and retainers, as well as leopards and mudfish, emblems of his power over forest and water and of his ability to move across boundaries distinguishing disparate realms. Although the memorial heads and the carved tusks were created in honor of particular *ọbas*, and the rites that are performed before them are always in the name of an individual *ọba*, the bronze heads and carved figures do not portray the individuality of past *ọbas* in either form or expression. It is an aesthetic and a religious principle in Benin culture that the particular is subordinated to the general. The reigning *ọba* depends upon the collective royal ancestors and yields to their commands, and the same is true of the iconography of the ancestral shrines and ritual artifacts of the Edo people generally. Thus, the ancestral shrines and their sculptures are not merely memorials but serve as a means of communication with the living dead.

As in most other African religious traditions, the Edo distinguish between a high god, Osanobua, and a pantheon of deities that includes Olokun, god of the sea and bestower of wealth, Ogun, god of iron, and Ọṣun, god of herbal leaves, whose shrines and rituals articulate the religious life for king and commoner as one of response to the powers upon which individuals are dependent but over which they have relatively little control. However, in a monarchical society, with its divisions of labor among craftsmen, hunters, farmers, warriors, and traders (with the Portuguese, Dutch, and British) and its

high regard for individual enterprise and prowess, the Cult of the Hand, *ikegobo*, also known as *ikega*, provides a means for celebrating the ability of the individual to accomplish things and, within limits, to achieve new status. Containers for offerings to the Hand, crafted in bronze for kings and in wood for titled persons, bear images of power such as an *ọba* sacrificing leopards, a warrior holding the severed head of an enemy, Portuguese soldiers with guns, or the tools and emblems of office for the blacksmith, carver, or trader. All shrines for the Hand bear the image of the clenched fist, showing the ventral side, with the thumb pointing upward and outward. The directness with which the ritual symbolism is expressed is unusual in African religious art but quite consistent with a ritual of self-esteem.

**Form and Meaning.** Notwithstanding the particularity of traditional African iconography, the general observation may be made that it is, in general, essentially conceptual and evocative. It is not representational and illustrative, and it is not abstract.

Although the principal subject of African art is the human figure, there is rarely any concern to portray individual likeness, even where a sculpture has been commissioned to commemorate a particular person, as in Akan funerary pottery, Yoruba twin figures, or, as noted above, the Benin bronze heads on royal ancestral shrines. And there is rarely any attempt to visualize in material form spiritual powers, although an elaborately constructed masquerade of cloth, wood, and raffia or a sculpted figure on a shrine may “locate” for ritual purposes the ancestral presence, the god, or the spirit. Rather, African iconography is primarily concerned with expressing the essential nature and status of those powers to which one must respond and with providing models of appropriate response to such powers.

**Presence of power.** Among the Igbomina Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria the costumes of the masquerades for the patrilineal ancestors, *egungun paaka*, combine materials of the forest with those of human manufacture, such as layers of richly colored cloths, bits of mirror, and beaded panels. The carved headdress portion will often meld animal and human features. Packets of magical substances will be secreted within the costume. It is the peculiar state of being of the living dead, who cross boundaries and move between two realms, who dwell in heaven yet profoundly affect the well-being of the living, that is materialized, for masquerades are created to reveal a reality not otherwise observable and to evoke an appropriate response, such as awe and dependency, on the part of the observer. Thus, among the Pende of Zaire the concept of *mahamba* signifies an object, such as a mask, or a ritual given by the ancestors to the living for the common good and through which



