Birth from the Knee

To have lost the art of thinking in images is precisely to have lost the proper linguistic of metaphysics and to have descended to the verbal logic of "philosophy."

Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "The Primitive Mentality".

Introduction

In this paper I propose to examine the curious notion of birth from the knee, which finds expression in a wide variety of stories and images. The extensive distribution of this idea provides silent testimony to its antiquity. This work is largely dependent on the efforts of the American art historian, Carl Schuster (1904-1969), whose research provides solid ground for the interpretation of this peculiar idea and much else. Not only did he connect the notion of birth from the knee to a large number of related ideas, but he opened a window on many of the central beliefs of our earliest ancestors.

Most of the ideas presented here are based on a simple metaphor: the equation of human reproduction, descent, and affinity with trees and plants. We would do well to remember that before writing externalized knowledge, the image had a fundamental role in communicating ideas. We think in images, at least in part, and this innate capacity was used in full by our ancestors. This enables art historians, with the aid of other disciplines such as linguistics and anthropology, to venture where no written records exist. When we do find literary evidence in later periods, it sometimes gives voice to these older ideas since they persisted, though often in confused or debased forms.[1]

Birth from the Father

The original belief was that children are born from the right knee of their father. The seed or perhaps small child (*homunculus*) travels by some mysterious process into the penis from whence it is "planted" in the woman. The metaphor is consistent with ideas about how heaven (male) and earth (female) were separated in the beginning and that the rain or dew from heaven fertilizes the earth. These are the kind of binary structures that interested Claude Levi Strauss and which he used as a basis for structuralism. Another anthropologist and theorist, Gregory Bateson, has some relevant comments in his discussion of totemism:

> Their ideas about nature, however fantastic, are supported by their social systems; conversely, the social system is supported by their ideas of nature. It thus becomes very difficult for the people, so doubly guided, to change their view either of nature or of the social system. For the benefits of stability, they pay the price of rigidity, living as all human beings must, in an enormously complex network of mutually supporting presuppositions.[2]

Another reason for conceiving of the knee as a generative organ was the significance once attached to the body joints in early times, a matter we will summarize later. The articulation of bodies, both human and animal, was related to the nodes of plants, which can be cut and replanted to grow another plant. Many myths tell of children conceived from severed fingers and toes or from seeds or plants. The knee is the most prominent joint in the body and contains synovial fluid, which was equated with the sap in trees, the juice in plants, or the sperm in humans and animals.

1. A work like Carlo Ginsburg's *The Cheese and the Worms*, for example, chronicles the remnants of very old beliefs in Renaissance Italy.
2. Gregory Bateson, *Mind and Nature*, pp. 158-159.

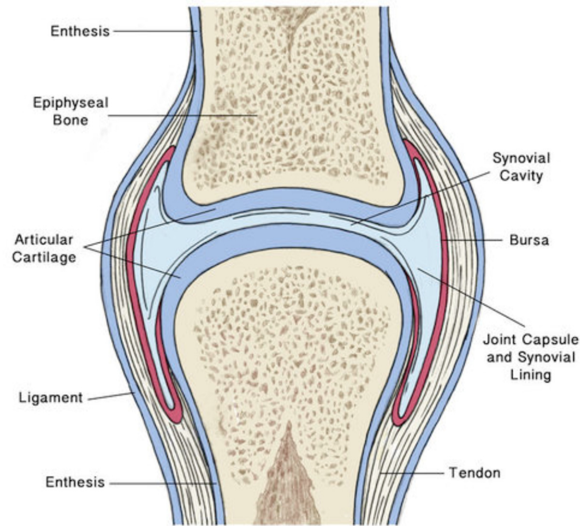

Figure 1: Diagram of the knee

Most significantly, both the knee and the head played a crucial role in an ancient system of graphical representation developed by Paleolithic peoples to express their ideas about genealogy and descent. We will begin by summarizing the elements of this iconography. I will not attempt to justify Schuster's ideas other than to show their connection to the other ideas discussed in this paper. Interested readers can consult the Wikipedia entry on Carl Schuster for further references.

Genealogical Iconography

Carl Schuster believed that Paleolithic peoples developed a system for illustrating their ideas about genealogy.[1] Not a kinship system — which depicts actual relations — but an idealized system linked to certain cosmological ideas. The resulting designs were used to decorate the body, clothing, and tools. Their function was to clothe the individual in his/her tribal ancestry. The basic units of the system were conventionalized human figures, linked like paper dolls, arm to arm to depict relation within the same generation, and leg to arm to depict descent. Linked together, these human bodies formed patterns, often of astonishing complexity (Figure 2).

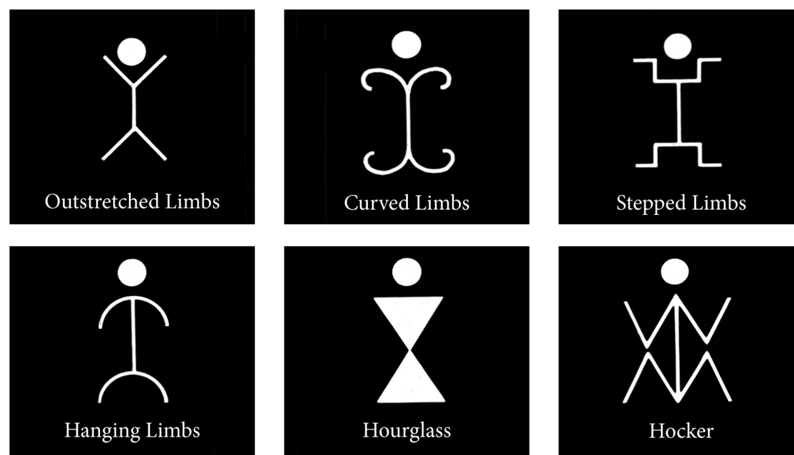

Figure 2: Schematic rendering of basic genealogical elements

1. See "Genealogical Patterns in the Old and New Worlds." Revista Do Museu Paulista, Nova Série, vol. X (1956/58), Sao Paulo, Brazil. This article was also printed separately as a booklet under the same title.

