

THE DOGON

An Overview

(This material has been compiled and edited from various sources)

CMG Archives

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(2013)

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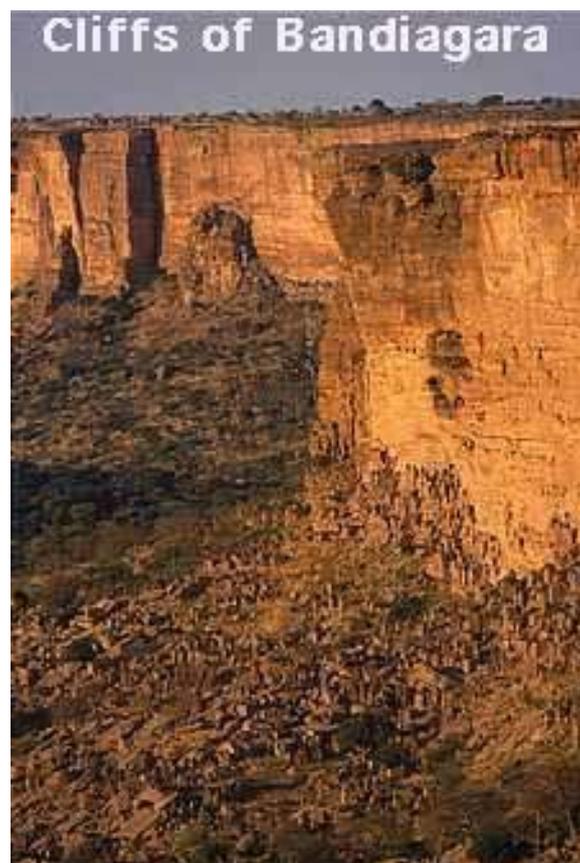
Introduction

The Dogon are an ethnic group living in the central plateau region of the country of Mali, in the West of the Continent of Africa, south of the Niger bend, near the city of Bandiagara, in the Mopti region. The population numbers between 400,000 and 800,000. The Dogon are best known for their religious traditions, their mask dances, wooden sculpture and their architecture. The past century has seen significant changes in the social organization, material culture and beliefs of the Dogon, partly because Dogon country is one of Mali's major tourist attractions.





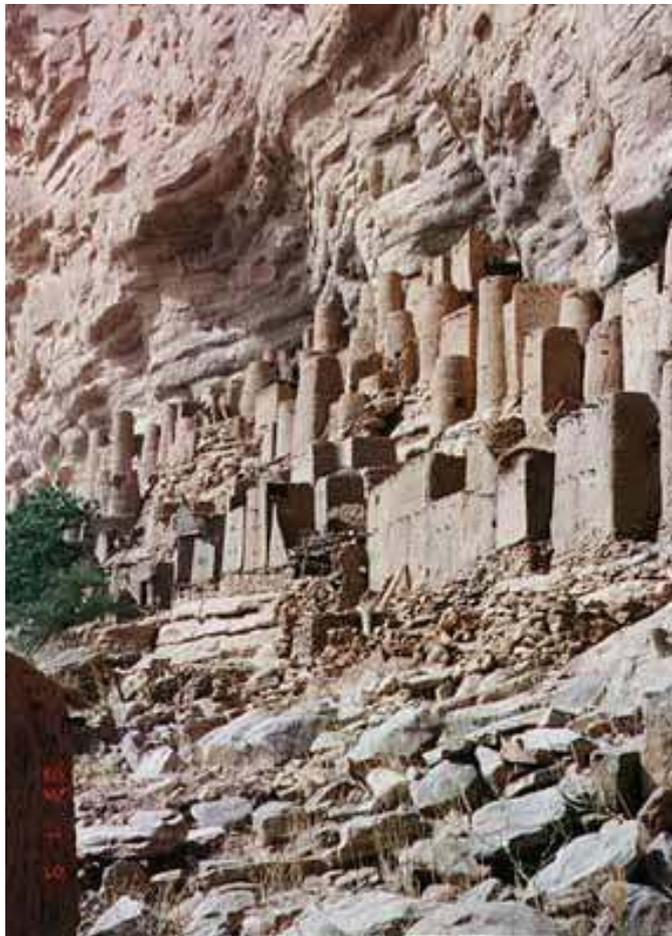
This area is composed of three distinct topographical regions: the plain, the cliffs, and the plateau.



Within these regions the Dogon population of about 300,000 is most heavily concentrated along a 200 kilometre (125 mile) stretch of escarpment called the Cliffs of Bandiagara.



These sandstone cliffs run from southwest to northeast, roughly parallel to the Niger River, and attain heights up to 600 meters (2000 feet).



The cliffs provide a spectacular physical setting for Dogon villages built on the sides of the escarpment. There are approximately 700 Dogon villages, most with fewer than 500 inhabitants.



A Dogon family compound in the village of Pegue is seen from the top of the Bandiagara escarpment. During the hot season, the Dogon sleep on the roofs of their earthen homes.



A typical Dogon Village - 2006

Dogon villages are comprised of different buildings:

- *Male granary*: storage place for pearl millet and other grains. Building with a pointed roof. This building is well protected from mice. The amount of filled male granaries is an indication for the size and the richness of a guinna.
- *Female granary*: storage place for a woman's things, her husband has no access. Building with a pointed roof. It looks like a male granary but is less protected against mice. Here, she stores her personal belongings such as clothes, jewelry, money and some food. A woman is economically independent and earnings and things related to her merchandise are stored in her personal granary. She can for example make cotton or pottery. The number of female granaries is an indication for the number of women living in the guinna.
- *Tógu nà* (a kind of *case à palabres*): a building only for men. They rest here much of the day throughout the heat of the dry season, discuss affairs and take important

decisions in the toguna. The roof of a toguna is made by 8 layers of millet stalks. It is a low building in which one cannot stand upright. This helps with avoiding violence when discussions get heated.