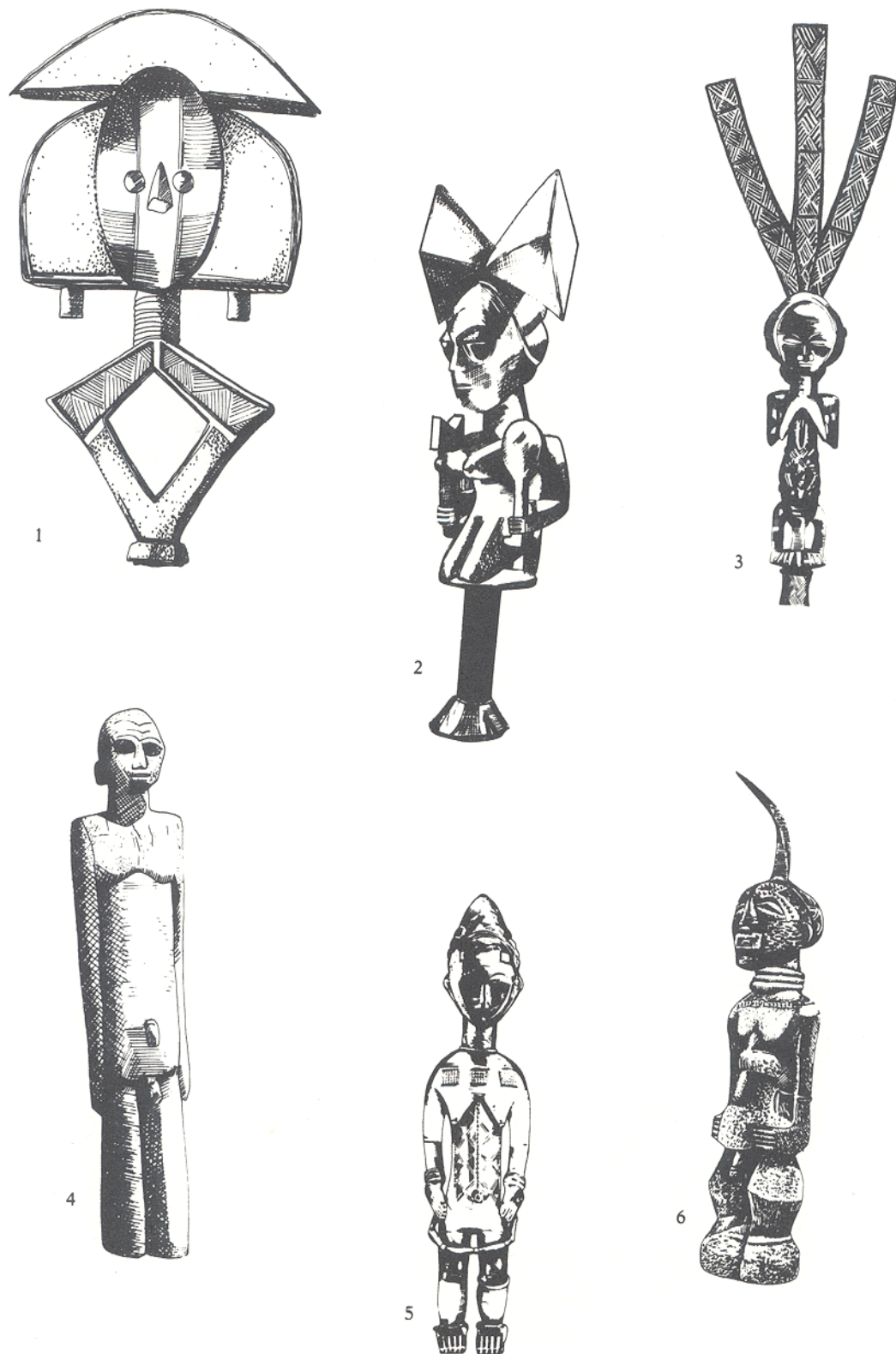


FIGURE 2. *African Figural Sculpture*. (1) Kota reliquary figure, or *mbulu-ngulu* ("image of the dead"); Gabon. (2) Yoruba dance wand, *Şango* cult; Nigeria. (3) Luba bow stand; Zaire. (4) Lobi spirit figure; Burkina Faso. (5) Baule spirit wife; Ivory Coast. (6) Songye power figure; Zaire. Along with dance and music, sculpture plays an important role in the religious life of Africans.

the ancestors periodically manifest themselves and communicate with their descendants.