To depict descent, the leg of one human figure is linked to the arm of a lower, adjacent one. Figures can also be linked if the adjacent figure is inverted. The linkage serves to fuse the limbs to create an overall pattern (Figure 3). The notion is that people grow out of one another in the manner of plants grown from a cutting. This idea may seem strange to us but it is essentially metaphoric and what we consider "figures of speech" were once "figures of thought" as Onians and others have shown.

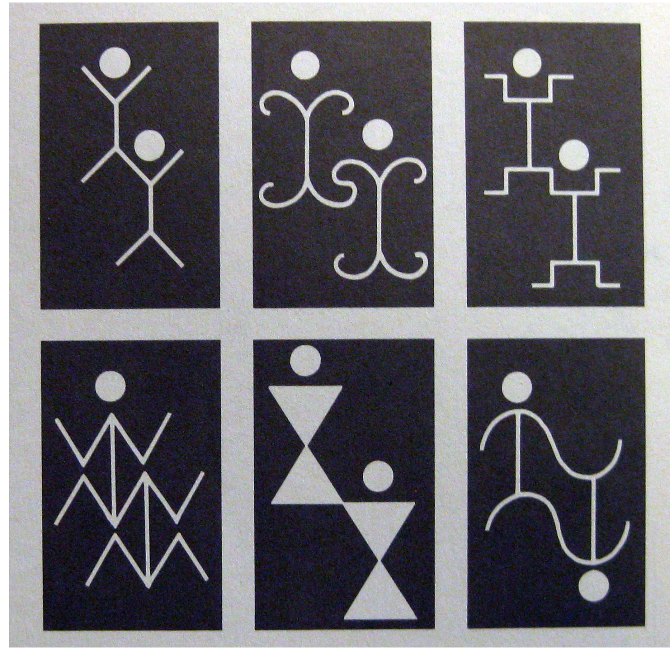

Figure 3: Descent

Figures can also be linked horizontally, arm to arm and leg to leg, to depict relationships within a single generation (Figure 4).

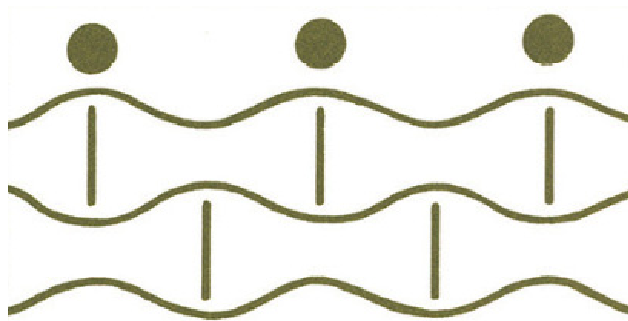

Figure 4: Relationship

A cotton *ikat* from Sulawesi, Indonesia (Figure 5) contains a repeated human figure with distended ear lobes and a prominent spinal column. Each limb forms a "Z" to link with an arm or a leg diagonally above and below.

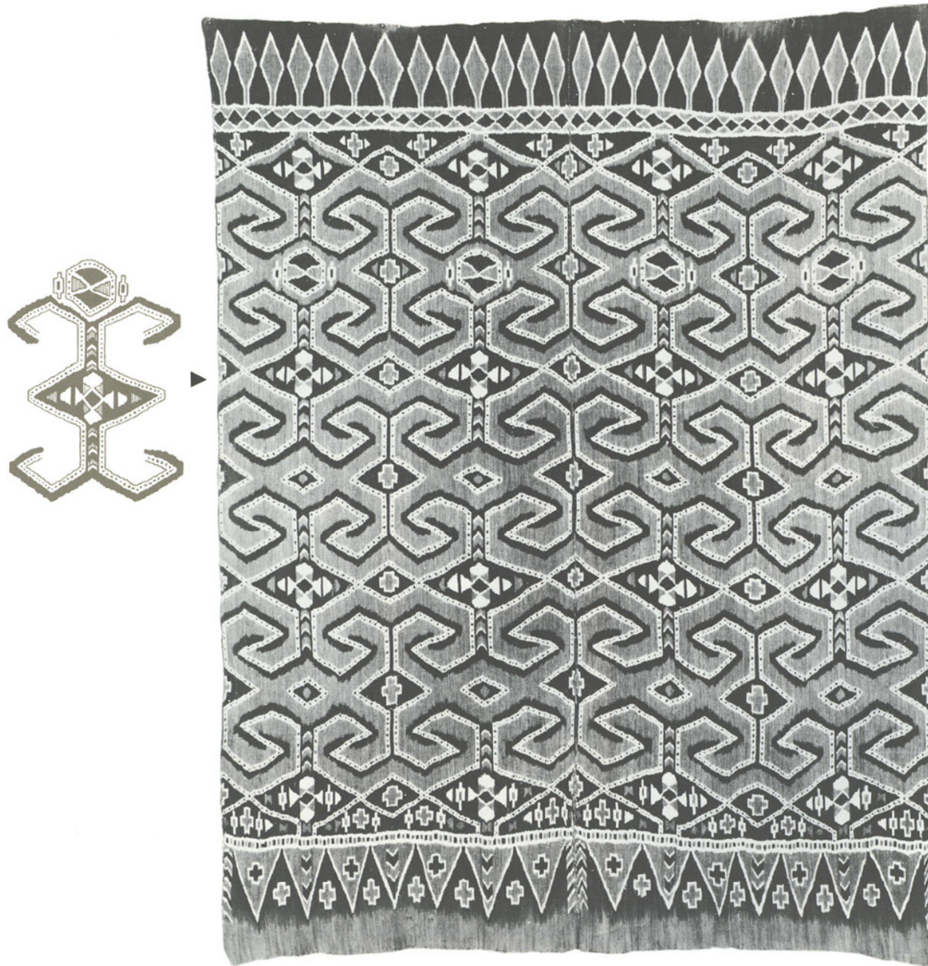

Figure 5: Sulawesi cotton ikat, Indonesia

The anthropologist, Edmund Carpenter, remarks:

> The significance of [the design] can best be understood with reference to the genetic theories of certain Indonesian peoples. According to these beliefs, the body of each person is composed of two halves, derived respectively from the corresponding halves of each parent. When viewed in terms of this idea, the figures to the right & left immediately above each individual represent the father & mother, each of whom contributes one half to his formation. The figures to the right & left immediately below the same individual represent his children, or rather his share in their creation, by virtue of marriage.[1]

1. Carl Schuster and Edmund Carpenter, *Social Symbolism in Ancient and Tribal Art*, vol.1, book 1, p. 51. Reference to the genetic theory of certain Indonesian peoples is derived from J. Roder, 'Levende Oudheden op Ambon'. *Cultureel Indie*, 1, pp. 97-105 (1939).