- House for menstruating women: this house is on the outside of the village. It is constructed by women and is of lower quality than the other village buildings. Women having their period are considered to be unclean and have to leave their family house to live during five days in this house. They use kitchen equipment only to be used here. They bring with them their youngest children. This house is a gathering place for women during the evening. This hut is also thought to have some sort of reproductive symbology due to the fact that the hut can be easily seen by the men who are working the fields who know that only women who are on their period, and thus not pregnant, can be there.

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Origin

The precise origin of the Dogon, like those of many other ancient cultures, is undetermined. Their civilization emerged, in much the same manner as ancient Sumer, both sharing tales of their creation by gods who came from the sky in space ships, who allegedly will return one day.

The early histories are informed by oral traditions that differ according to the Dogon clan being consulted and archaeological excavation much more of which needs to be conducted.

Because of these inexact and incomplete sources, there are a number of different versions of the Dogon's origin myths as well as differing accounts of how they got from their ancestral homelands to the Bandiagara region. The people call themselves 'Dogon' or 'Dogom', but in the older literature they are most often called 'Habe', a Fulbe word meaning 'stranger' or 'pagan'.



Certain theories suggest the tribe to be of ancient Egyptian descent - the Dogon next migrating to the region now called Libya, then moving on to somewhere in the regions of Guinea or Mauritania.



Around 1490 AD, fleeing invaders and/or drought, they migrated to the Bandiagara cliffs of central Mali. Carbon-14 dating techniques used on excavated remains found in the cliffs indicate that there were inhabitants in the region before the arrival of the Dogon. They were the Toloy culture of the 3rd to 2nd centuries BC, and the Tellem culture of the 11th to 15th centuries AD.

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Language

Dogon has been frequently referred to as a single language. In reality, there are at least five distinct groups of dialects. The most ancient dialects being dyamsay and tombo, the former being most frequently used for traditional prayers and ritual chants. The Dogon language family is internally highly diverse, and many varieties are not mutually intelligible, actually amounting to some 12 dialects and 50 sub-dialects. There is also a secret ritual language *sigi so* (language of Sigi), which is taught to dignitaries (*olubarū*) of the Society of the Masks during their enthronement at the *Sigui* ceremony. Women have no right to learn *Sigui So*.

It is generally accepted that the Dogon languages belong to the Niger–Congo language family, though the evidence is weak. They have been linked to the Mande subfamily but also to Gur. In a recent overview of the Niger–Congo phylum, Dogon is treated as an independent branch.

The Dogon languages show few remnants of a noun class system (one example is that human nouns take a distinct plural suffix), leading linguists to conclude that Dogon is likely to have diverged from Niger–Congo very early. Another indication of this is the subject–object–verb basic word order, which Dogon shares with such early Niger–Congo branches as *Ijoid* and *Mande*.

About 1,500 ethnic Dogon in seven villages in southern Mali speak the Bangime language, which is unrelated to the other Dogon languages and presumed to be an ancient, pre-Dogon language isolate.

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Dogon Society

Dogon society is composed of several different sects:

- The *Amma* sect: worships the highest creator god Amma. The celebration is once a year and consists of offering boiled millet on the conical altar of Amma, colouring it white. All other sects are directed to the god Amma.
- *Sigui*: the most important ceremony of the Dogon. It takes place every 60 years and can take several years. The last one started in 1967 and ended in 1973, the next one will start in 2027. The Sigui ceremony symbolises the death of the first ancestor (not to be confused with Lébé) until the moment that humanity acquired the use of the spoken word. The Sigui is a long procession that starts and ends in the village of Youga Dogorou and goes from one village to the other during several months or years. All men wear masks and dance in long processions. The Sigui has a secret language, Sigui So, that women are not allowed to learn. The secret Society of Sigui plays a central role in the ceremony. They prepare the ceremonies a long time in advance, and they live for three months hidden outside of the villages while nobody is allowed to see them. The men from the Society of Sigui are called the *Olubaru*. The villagers are afraid of them and fear is cultivated by a prohibition to go out at night, when sounds warn that the Olubaru are out. The most important mask that plays a major role in the Sigui rituals is the Great Mask or the Mother of Masks. It is several meters long and is just held up by hand and not used to hide a face. This mask is newly created every 60 years.
- The *Lébé* sect: worships the ancestor Lébé Serou, the first mortal human being, who, in Dogon myth, was transformed into a snake. The celebration takes place once a year and lasts for three days. The altar is a pointed conic structure on which the Hogon offers boiled millet while mentioning in his benediction eight grains plus one. Afterwards, the Hogon performs some rituals in his house that is also the home of Lébé. The last day, all the village men visit all the Binou altars and dance three times around the Lébé altar. The Hogon invites everybody that assisted to drink the millet beer.
- The *Binou* sect: uses totems, common ones for the entire village and individual ones for totem priests. A totem animal is worshipped on a Binou altar. Totems are for example the buffalo for Ogol-du-Haut, and the panther for Ogol-du-Bas. Normally, nobody will ever be harmed by its own totem animal, even if this is a crocodile as for the village of Amani. Here is a large pool of crocodiles that do not harm any villager. However, a totem animal might exceptionally harm if one has done something wrong. A worshipper is not allowed to eat his totem. For example, an individual with a buffalo as totem is not allowed to eat buffalo meat, but also not to use leather from its skin and even not to see a buffalo die. If this happens by accident he has to organise a purification sacrifice at the Binou altar. Boiled millet is offered and goats and chickens are sacrificed on a Binou altar. This colours the altar both white and red. Binou altars look like little houses with a door. They are bigger when the altar is for an entire village. A village altar has also the 'cloud hook', that will catch clouds and make it rain.
- The *twin* sect: the birth of twins is a sign of good luck. The enlarged Dogon families have common rituals during which they evoke all their ancestors till their origin, the ancient pair of twins from the creation of the world belief.
- The *Mono* sect: the Mono altar is at the entry of every village. Unmarried young men celebrate the Mono sect once a year in January or February. They spend the night around the altar, singing and screaming and waving with fire torches. They hunt for mice that will be sacrificed on the altar at dawn.