A similar observation may be made about the reliquary figures of the Kota people of Gabon (see figure 2.1). Referred to as *mbulu-ngulu*, "image of the dead," the two-dimensional figures consist of a large ovoid head above a simple, diamond-shaped wooden base. On a shrine the sculptured form is seated in a bark container holding the bones of several generations of ancestors. The ovoid face and coiffure are created by applying thin sheets or strips of brass and copper to a wooden form in a variety of interrelated geometric patterns. In every case, it is the power of the eyes that holds and penetrates the beholder, expressing the bond between the living and the deceased and the protective power of the ancestors in and for the life of the extended family.

It is not only the reality of the ancestral presence that Africa's religious art presents. Among the Eḡba, Eḡbado, and Kẹtu Yoruba it is the power of "our mothers" that is celebrated in the spectacle of the Eḡḡ/Gẹlẹḡ festival of masquerade, dance, and song at the time of the spring rains. "Our mothers," *awọn iya wa*, is a collective term for female power, possessed by all women, but most fully by female ancestors and deities and by elderly women in the community who are thus able to sustain or inhibit the procreative process and all other human activities upon which the entire society depends. Balanced on the dancers' heads, for they always appear in pairs, are sculptures depicting the composed face of a beautiful woman above which there may be a dramatic scene of conflict between snakes and a quadruped

(see figure 3.1) or scenes depicting domestic activities or social roles. The total sculpted image is perceived as a visual metaphor, often understood as having multiple levels of significance. Likewise, in the deliberate pairing of the delicate face masks and the massive forms and aggressive imagery of zoomorphic helmet masks of the Poro society among the Senufo people of the Ivory Coast (see figures 3.3 and 3.4) one also observes images that refer to the complementary roles of female and male, both human and spiritual, by which life is sustained. In these masquerades, as in Kuba helmet masks worn by the king, African artists are not concerned with the representational illusion entailed in copying nature. Rather, they concentrate on that which they know and believe about their subjects, and they seek to construct images to which the distinctive spirituality of a people can react.

This is also true of emblems of office, such as the beautifully carved bow stands owned by Luba chiefs in southeastern Zaire (see figure 2.3). The bow stands are considered sacred and are usually kept with ancestral relics, where only the chief and special caretakers are permitted to see them. The work images Luba political and spiritual power. It is through the maternal line that chiefs inherit their office. In the sculpted female figure at the top, woman as genetrix is conveyed in the lifting of the maternal breasts, the elaborately scarified abdomen, and the exposed genitals. The closed eyes of the serene face convey the inner, cerebral power that contrasts with the reproductive and nurturing power of her body. And the soaring three-pronged coiffure, express-