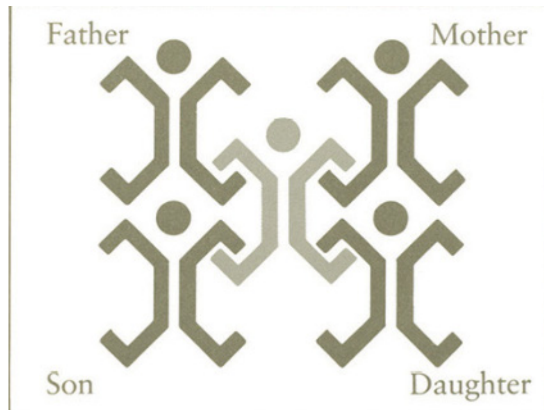

Figure 6: Schematic illustration of genetic relationships depicted in Figure 5.

We would be fully justified in referring to the cotton *ikat* in Figure 5 as a depiction of the "social fabric,"an expression that carries more meaning than one might assume.

If we remove the heads from our genealogical patterns, bearing in mind that the figures represent ancestors and not living people, we are left with what is referred to as "geometric art," most familiar to us as decorative motifs like hourglass figures, diamonds, St. Andrew's crosses, meanders, and spiral patterns, which appear in the traditional art forms of many cultures throughout the world. These patterns are in fact figurative and have no roots in geometry despite their later devolution into decoration. They once had meaning to their makers.

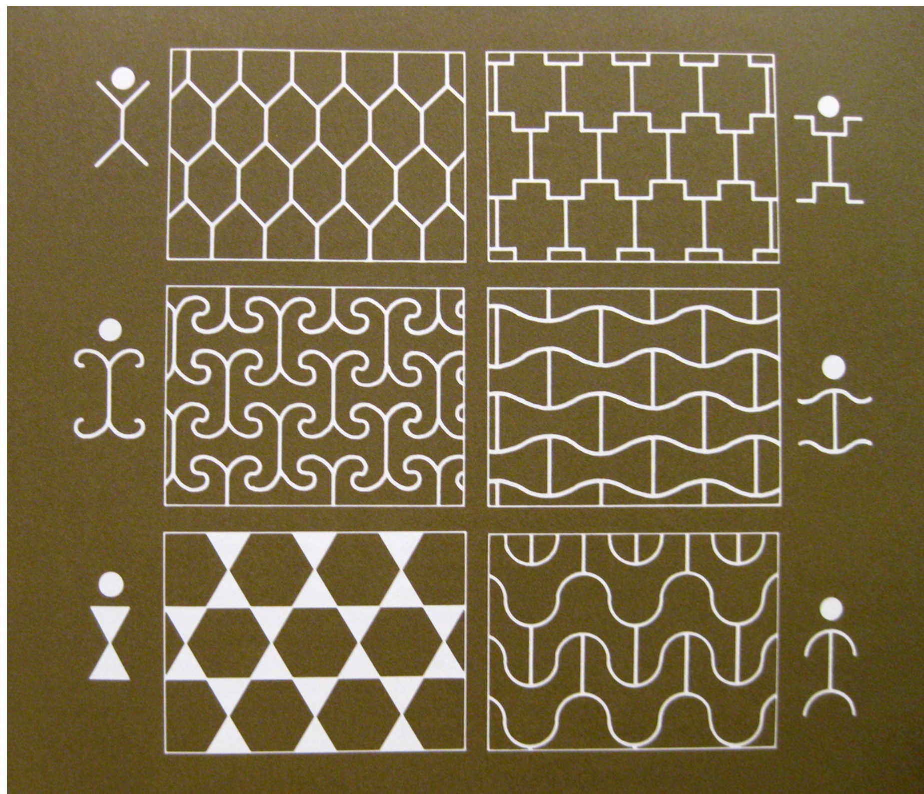

Figure 7: Linked ancestor figures

Our earliest evidence for this symbolism is also our earliest verified instance of human artwork, found in the Blombos Cave in South Africa and dating from about 80,000 B.C. (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Red ocher with inscribed hour-glass figures, Blombos Cave, South Africa

This graphic system is well represented in Paleolithic and Mesolithic art and it survived among tribal peoples into modern time. It is so pervasive that it has escaped notice. Many different kinds of patterns were derived from these basic building blocks and it is not possible to provide examples for all of them here.[1] I will concentrate on those that relate to birth from the knee.

Figure 9, a pictograph from Los Letreros cave in Almeria, Spain, dating from the Neolithic or Chalcolithic period, shows linked human figures in a kind of Tree of Jesse configuration. The same idea is reflected in Figure 10, a panel from an Australian opossum-skin robe in which several linked chains of human figures are overlaid, probably indicating marriages between moieties.

Figure 9: Pictographs, Almeria, Spain (3000 to 4000 B.C.)

1. See Carl Schuster and Edmund Carpenter, *Social Symbolism in Ancient and Tribal Art*. The Rock Foundation (1986-1988) 3 volumes. These volume were privately printed in limited numbers but will soon be available in E-book and print-on-demand formats.

Figure 10: Panel of an Australian opossum-skin robe (19th century)

These linkages between human "limbs"—note the word itself—are fictional but they are a good way of expressing the continuity between generations, in the manner of a continuous vine or runner that bears human fruit.

Initiation rituals found among the Wikmunkan and Wiknatara aborigines of Australia (Figure 11) and the Selk'nam (Ona) of Tierra del Fuego (Figure 12) both feature men linking their arms. It is more than likely that many of the European folk-dance patterns are derived from this conception.