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Culture and religion

The majority of Dogon practice an animist religion, including the ancestral spirit Nommo, with its festivals and a sect in which Sirius plays an important part. A significant minority of the Dogon practice Islam. Another minority practice Christianity.

The Dogon record their ancestry through a patrilineal system. Each Dogon community, or enlarged family, is headed by one male elder. This chief head is the oldest living son of the ancestor of the local branch of the family. According to the NECEP database, within this patrilineal system polygynous marriages with up to four wives can occur.

Most men, however, have only one wife, and it is rare for a man to have more than two wives. Formally, wives only join their husband's household after the birth of their first child. Women may leave their husbands early in their marriage, before the birth of their first child. After having children, divorce is a rare and serious matter, and it requires the participation of the whole village. An enlarged family can count up to hundred persons and is called guinna.



A Hogon

The Dogon are strongly oriented toward harmony, which is reflected in many of their rituals. For instance, in one of their most important rituals, the women praise the men, the men thank the women, the young express appreciation for the old, and the old recognize the contributions of the young. Another example is the custom of elaborate greetings whenever one Dogon meets another. This custom is repeated over and over, throughout a Dogon village, all day. During a greeting ritual, the person who has entered the contact answers a series of questions about his or her whole family, from the person who was already there. The answer is *sewa*, which means that everything is fine. Then the Dogon who has entered the contact repeats the ritual, asking the resident how his or her whole family is. Because the word *sewa* is so commonly repeated throughout a Dogon village, neighboring peoples have dubbed the Dogon the *sewa* people.

The Hogon is the spiritual leader of the village. He is elected from among the oldest men of the enlarged families of the village. After his election he has to follow a six-month initiation period, during which he is not allowed to shave or wash. He wears white clothes and nobody is allowed to touch him. A young virgin that has not yet had her period takes care of him, cleans the house and prepares his meals. She returns to her home at night.

After his initiation, he wears a red fez. He has an armband with a sacred pearl that symbolises his function. The virgin is replaced by one of his wives, but she also returns to her home at night. The Hogon has to live alone in his house. The Dogon believe the sacred snake Lébé comes during the night to clean him and to transfer wisdom.

The Dogon maintain an agricultural mode of subsistence, and cultivate pearl millet, sorghum and rice, as well as onions, tobacco, peanuts, and some other vegetables. Marcel Griaule stimulated the construction of a dam near Sangha and incited the Dogon to cultivate onions. The economy of the Sangha region doubled since then and its onions are sold as far as the market of Bamako and even Côte d'Ivoire. They also raise sheep, goats and chickens. Grain is stored in granaries.

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Religious Speculation

The religious beliefs of the Dogon are enormously complex and knowledge of them varies greatly within Dogon society. Dogon religion is defined primarily through the worship of the ancestors and the spirits whom they encountered as they slowly migrated from their obscure ancestral homelands to the Bandiagara cliffs. They were called the 'Nommo' (Amphibious Gods?)

There are three principal cults among the Dogon; the Awa, Lebe and Binu.

The Awa is a cult of the dead, whose purpose is to reorder the spiritual forces disturbed by the death of Nommo, a mythological ancestor of great importance to the Dogon.

Members of the Awa cult dance with ornate carved and painted masks during both funeral and death anniversary ceremonies. There are 78 different types of ritual masks among the Dogon and their iconographic messages go beyond the aesthetic, into the realm of religion and philosophy.



The primary purpose of Awa dance ceremonies is to lead souls of the deceased to their final resting place in the family altars and to consecrate their passage to the ranks of the ancestors.

The cult of Lebe, the Earth God, is primarily concerned with the agricultural cycle and its chief priest is called a Hogon.

All Dogon villages have a Lebe shrine whose altars have bits of earth incorporated into them to encourage the continued fertility of the land.

According to Dogon beliefs, the god Lebe visits the hogons every night in the form of a serpent and licks their skins in order to purify them and infuse them with life force. The hogons are responsible for guarding the purity of the soil and therefore officiate at many agricultural ceremonies.



In the village of Sangha, onion bulbs are smashed and shaped into balls that are dried in the sun. The onion balls are trucked as far away as the Ivory Coast to be sold as an ingredient for sauces. Introduced by the French in the 1930s, onions are one of the Dogon's only cash crop.



Millet Harvest - Dogon women pound millet in the village of Kani Kombal. Millet is of vital importance to the Dogon. They sow millet in June and July, after the rains begin. The millet is harvested in October.



Nowadays, the Dogon blacksmiths forge mainly scrap metal recuperated from old railway lines or car wrecks. So, little by little, the long process of iron ore reduction, which demands a perfect knowledge of fire and its temperatures, has been abandoned.