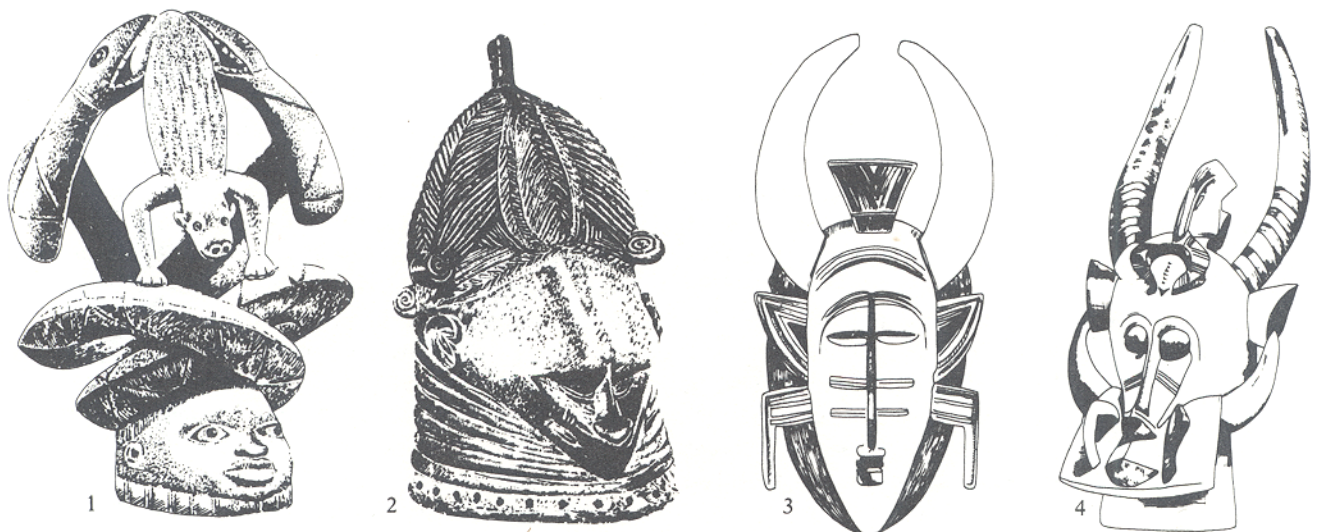


FIGURE 3. *Headdress and Masks*. (1) Yoruba headdress used in the Eḡḡ/Gẹlẹḡ festival; Nigeria. (2) Mende helmet mask of the female spirit Nowo; Sierra Leone. (3, 4) Senufo masks; Ivory Coast. Masks are used throughout Africa to embody the divine.



ing her status and beauty, repeats as an inverted pattern the sculptural treatment of the breasts and the legs, each of which frames a central vertical element. On ritual occasions, the chief's bow and arrows, signs of his political authority, would rest in her elaborate coiffure at the top of the staff. Below her, the metal tip of the staff is thrust into the earth, the realm of the ancestors. It is maternal power that provides the link with the ancestral power on which a Luba chief's power depends.

**Models of response.** Ritual sculpture provides not only images of the powers on which the living depend but models for appropriate response to gods and spirits. The naked male or female, arms at their sides or touching their abdomens, on Lobi shrines in Burkina Faso (see figure 2.4) as well as the figure of a kneeling woman with a thunder ax balanced upon her head and holding a dance wand for the Yoruba god Šango (see figure 2.2) are images of man and woman as devotees, as inspired and powerful. They are images through which persons see their spirituality and by which their spirituality is deepened.

The distinction between imaging the nature and status of spiritual powers and imaging the religious self in the posture of devotion and power cannot in most instances be clearly drawn: much African iconography combines the two processes, less so perhaps where there are ancestral associations and more often where the reference is to gods and spirits. On the shrines of the Baule people of the Ivory Coast, men and women will place figures representing the spouse that they had in the other world before they were born (see figure 2.5). The figure is thus the locus for one's spirit spouse and the place where one attends to the claims of that other. But at the same time the sculptures—many of them carved with great skill—present idealized images of male and female, often in the maturity of life, the hair or beard carefully groomed, the body decorated with scarification patterns and adorned with beads, the face composed, the stance well balanced. Likewise among the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria the tutelary gods of a town are imaged in wooden figures based upon an idealized human model, for the gods not only have life-giving powers but are also the guardians of morality. The sculptures, for they are often in groups, are looked upon as the "children" of the deity honored. Hence, in their presence the devotee is confronted with conceptions of the self that constrain him or her in thought and action to a deepened awareness of the self that that person is and is not.

Perhaps the most extraordinary images of self and of personal power are carvings that incorporate magical substances (in or on images) to the extent that they al-

ter the human form of the image (see figure 2.6). They are found for the most part among the Songye and Kongo peoples of the lower Kongo (Zaire) Basin. Some figures have an antelope horn filled with "medicines" projecting from the head, others have nails and small knives pounded into the body or a magic-holding resin box imbedded in the belly. They are visualizations in the extreme of ritual action as manipulative power. Using such carvings in conjunction with words of invocation, the priest or owner of the image engages with the evil in the world, either to project or deflect its aggressive power.