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Figure 11: Australian ritual at Cape York (1936). Photograph by U. McConnel.

Figure 12: Part of the Selk'nam Hain ceremony (1923). Photograph by M. Gusinde.

Let's look at another example, a textile from Formosa (Figure 13) which illustrates another aspect of the symbolism. The bodies are provided with multiple outlines to indicate multiplication of the figures in each generation.[1]

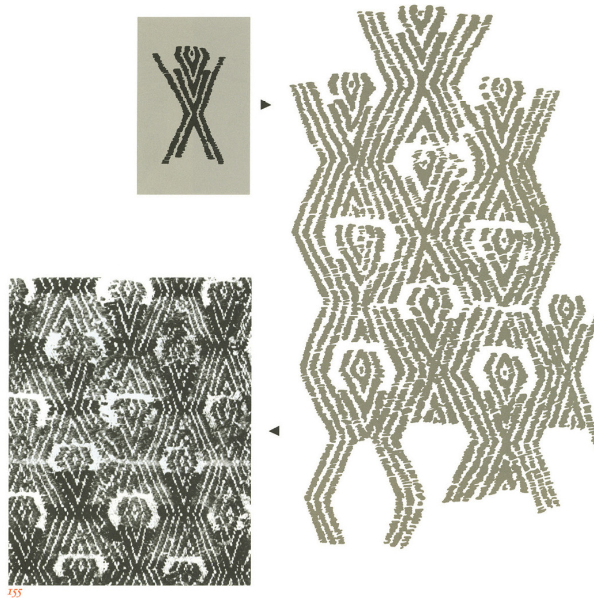

Figure 13: Textile from Formosa, Paiwan tribe

A hypothetical reconstruction of a single figure from a petroglyph in Guiana (Figure 14) exhibits the same outlines.The vertical extensions of the limbs indicate descent and reinforce the notion that people grow from one another like vines.

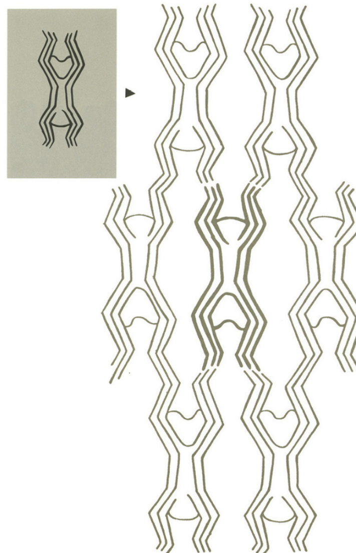

Figure 14: Petroglyph from Guiana, Essequibo River, Waraputa cataract

1. In body painting, this is done by using more than one finger to make the outline.

A design incised on a Melanesian war club (Figure15) provides a more precise representation of birth from the knee and shows how well it fits into the genealogical patterns.

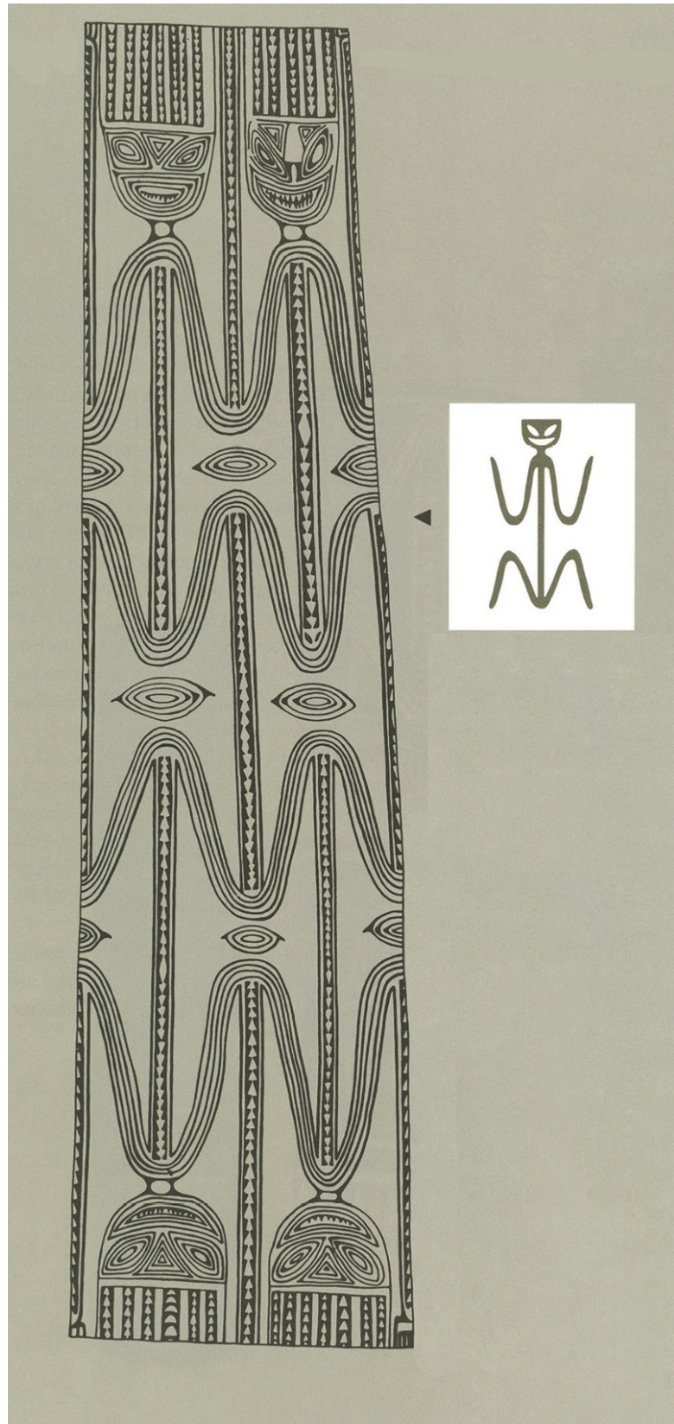

Figure 15: Design incised on a club, Byron Straits Islands, New Ireland

Note that the heads of the lower figures—descendants, in our genealogical scheme—are placed above the knee of the upper figures, their parents. That is to say, the lower figures are "born" from the knees of the upper while the limbs function as the connections between generations. The placement of heads in this genealogical diagram also explains another widespread custom, the practice of joint marking.