One of the last smelting was done in Mali, in 1995, by the Dogon blacksmiths. The event became the subject of a film which was entitled "Inagina, The Last House of Iron". Eleven blacksmiths, who still hold the secrets of this ancestral activity, agreed to perform a last smelt. They gathered to invoke the spirits.



They sunk a mine shaft, made charcoal, and built a furnace with earth and lumps of slag. The last furnace - or Inagina - meaning literally the 'house of iron' gave birth to 69 kilos of iron of excellent quality. With this, the blacksmiths forged traditional tools intended for agriculture, the making of weapons, and jewelry for the Dogon people.

Youdiou Dances - During the Dama celebration, Youdiou villagers circle around two stilt dancers. The dance and costumes imitate the tingetange, a long-legged water bird. The dancers execute difficult steps while teetering high above the crowd.

The cult of Binu is a totemic practice and it has complex associations with the Dogon's sacred places used for ancestor worship, spirit communication and agricultural sacrifices. Marcel Griaule and his colleagues came to believe that all the major Dogon sacred sites were related to episodes in the Dogon myth of the creation of the world, in particular to a deity named Nommo.

Binu shrines house spirits of mythic ancestors who lived in the legendary era before the appearance of death among mankind. Binu spirits often make themselves known to their descendants in the form of an animal that interceded on behalf of the clan during its founding or migration, thus becoming the clan's totem.

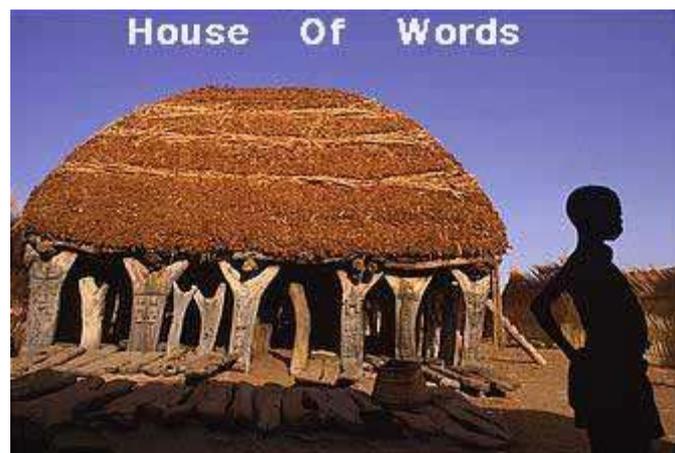
The priests of each Binu maintain the sanctuaries whose facades are often painted with graphic signs and mystic symbols. Sacrifices of blood and millet porridge the primary crop of the Dogon are made at the Binu shrines at sowing time and whenever the intercession of the immortal ancestor is desired.

Through such rituals, the Dogon believe that the benevolent force of the ancestor is transmitted to them.



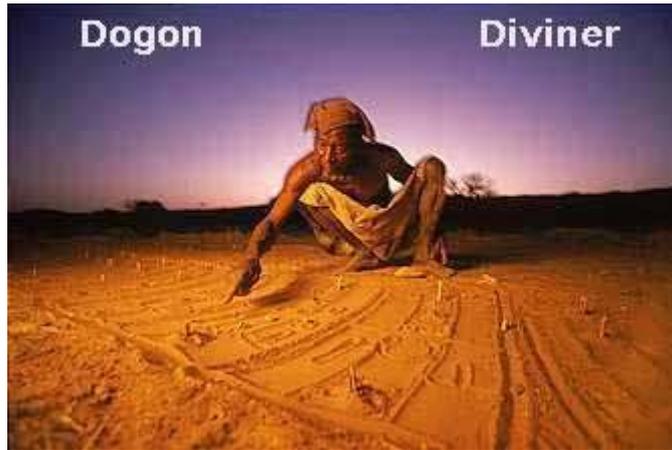
Kananga masks contain geometric patterns. These masks represent the first human beings. The Dogon believe that the Dama dance creates a bridge into the supernatural world. Without the Dama dance, the dead cannot cross over into peace.

Their self-defence comes from their social solidarity which is based on a complex combination of philosophic and religious dogmas, the fundamental law being the worship of ancestors. Ritual masks and corpses are used for ceremonies and are kept in caves. The Dogon are both Muslims and Animists.

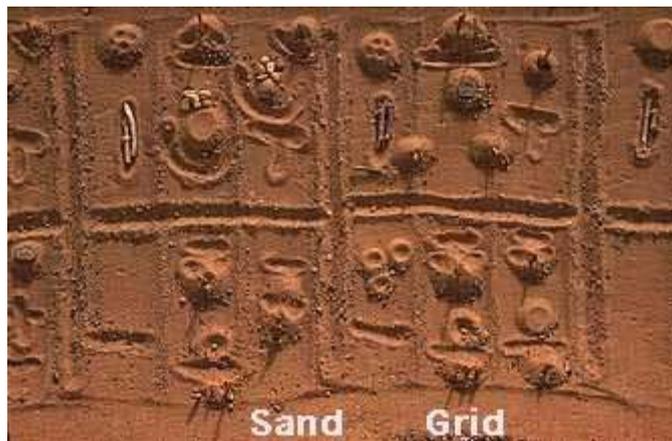


A 'Togu Na' - 'House of Words' - stands in every Dogon village and marks the male social center. The low ceiling, supported by carved or sculptured posts, prevents overzealous discussions from escalating into fights. Symbolic meaning surrounds the Togu Na. On the Gondo Plain, Togu Na pillars are carved out of Kile wood and often express themes of fertility and procreation. Many of the carvings are of women's breasts, for as a Dogon proverb says, "The breast is second only to God."