**Ritual Activity.** It is evident from what has been said that the iconography of African peoples must be understood in the context of ritual activity where the world as lived and the world as imaged become fused together and transformed into one reality. There are essentially two types of rituals—those in which a person or group undergoes a change in status, usually referred to as rites of passage, and rituals of world maintenance through which a person or group affirms and seeks to secure in the words and actions of sacrifice a worldview.

**Rites of passage.** Among many African peoples the masquerade is associated with rites of passage, as, for example, the seasonal rituals of sowing, tilling, and harvesting among the Bwa and Bamana, the funeral rites of the Dogon and the Yoruba, and the rituals of initiation of youth into the societies of the Dan and Mende peoples of West Africa.

Among the Mende people of Sierra Leone, Nowo, a female spirit, appears in dance and masquerade to girls being initiated into the Sande (also known as Bundu) ceremonial society (see figure 3.2). As far as is known, it is the only female mask danced by a woman in Africa. While associated with the Sande society and thought of as the Sande spirit, Nowo appears in other ritual contexts. Her image is carved on the finial of the rhythm pounders used in the boys' initiation rites, on the staff carried by the leader of the men's Poro society, on the carved mace of the Mende king, as well as on divination implements, women's ritual spoon handles, and on weaving-loom pulleys. But it is only to the female initiates into Sande that Nowo appears in the fullness of the masquerade and the movements of the dance.

In the rituals, Nowo is a spiritual presence and images the beauty and power, the nobility, of woman. Thick, dyed-black fiber strands, suspended from a wooden helmet mask, cover the dancer's body. The carved headdress depicts a composed face with faintly opened eyes that see but may not be seen. The head is crowned with an elaborate coiffure into which are woven cowrie shells and seed pods, symbols of wealth and fertility. Black is said to be woman's color, the



color of civilized life. The glistening black surface suggests the lustrous, well-oiled skin with which the initiates will reenter the world. Nowo thus provides an image of the physical beauty and the spiritual power of woman to those about to take their place as adults in Mende society.

**World maintenance rituals.** The role of iconography in Africa's rituals of world maintenance is no less important than in rites of passage. Among the Yoruba, to cite only one example, paired bronze castings of male and female figures joined at the top by a chain, *edan*, are presented to an initiate into the higher ranks of the Oṣugbo secret society, who worship Onile, "the owner of the house" (see figure 4). The house is the cult house, which is a microcosm of the universe. The secret, visualized in the linking of male and female, appears to refer to a vision of life in terms of its completion and transcendence of time.

The titled members of the Oṣugbo society are the elders of the community. They are beyond the time of procreative concerns. For them sexual differentiation is no longer as important as it once was. Furthermore, kinship distinctions are secondary to the world of the cult house, since identification of person by patrilineage is replaced by an allegiance to the unity of all life in Onile. Thus, the Oṣugbo participate in the settling of conflicts that divide the body politic. The sacred em-

blems of the society, the *edan*, are placed on those spots where the relationships among men have been broken and blood spilled. Expressing the unity of male and female, they possess the power of reconciling and adjudicating differences and atoning through sacrifice for the violation of the "house."

The seated male and female figures present to the viewer the signs of their power and authority, *aṣẹ*. The female holds a pair of *edan*, as she would twin children. The male figure, with clenched fists, makes the sign of greeting to Onile. Four chains with tiny bells are suspended from the sides of each figure's head. The number four, as well as multiples of four, are important in Ifa divination; Oṣunmila (also called Ifa), the divination god, knows the secret of creation and the sacrifices that will make one's way propitious. Above the spare, ascetic bodies, the heads of the paired figures radiate with their *aṣẹ*. Twelve chains are suspended from the plate below each figure. Twelve is a multiple of three and four, also numbers associated with Oṣugbo and Ifa ritual symbolism. In their combination, there is completion and wholeness born of the secret knowledge of Oṣugbo and Ifa, a secret readily revealed to the informed eye.

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FIGURE 4. Yoruba *Edan*, Paired Bronze Castings of Male and Female Figures Coupled by a Chain; Nigeria. Elder members of the Oṣugbo society perceive in this sculpture the message of time's completion and transcendence.