Joint Marks

In September 1949, Carl Schuster delivered a paper titled “A Significant Correspondence between Old and New World Design” before the 29th International Congress of Americanists in New York. The goal of the conference, sponsored by the American Museum of Natural History, was to determine the influence of the ancient civilizations of the Far East on the cultures of the Pacific and the Americas. An expanded version of the paper was printed two years later with the more explicit title, “Joint Marks: A Possible Index of Cultural Contact Between America, Oceania, and the Far East.”The paper was replete with examples from many cultures and time periods. The limited number presented here are only meant to illustrate the idea within the larger scope of this paper.

The paper began with a number of illustrations of a puzzling design motif found extensively in both the Pacific and the Americas, a squatting human figure (hocker) with a disk between each flexed elbow and knee (Figure 16). Schuster believed that these disks were not decorative but once had significance. They were clearly related to a similar motif found in the same areas, figures with markings on the elbows and knees themselves, and often on the other body joints as well.

Figure 16: Carved paddle blade, Borneo

Though the relationship between these two types of designs—those with disks between the elbows and knees, and those with disks on the joints themselves—cannot be demonstrated as clearly as we might wish by means

> of transitional forms, still there is enough circumstantial evidence for such a development to warrant an inquiry into the later motive as a possible explanation for the former. Hence, it will be our object, in the first place, to investigate the character and trace the distribution of the motive of the joint-mark, as it occurs in the decorative arts, and sometimes on the living human body, in both parts of the world.[1]

This exercise was to take Schuster well beyond the confines of the paper. In fact, he had been gathering examples of joint marks for many years, not only from Asia, the Pacific, and the Americas, but from Europe and Africa as well.

Many ceramic examples from South American had single or double rings stamped on the joints (shoulders, wrists, knees), probably made with a hollowed reed pressed into the wet clay. Figure 17 is a figure on a vessel from Marajó Island at the mouth of the Amazon.

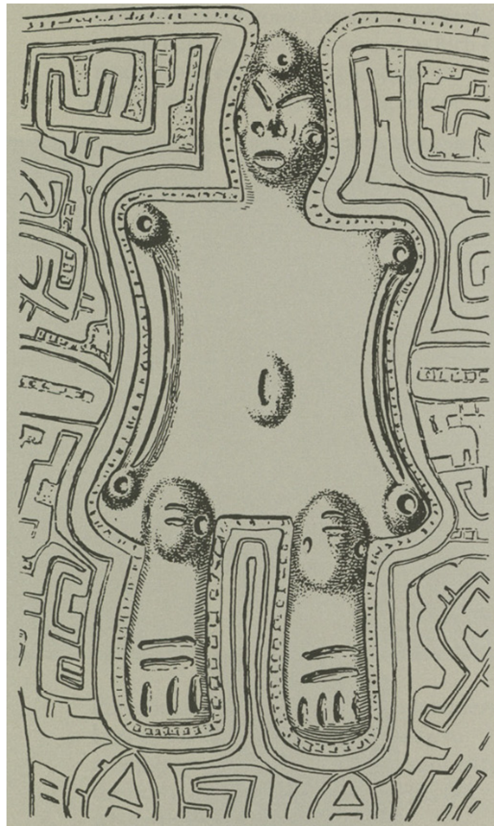

Figure 17: Detail from a vessel with joint-marked figure from Marajó Island, Brazil.

These same joint marks were also applied to various animal figures such as frogs and lizards just as they were in areas of the western Pacific (Figure 18). Schuster believed that these nucleated circles were meant to represent eyes because in many areas, human faces, rather than disks or circles, were placed on the joints.

1. Schuster, "Joint Marks: A Possible Index of Cultural Contact Between America, Oceania, and the Far East," p. 5.

Figure 18: Pottery urn from Marajó Island, Brazil.

As we found in the New World, so also here in the Pacific the use of eyes as joint-marks is associated with the similar use of complete human faces from which the eyes are presumably derived, and of which they probably represent a rudimentary survival.[1]

Figure 19: Haida house screen with detail, Long Island, Alaska

Both forms commonly appear in the art of the Pacific Northwest Coast. A painted design on a Haida house-front shows each shoulder and hand marked with a ring (Figure 19). The added triangles of the shoulders are meant to represent the canthus of the eye. Another Haida house painting from the same area shows complete faces at the joints as does a Tlingit house-screen (Figure 20). Franz Boas had come to the same conclusion at the turn of the century.

1. Schuster, ibid,, p. 24.

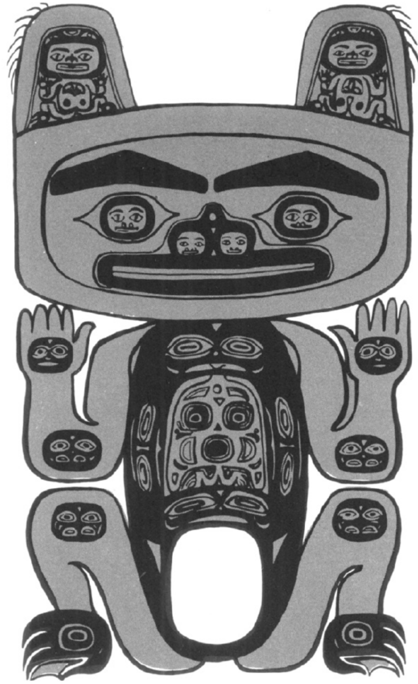

Figure 20: Detail of a Tlingit house screen, Wrangell, Alaska

> An examination...will show that in most cases, it [the eye] is used to indicate a joint. Shoulder, elbow, hand, hips, knees, feet, the points of attachment of fins, tails, and so forth, are always indicated by eyes.[1]

Additional support was provided in 1896 by Rudolph Virchow who reported that the Bella Coola believed that the wrinkled skin over the knuckles of men were rudimentary eyes that had survived from earlier times when each part of the body had terminated in an eye.[2]

If eyes were used to represent faces this would help to explain the circle-and-dot motif common in Eskimo art and tattooing. Simple dot tattoos, placed on body joints, were known among the Eskimo of St. Lawrence Island in the Bering Sea and among the maritime Chuckchee of northeastern Siberia. These practices were reinforced by spiritual beliefs.