Unfortunately, collectors have stolen some of the more intricately carved pillars, forcing village elders to deface their Togu Na posts by chopping off part of the sculpted wood. This mutilation of the sculpted pillars assures their safety.



Amaguime Dolu, a diviner in the village of Bongo, performs a ritual. He derives meaning and makes predictions from grids and symbols in the sand. At dusk, he draws a questions in the sand for the sacred fox to answer. The Dogon people believe the fox has supernatural powers. The Dogon may ask questions such as: "Does the man I love also love me?" or "Should I take the job offer at the mission church?" In the morning, the diviner will read the fox prints on the sand and make interpretations. The fox is sure to come because offerings of millet, milk and peanuts are made to this sacred animal.

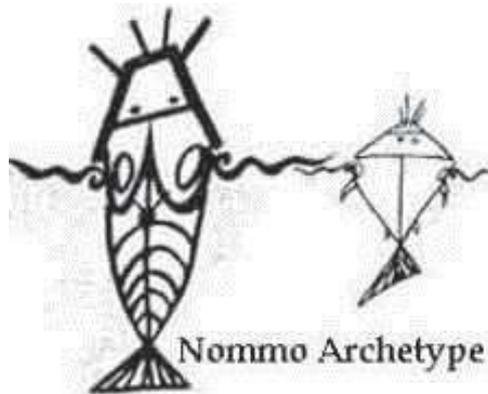


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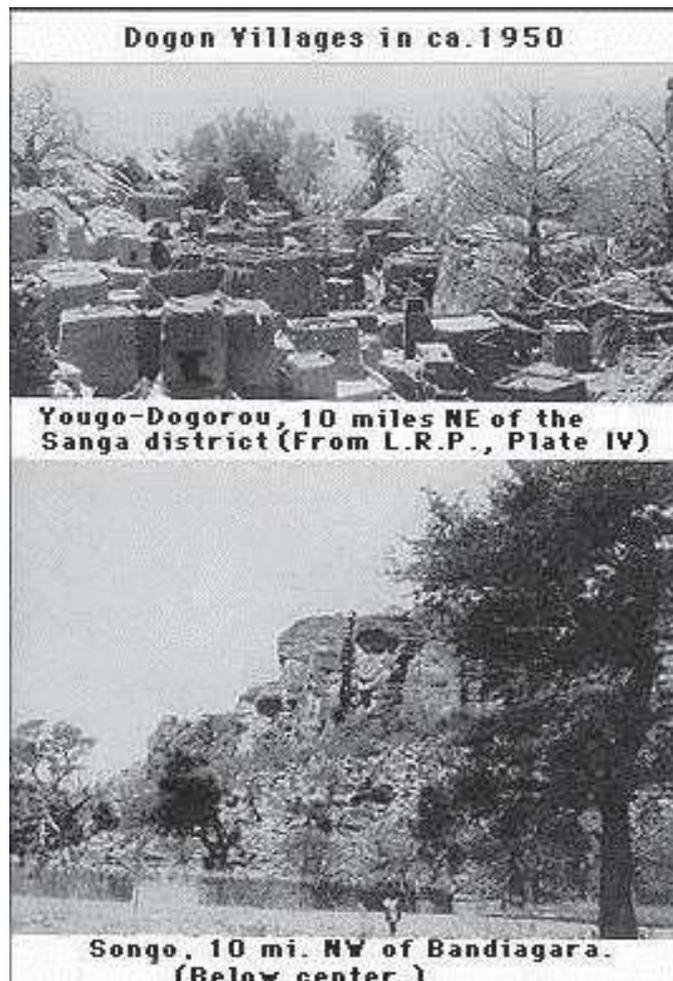
Nommo

Reality or Speculation?

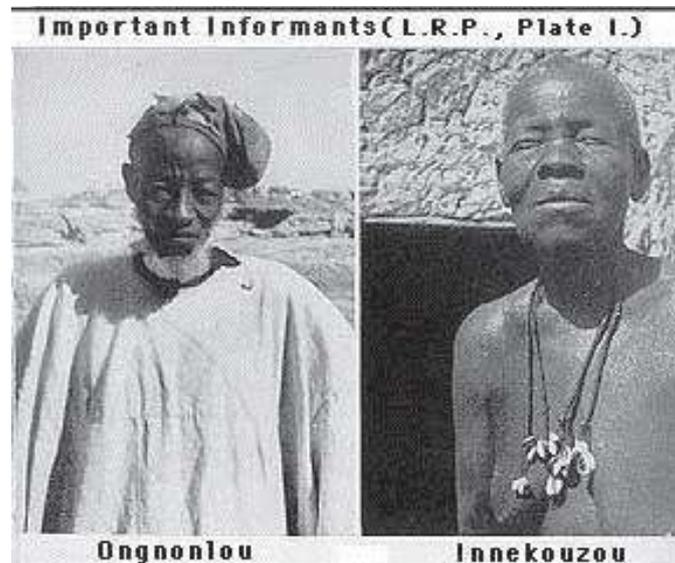


Astronomy

The Dogon are famous for their astronomical knowledge taught through oral tradition, dating back thousands of years, referencing the star system, Sirius linked with the Egyptian goddess Isis. The astronomical information known by the Dogon was not discovered and verified until the 19th and 20th centuries, making one wonder how the Dogon came by this knowledge. Their oral traditions say it was given to them by the Nommo. The source of their information may date back to the time of the ancient Egyptian priests.