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JOHN PEMBERTON III

## Australian Aboriginal Iconography

Art has a central place in Australian Aboriginal religion. The substance of Aboriginal ceremonies and rituals consists of enactments of events from the Dreaming, or ancestral past, events that are conserved in the form of the songs, dances, designs, and sacred objects that belong to a particular clan or totemic cult group. Such forms are referred to collectively by a word that can be translated as "sacred law," and it is as "sacred law" that art mediates between the ancestral past and the world of living human beings. Designs that were created in the Dreaming as part of the process of world creation are handed down from generation to generation as a means of maintaining the continuity of existence with the ancestral past. [See Dreaming, The.]

Designs can be referred to then as "Dreaming," and they are manifestations of the ancestral past in a number of senses. Each originated as a motif painted on an ancestral being's body, as an impression left in the ground by that being, or as a form associated in some other way with ancestral creativity. In many regions myths relate how ancestral beings gave birth to or created out of their bodies the sacred objects associated with particular social groups and land areas. The meaning of the designs on the objects often refers to the acts of ancestral creativity that gave rise to the shape of the landscape; in this respect, the designs can be said to encode Dreaming events. And finally, the designs can be a source of ancestral power. Paintings on the bodies of initiates are thought to bring the individuals closer to the spiritual domain; sacred objects rubbed against the bodies can have similar effect. In eastern Arnhem Land, upon a person's death, designs painted on his or her chest or on the coffin or bone disposal receptacle help to transfer the soul back to the ancestral world to be reincorporated within the reservoirs of spiritual power associated with a particular place. Art is linked in with the concept of the cycling of spiritual power down the generations from the ancestral past to the present that characterizes Aboriginal religious thought. The same design may later be painted on an initiate's chest, signifying what Nancy Munn refers to in *Walbiri Iconog-*

*raphy* (1973) as the intergenerational transfer of ancestral power, which conceptually integrates the Dreaming with present-day experience.

Aboriginal art varies widely across the continent. Any similarities that exist tend to reside in the properties of the representational systems that are employed—the kinds of meanings that are encoded in the designs and the way in which they are encoded—rather than in the use of particular motifs. One notable exception appears to be what Munn refers to as the circle-line or site-path motif (0 = 0 = 0), which forms a component of designs throughout Australia. In such designs, the circles usually refer to places where some significant event occurred on the journey of a Dreaming ancestral being, and the lines refer to the pathways that connect the places.

Likewise, designs in Aboriginal art exist independent of particular media. The same design in Arnhem Land may occur as a body painting, a sand sculpture, an emblem on a hollow log coffin, or an engraving on a sacred object (*rangga*). In central Australia the same design may be incised on a stone disc (*tjurunga*), painted on the body of a dancer in blood and down, or made into a sand sculpture. Further, it is the design that gives the object its particular ancestral connection: the designs are extensions of ancestral beings and are sometimes referred to as their "shadows." Thus, they can be used in different contexts for different purposes. The same basic design may be used as a sand sculpture in a curing ceremony, painted on an initiate's body to associate him with particular ancestral forces or to mark his membership in a social group, or painted on a coffin to guide the dead person's soul back to the clan lands to be reincorporated within the ancestral domain.

**Systems of Representation.** Meaning in Aboriginal art is encoded in two distinct systems of representation, one iconic and figurative, the other aniconic and geometric. The iconography of Aboriginal religious art arises out of the interplay between these two complementary systems. This distinction extends outside the area of the visual arts to dance and ceremonial action, which involve some components and actions that are essentially mimetic and represent the behavior and characteristics of natural species as well as other components that are abstract and have a conventional and nonrepresentational meaning. The balance between the figurative and the geometric varies from one region to another. The art of central Australia, of groups such as the Walbiri, the Aranda, the Pintubi, and the Pitjantjatjara, is characterized by geometric motifs, whereas western Arnhem Land in contrast is associated with a highly developed figurative tradition. Nonetheless, there is a figurative component in central Australian art, and the *marayin* designs, clan-owned body