> In this connection, an observation of Thalbitzer seems of special significance. "According to Eskimo notions," he says, "...in every part of the human body (particularly in every joint, as for instance, in every finger joint) there resides a little soul....[3]

Schuster would later dedicate a separate paper to the survival of joint marks in the art of the far north, "A Survival of the Eurasiatic Animal Style in Modern Alaskan Eskimo Art." An earlier paper by Helge Larsen and Froelich Rainey had suggested that the art of the prehistoric Eskimo culture, referred to as Ipiutak, was derived from the Bronze Age and Iron Age "Animal Style" art of the Eurasiatic steppes.[4] Schuster agreed but took the matter a good deal further. One of the similarities between Ipiutak ivory carvings and Animal Style metal work was the presence of nucleated circles

1. Schuster, "Joint Marks," op cit., p. 17.
2. Ibid., p. 17, ft. 18.
3. Ibid., p. 18, ft. 21.
4. Helge Larsen, "The Ipiutak Culture: Its Origins and Relationships." For an introduction to Animal Style art, see Bunker, Chatwin, and Farkas, "Animal Style" Art from East to West. See also, Edmund Carpenter and Carl Schuster, op. cit., vol. 1, bk. 4, app. 1.

and pear-shaped bosses placed on the bodies of animals (Figure 20). Schuster believed these were displaced joint marks that had lost their significance and become surface decoration. In fact, joint marks were present in the art of early civilizations of the Mediterranean and Near East, from at least the 2nd millennium, and certainly long before the appearance of the Animal Style. It was changing fashion that had helped to reduce this once meaningful form to mere ornament.

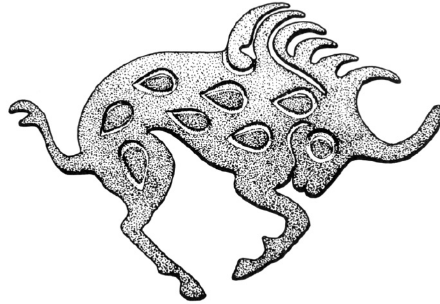

Figure 21: Decoration on a bronze vessel, late Chou style, China

> The underlying symbolic quality of the joint mark—what we may call its indispensability to the theme of animal representation (or perhaps even its magic significance)—has been obscured throughout its history by the rationalizing tendency of an art under the more or less direct domination by early urban civilizations of the Ancient East—an art forever bent upon naturalistic representation.[1]

The use of joint marks had survived from archaic times as a living tradition only in more remote and peripheral areas like the Far North (Figure 21). Connections were hard to trace because examples created in perishable materials like wood had not survived. Only an indirect link existed in metal.

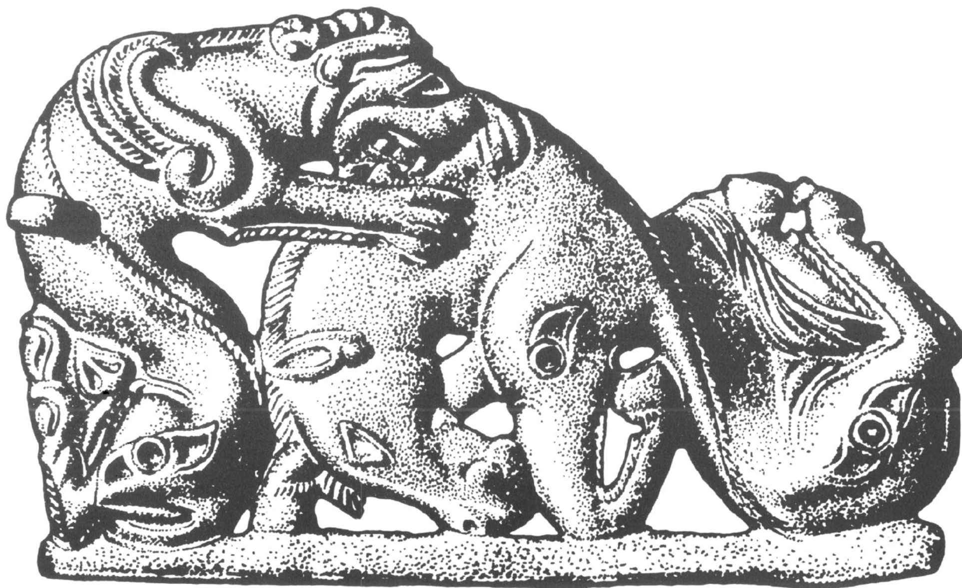

Figure 22: Scythian gold plaque, (5th to 4th century B.C.), Siberia

1. Schuster, "A Survival of the Eurasiatic Animal Style in Modern Alaskan Eskimo Art," p. 39.

Many examples exist in the Pacific islands. A Maori shell-inlaid board from New Zealand also features jaws at the joints though they may not be apparent at first glance (Figure 22). Conventionalized eye-like figures called *manaia*-heads occur in pairs, the juncture of each pair forming an open jaw. The use of shell or other inlay to emphasize the joints is quite common wherever joint marks are found.

Figure 23: Carved plank, Maori, New Zealand

A beautiful carved double-bowl from Hawaii has similar shell-inlaid eyes at the joints (Figure 23).

Figure 24: Wooden double-bowl with shell inlay, Hawaii

Joint marks may first have been applied to the human body via tattooing and scarification. In addition to the Eskimo example discussed earlier, eye-like designs and human faces were once placed on joints in other cultures. A tattooed Marquesan Islander has human faces on his shoulders and knees (Figure 25) while another man from the Sepik River has a face scarified on his shoulder (Figure 26).

Figure 25: Tattooed Marquesan Islander

Figure 26: Scarified male, Sepik, Papua/New Guinea.

Joint marks also occur on three-dimensional sculpture where they appear as interarthral balls or props, looking strangely out of place. Of the many examples collected by Schuster, two will suffice, a wooden figure from New Guinea (Figure 27) and a chief's chair from Cameroon (Figure 28).