As the story goes - in the late 1930s, four Dogon priests shared their most important secret tradition with two French anthropologists, Marcel Griaule and Germain Dieterlen after they had spent an apprenticeship of fifteen years living with the tribe. These were secret myths about the star Sirius, which is 8.6 light years from the Earth.



The Dogon priests said that Sirius had a companion star that was invisible to the human eye. They also stated that the star moved in a 50-year elliptical orbit around Sirius, that it was small and incredibly heavy, and that it rotated on its axis.

Initially the anthropologists wrote it off publishing the information in an obscure anthropological journal, because they didn't appreciate the astronomical importance of the information.

What they didn't know was that since 1844, astronomers had suspected that Sirius A had a companion star. This was in part determined when it was observed that the path of the star wobbled.

In 1862 Alvan Clark discovered the second star making Sirius a binary star system (two stars).

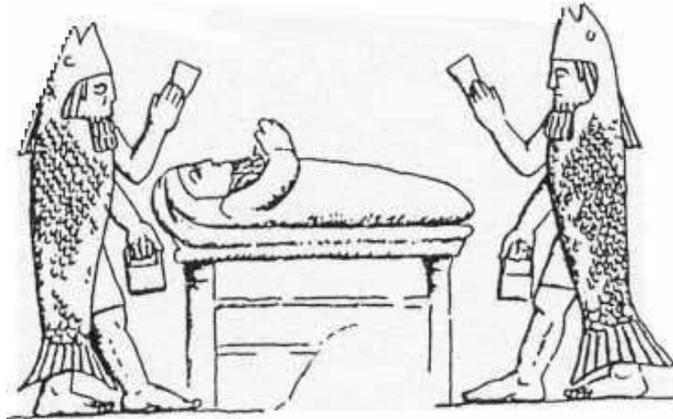
In the 1920's it was determined that Sirius B, the companion of Sirius, was a white dwarf star. White dwarfs are small, dense stars that burn dimly. The pull of its gravity causes Sirius' wavy movement. Sirius B is smaller than planet Earth.

The Dogon name for Sirius B is *Po Tolo*. It means *star - tolo* and *smallest seed - po*. Seed refers to creation. In this case, perhaps human creation. By this name they describe the star's smallness. It is, they say, the smallest thing there is. They also claim that it is 'the heaviest star' and is white in colour. The Dogon thus attribute to Sirius B its three principal properties as a white dwarf: small, heavy, white.

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Nommo Description

The Nommo are ancestral spirits (sometimes referred to as deities) worshipped by the Dogon tribe of Mali. The word Nommos is derived from a Dogon word meaning, "to make one drink," The Nommos are usually described as amphibious, hermaphroditic, fish-like creatures. Folk art depictions of the Nommos show creatures with humanoid upper torsos, legs/feet, and a fish-like lower torso and tail. The Nommos are also referred to as "Masters of the Water", "the Monitors", and "the Teachers".



Amphibious Gods

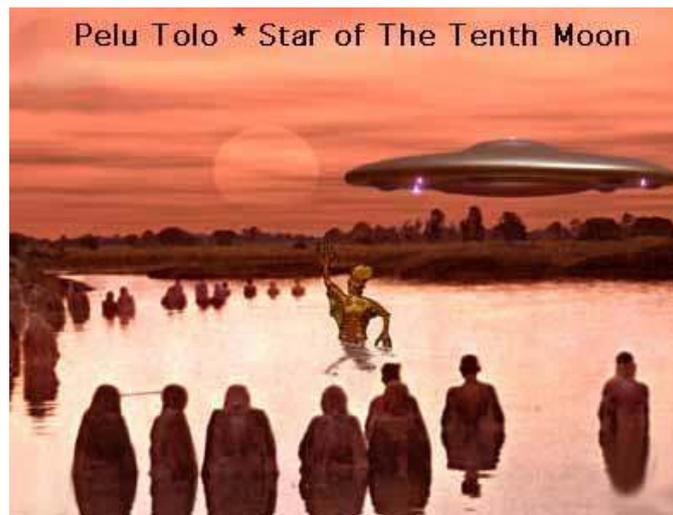
Nommo can be a proper name of an individual, or can refer to the group of spirits as a whole. For purposes of this article "Nommo" refers to a specific individual and "Nommos" is used to reference the group of beings.

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Nommo Mythology

Dogon mythology states that Nommo was the first living creature created by the sky god Amma. Shortly after his creation, Nommo underwent a transformation and multiplied into four pairs of twins. One of the twins rebelled against the universal order created by Amma. To restore order to his creation, Amma sacrificed another of the Nommo progeny, whose body was dismembered and scattered throughout the world. This dispersal of body parts is seen by the Dogon as the source for the proliferation of Binu shrines throughout the Dogons' traditional territory; wherever a body part fell, a shrine was erected.

In the latter part of the 1940s, French anthropologists Marcel Griaule and Germaine Dieterlen (who had been working with the Dogon since 1931) were the recipients of additional, secret mythologies, concerning the Nommo. The Dogon reportedly related to Griaule and Dieterlen a belief that the Nommos were inhabitants of a world circling the star Sirius.



The Nommos descended from the sky in a vessel accompanied by fire and thunder. After arriving, the Nommos created a reservoir of water and subsequently dove into the water. The Dogon legends state that the Nommos required a watery environment in which to live. According to the myth related to Griaule and Dieterlen: "The Nommo divided his body among men to feed them; that is why it is also said that as the universe "had drunk of his body," the Nommo also made men drink. He gave all his

life principles to human beings." The Nommo was crucified on a tree, but was resurrected and returned to his home world. Dogon legend has it that he will return in the future to revisit the Earth in a human form.

