

DOGON CULTURE

LOCATION

The Dogon are a tribe from Mali who until fairly recently were able to keep their culture largely undisturbed by hostile tribes, colonists, and modern life. This is mainly due to their geographical isolation along the steep rock walls and plateau of the region Bandiagara. Even today, the Dogon live without electricity, plumbing or a road system. Visitors to 'Pays Dogon' have to travel by foot or donkey cart, and have to make sure they take a guide along who can tell them about all the sacred - and sometimes forbidden - places scattered across the villages and countryside.

HISTORY

Dogon history is based on oral tradition which tells the story of their ancestors who came to Bandiagara some time around the 10th century. These ancestors were four brothers named Dyon, Ono, Arou, and Domno. Inhabitants of different regions claim to be related to one of these four brothers. Oral tradition tells us that the Dogon originally come from the west bank of the Niger River (10th to 13th centuries). They ended up in the Bandiagara cliffs region around the 14th or 15th century. Before 1921, the Dogon lived mostly along the cliffs and on the plateau. Here they were safe from war-hungry tribes such as the Islamic Peul, who frequently tried to attack them. Only after the French colonists managed to pacify the area in 1921, Dogon people started to spread out across the plains where water was more plentiful and land easier to cultivate.

RELIGION

The Dogon practice an animist religion, which believes all things and natural forces contain a living soul. Their religion is defined primarily through the worship of Amma, the creator god, and of their ancestors and protector spirits.

The Dogon have four important cults in which they express their beliefs and perform religious rituals. The Awa cult, also known as the cult of the masks, is exclusively male. The male society of this cult is characterized by strict rules of conduct, responsibilities, taboos and a secret language. All young men in the Awa cult are instructed in the art of the masks, which is forbidden to women and children. The cult of Binou is a society that links certain families to a totem, often in the form of an animal. The cult of the ancestors believes in maintaining good relations between the living and the dead. The fourth cult is called Lébé, which is agricultural and worships the mythical Nommo creatures. The most important agricultural ritual is called the Bulu, which takes place before the first rains and planting of the crops.

The most mysterious part of Dogon religion and culture is their myth about the Nommo and a star called Sirius B. The Dogon people call this star Po Tolo. In the 1920s they told a French anthropologist about this tiny and extremely dense star, explaining that it circled around Sirius A, the brightest star in the sky. The most remarkable part of this story is that Sirius B could not be viewed by people until the 1970s when telescopes were finally strong enough to see it. The Dogon claim that the Nommo, their half-fish, half-human spirits told them about Sirius B. Nommo were mythical creatures who supposedly came from the Sirius star system to earth and visited the Dogon back in the earliest days of their history. This unusual story has created much speculation from western scientists and researchers, including Carl Sagan, who wrote a book on the theory that the Dogon were visited by extraterrestrial beings in the past.

SOCIETY, ECONOMY AND POLITICS

The Dogon are primarily farmers of millet, sorghum, rice, onions, beans, tobacco, and sorrel. Their onions are famous and exported throughout the Sudan region. Another locally famous Dogon product is Dogon, or millet beer. Apart from farming they also keep herds of goats and sheep along with a few cows and chickens. Because game in the area is scarce, hunting contributes little to the Dogon diet. Fishing is done once a year as a group activity.

The Dogon live in large family households called Gina. A Gina is usually composed of a polygamous family group: a husband with several wives, and their unmarried children. Dogon villages mostly consist of families who stem from the same (male) ancestor. This is called a patrilineage. These lineages own houses and agricultural fields have their own altars and ceremonies, as well as their own burial grounds. The head of the lineage is called Gina Bana, who is the oldest living male descendant of the common ancestor. The primary responsibility of the Gina Bana is to be the

master of ceremonies. He is also the leader of a council of elders made up of all the adult men of the group. The council and the Gina Bana settle family disputes, administer the property, and send representatives to the village council.

CULTURE

The Dogon are known for their beautifully carved masks and wooden figures. A popular image in paintings, masks and woodcarvings, is that of the Kanaga, a religious symbol of a human form with two arms pointing to the sky and legs pointing to earth. It symbolizes life as a transitional phase from earth to heaven. The most common colors used Dogon art are red, black, and white, and typical Dogon patterns include spirals and checkerboard motifs. These motifs are all related to the Dogon stories of origin.

When Dogon women menstruate they have to go to special houses which they cannot leave until their period has passed. This is because the Dogon believe that blood attracts spirits, possibly evil ones. For the women the monthly break is quite nice; food is brought to them by other tribesmen and they get a rest from working in the fields and watching the children. One very controversial cultural custom concerning Dogon women is female circumcision. This is the practice of removing parts of a young woman's genitalia to 'cleanse' her spiritually. It is often a terribly painful procedure, performed without medication or sterilized knives and many young women die. This custom is strongly tied with the Dogon creation myth and religion; the very first female circumcision was performed by Amma himself on the Mother Earth. Its practice is common in societies that place a high stake on female virginity and patrilineage.