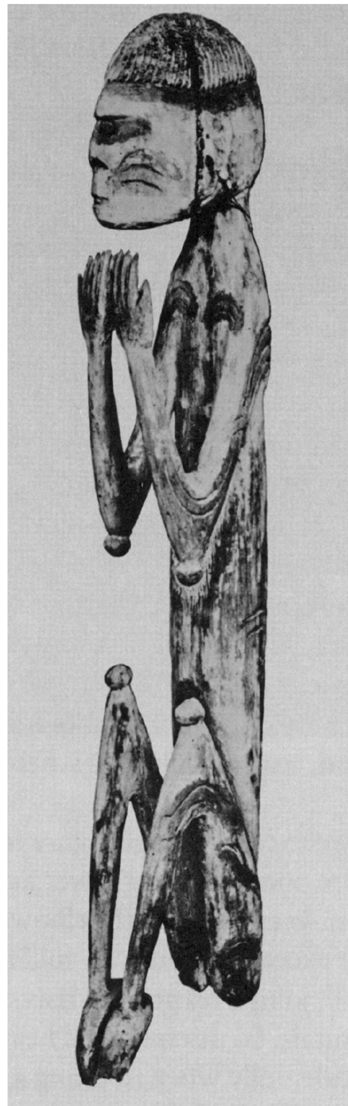

Figure 27: Wooden figure, Vooanderbeeld, Irian Jaya.

Figure 28: Chief's chair, Bamum, Cameroon Grasslands.

Examples are not lacking from Greek and Roman times. A complete face appears on the leg of a Classical Greek statue of Ares (Figure 29).

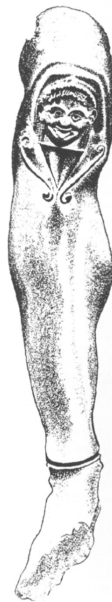

Figure 29: Fragmentary stone leg with greave, from statue of Ares, classical Greek.

As the evidence mounted, Schuster became convinced that the tradition of joint marking was very old. The distribution was interesting in itself. Joint marks were present in Asia, North and South American, Europe, and throughout the Pacific, though less common in Africa and unknown in Southern Australia. Clearly the tradition is related to the use of body joints for counting ancestors.

> Australian aborigines who reckon genealogy on their finger-joints may preserve man's earliest method. Perhaps in neolithic times, conceivably first in Asia, genealogical reckoning by joints was transferred to the body as a whole. This might explain the absence of joint-marks in Southern Australia and their rarity in Africa.[1]

To summarize, it was believed that the soul of an ancestor was resident at each of the major joints of the body and represented as a face, often abbreviated as an eye. There are 12 major body joints, or 14 if you count the genitals and the head, as is sometimes done.[2] In turn, this idea supports and is supported by the genealogical system discussed earlier which equated the human body with plants and trees. The notion of birth from the knee is more intelligible when seen within this larger context.

The Body as a Kinship Chart

If kinship relations were first registered using the joints of the fingers, this model could have been easily extended to the other joints of the body. This would account for the widespread evidence of joint marking found in so many ancient and tribal cultures. The basic idea is that the structure of a person's body corresponds to the social order and may be thought of as a living kinship chart. We have seen the same idea expressed in our genealogical iconography and need not go far into the past to find examples.

We can start with a 14th century German manuscript known as the *Sachsenspiegel*, a legal code that includes illustrations of joint-marked humans intended as memory devices, helpful for determining the sequence of relations governing the rights of inheritance (Figure 30).

Figure 30: Genealogical chart, Wolfenbüttel Sachsenspiegel, 14th century, Germany

1. Edmund Carpenter and Carl Schuster, *Social Symbolism in Ancient and Tribal Art*, vol. 1, bk. 3, p. 821.
2. The underlying idea is that an original ancestor is dismembered at the joints to form society and the world. Our body is a universe in microcosm. Many ancient art forms and practices are derived from this idea; too many to be discussed here.

> The father and the mother stand in the head, full brothers and sisters in the neck, first cousins at the shoulders, second cousins at the elbows, third cousins at the wrists, fourth, fifth, and sixth cousins at the joints of the fingers. Finally come the nails, at which would stand the seventh cousins...[1]

While the medieval jurists who compiled this manuscript were many centuries removed from their tribal ancestors, they called on an image of ancient vintage, one that would have been meaningful to the unlearned. The basic principle is simple: the relationship is more remote the farther you are from the head. Despite the logic of this arrangement, Schuster believed this system represented an inversion of the actual historical development in which the joints of the fingers would have been used first and then the joints of the body.

A similar chart is found among the Dogon people of West Africa that is closer to the original tradition, for it uses the whole body to express kinship relations (Figure 31). The French anthropologist Marcel Griaule relates the story behind the diagram in his remarkable book, *Conversations With Ogotemmêli*.

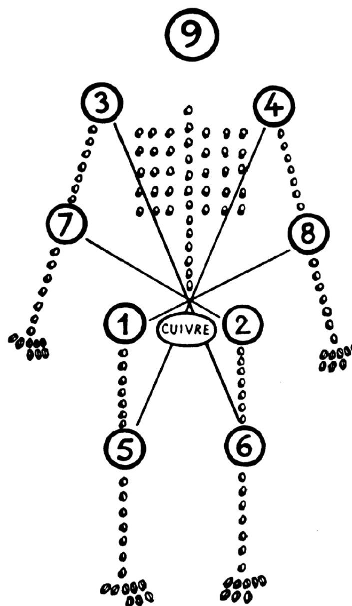

Figure 31: Dogon kinship chart (after Griaule)

In Dogon cosmology, a mythical seventh ancestor organizes the world by vomiting forth *dougé* stones in the outline of a man's soul. The blind elder Ogotemmêli explains:

> He placed the stones one by one, beginning with the one for the head, and with the eight principal stones, one for each ancestor, he marked the joints of the pelvis, the shoulders, the knees and the elbows. The right-hand side came first; the stones of the four male ancestors were placed at the joints of the pelvis and shoulders, that is, where the limbs had been attached, while the stones of the four female ancestors were placed at the other four joints.
>
> 'The joints,' said Ogotemmêli 'are the most important part of a man.'[2]

The purpose of this diagram is to illustrate marital relationships of the ancestors of the eight clans composing the society. Griaule added numbers to the diagram to indicate the relative social rank assigned by the Dogon. Large stones mark the primary joints on the diagram (shoulders, elbows,

1. Schuster, "Genealogical Patterns," op. cit., p. 92.
2. Marcel Griaule, *Conversations With Ogotemmêli*, p. 50.

hips, and knees). Males and females of opposite clans intermarry according to the lines connecting the numbers diagonally across the center of the body. The ninth stone, marking the head, represents the chieftaincy of each clan.