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Controversy

In the 1970s a book by Robert Temple titled *The Sirius Mystery* popularized the traditions of the Dogon concerning Sirius and the Nommos. In *The Sirius Mystery*, Temple advanced the conclusion that the Dogon's knowledge of astronomy and non-visible cosmic phenomenon could only be explained if this knowledge had been imparted upon them by an extraterrestrial race that had visited the Dogon at some point in the past. Temple related this race to the legend of the Nommos and contended that the Nommos were extraterrestrial inhabitants of the Sirius star system who had travelled to earth at some point in the distant past and had imparted knowledge about the Sirius star system as well as our own solar system upon the Dogon tribes.

Walter van Beek, an anthropologist studying the Dogon, found no evidence that they had any historical advanced knowledge of Sirius. Van Beek postulated that Griaule engaged in such leading and forceful questioning of his Dogon sources that new myths were created in the process by confabulation.

Carl Sagan has noted that the first reported association of the Dogon with the knowledge of Sirius as a binary star was in the 1940s, giving the Dogon ample opportunity to gain cosmological knowledge about Sirius and the solar system from more scientifically advanced, terrestrial societies whom they had come in contact with. It has also been pointed out that binary star systems like Sirius are theorized to have a very narrow or non-existent Habitable zone, and thus a high improbability of containing a planet capable of sustaining life (particularly life as dependent on water as the Nommos were reported to be).

Daughter and colleague of Marcel Griaule, Genevieve Calame-Griaule, defended the project, dismissing Van Beek's criticism as misguided speculation rooted in an apparent ignorance of esoteric tradition. Van Beek continues to maintain that Griaule was wrong and cites other anthropologists who also reject his work. The assertion that the Dogon knew of another star in the Sirius system, Emme Ya, or "larger than Sirius B but lighter and dim in magnitude" continues to be discussed.

In 1995, gravitational studies indicated the possible existence of a red dwarf star circling around Sirius but further observations have failed to confirm this.

Space journalist and skeptic James Oberg collected claims that have appeared concerning Dogon mythology in his 1982 book and concedes that such assumptions of recent acquisition is "entirely circumstantial" and has no foundation in documented evidence and concludes that it seems likely that the Sirius mystery will remain exactly what its title implies; a mystery.

Earlier, other critics such as the astronomer Peter Pesch and his collaborator Roland Pesch and Ian Ridpath had attributed the supposed "advanced" astronomical knowledge of the Dogon to a mixture of over-interpretation by commentators and cultural contamination.

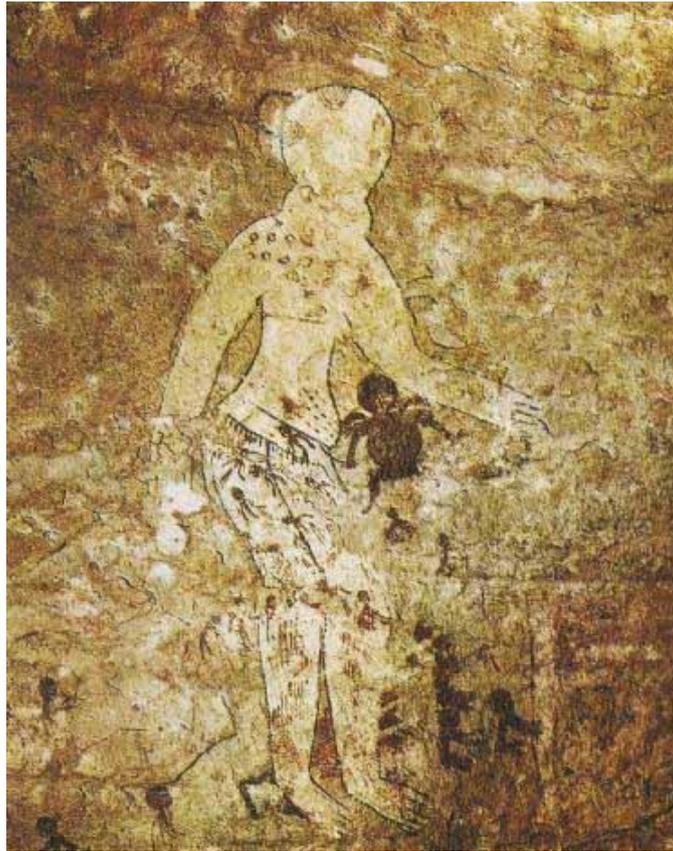


Tassili n'Ajjer, Sahara Desert, North Africa

Sahara rock art is a significant area of archaeological study focusing on the precious treasures carved or painted on the natural rocks found in the central Sahara desert. There are over three thousand sites discovered that have information about Saharan rock art. From the Tibesti massif to the Ahaggar Mountains, the Sahara is an impressive open-air museum containing numerous archaeological sites.

Tassili n'Ajjer (meaning "Plateau of the Rivers") is noted for its prehistoric rock art and other ancient archaeological sites, dating from Neolithic times when the local climate was much moister, with savannah rather than desert. The art depicts herds of cattle, large wild animals including crocodiles, and human activities such as hunting and dancing. The art has strong stylistic links to the pre-Nguni Art of South Africa and the region, executed in caves by the San Peoples before the year 1200 BCE.

The range's exceptional density of rock art paintings-pictograms and engravings-petroglyphs, and the presence of many prehistoric vestiges, are remarkable testimonies to Neolithic prehistory. From 10,000 BCE to the first centuries CE, successive peoples left many archaeological remains, habitations, burial mounds and enclosures which have yielded abundant lithic and ceramic material. However, it is the rock art (engravings and paintings) that have made Tassili world famous as from 1933, the date of its discovery. 15,000 petroglyphs have been identified to date.



Some of the painting have bizarre depictions of what appear to be spacemen wearing suits, visors, and helmets. resembling modern day astronauts. This takes us to the West African tribe - the Dogon whose legends say they were guided to the area from another part of Africa that was drying up - by fish gods called the Nommo who came in huge ships from the sky.

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Pictures



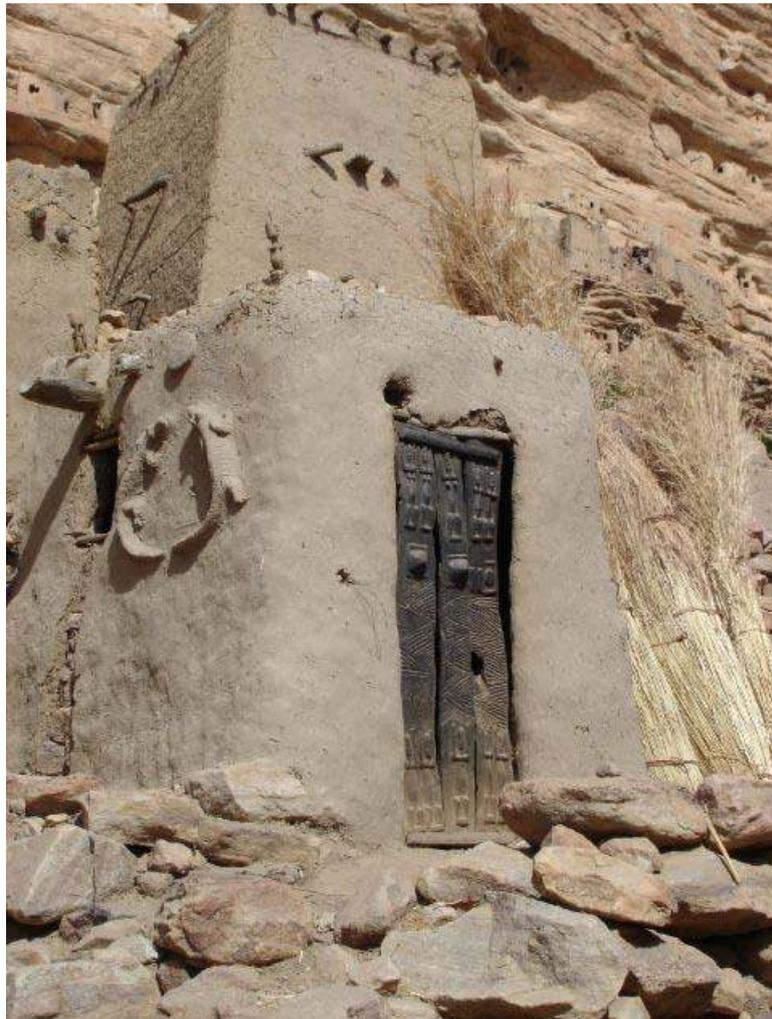
Toguna - a building only for men. They rest here much of the day throughout the heat of the dry season, discuss affairs and take important decisions in the toguna. The roof of a toguna is made by 8 layers of millet stalks. It is a low building in which one cannot stand upright. This helps with avoiding violence when discussions get heated.



The Bandiagara Cliffs - 2005



*Background: the remnant of the dwelling of the ancient Tellem people by the Bandiagara Escarpment, Dogon country, Mali.
Foreground: a mud mosque of the modern-day Dogon people
(2000)*



*The Dogon village of Banani, Mali,
Crocodile Totem, 2006*



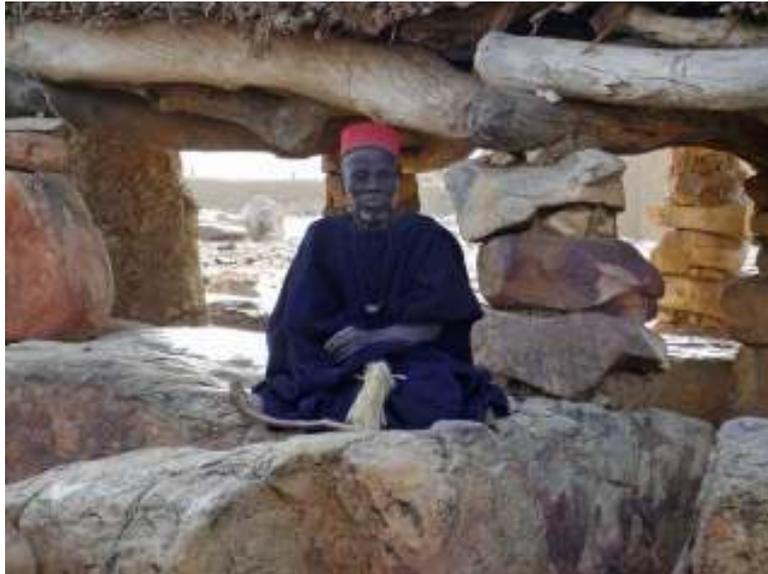
Dogon people, Mali - 2003



Dogon Hunter - 2010



Dogon circumcision cave painting, photographed in Mali, December 2006



A Hogon- 2006



*Antropomorphic representation, probably an ancestor figure.
Wood, Mali, 17th-18th century*

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