In the Dogon scheme, these *dougé* stones represent both the individual soul and the social structure at large. Further, they are covenant-stones, worn around the necks of totemic priests. They act as pledges of the affection of the eight original ancestors and as repositories of their life force that will sustain future generations.[1]

Both the *Sachsenspiegel* and the Dogon chart bring us as close to the origins of these ancient ideas as we are likely to get.

> The human body may serve as an image of human society in more than its joints. It must always have been obvious that joints are nothing more than locations where bones connect and that they disappear with the dissolution of the flesh, while bones remain. I presume that joints were first conceived as symbolizing marital unions between 'members' of the social order as represented by bones.[2]

Evidence from Mythology

Carl Schuster extended his study of joint marking with supporting ideas from mythology and linguistics.

> Now the importance of limbs as genetic bonds is manifested not only in art, but also in other expressions of human tradition. Throughout many parts of the world we encounter myths and legends about the birth of human beings from the limbs — sometimes from the arms or fingers, more commonly from the legs, and most commonly from the knees. Those born in this way are generally imagined as "the first people"; and the limbs from which they spring are those of an Ultimate Ancestor.[3]

We will begin our abbreviated survey in Africa.

> Among the Masai folk-tales collected by Hollis is one called "The Old Man and the Knee." It relates how an old man, living alone, was troubled with a swelling in his knee which he took for an abscess; but, at the end of sixth months, as it did not burst, he cut it open and out came two children, a boy and a girl.[4]

An older version of this folktale is preserved among the Nandi.

> Among the Moi clan, there is a tradition that the first Dorobo— again we find the Dorobo looked on as the earliest men— gave birth to a boy and a girl. His leg swelled up one day ... at length it burst, and a boy issued from the inner side of the calf, while a girl issued from the outer side. These two in the course of time had children, who were the ancestors of all the people on earth.[5]

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1. In this sense they are similar to the churingas of the Australian Bushmen. See Edmund Carpenter, *Social Symbolism in Ancient & Tribal Art,* vol. 2, bk. 5, pp. 1195-1201. Cf. René Guénon on sacred stones in *The Lord of the World*, Ch. 9.
2. Schuster, "Genealogical Patterns," op. cit., p. 94.
3. Schuster, ibid., p. 82. Stith Thompson's *Motif Index of Folk Literature* lists the following related themes: birth from a person's head; a man's thigh; a woman's thigh; an arm; an eye; a shoulder; a knee; a plant; a twig; a tree; a flower; a fruit.
4. Alice Werner, in *Mythology of All Races*, vol. 7: African Mythology, p. 156.
5. Ibid.

If we remember that legs are the connecting link in the iconography of descent, these ideas may not seem so strange. Some genealogical patterns have multiple, parallel limbs whose extensions connect with figures below them, as seen in Figures 13 and 14.

The need to rationalize the male origin of the child led to many variant forms of the myth including an African tale, related by Baumann, about the hero who "slipped out of his mother's womb into her leg and was immediately full grown."[1] The Greeks tell a similar story about the birth of Hephaistos from the hip of Hera. Another tale from the hill-tribes of India demonstrates this tendency to move the source of the child from the father's knee to the mother's.

> Originally the vagina was situated below the knee of the left leg. One day a chicken pecked at it, and it jumped up to a place of safety between the thighs, where it has remained ever since. But it was wounded and blood flows from it every month.[2]

In a Japanese version, a boy called "Knee-Spit" (Suneko-Tampako) is born from the knee of an old woman after being instructed by the Boddhissatva Kannon to smear saliva on her knee.[3] The saliva clearly stands for the male semen, which accounts for the transfer of the child, already present in the semen into the knee of the woman.

A Palaung version from Burma is closest to the original conception of the priority of male over female birth.

> Long, long ago…it was the man and not the woman who bore the children. The man carried the unborn child in the calf of his leg until the time when it was large enough to be born…. Then the man said, …'Take the baby and keep it warm in thy stomach….' He then saw that the woman had taken good care of the child…; so, after that time, he gave over to the woman the care of the children.[4]

The idea is also reflected in the stories of the Yami of Botel Tobago, an island forty-five miles off the southeastern tip of Formosa, and in the Marshall Islands.[5] The Yami rationalize their version of the story by relating that the penes of their ancestors were originally joined to their knees.[6]

Inez de Beauclair, who studied the Yami and corresponded frequently with Schuster, provided supporting evidence.[7] In a Yami folktale a man refers to his great-great grandchild as "the grandchild of the tip of my foot" (*apoko do katchi no ai go*) while his son refers to the same child as the grandchild of my knee (*apoko no tud*). She cites a letter from Dr. Robert Fox (May 1, 1956) of the National Museum in Manila that indicates similar beliefs in the Philippine where the Tagalog designate a great-grandchild as "grandchild of the knee" (*apo sa talampakan*). More detail is provided in Fox's letter:

> The Iloko-speaking people of Luzon (if I remember correctly data which I have collected in the past), have carried this (system of designating generational position by parts of the body) even farther. Likening the generational position of ego to the waist, they define five generations by the shoulders and head (i.e. ascending generations), and by the knees and the

1. Werner, op. cit., p. 103, ft. 141.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., p. 83, ft. 106a.
4. Carl Schuster, "Genealogical Patterns in the Old and New Worlds,"p. 84, ft.106a.
5. Carl Schuster,, ibid, p. 83.
6. Carl Schuster,, ibid, p. 103, ft. 142.
7. Inez de Beauclair, "Three Genealogical Stories from BOTEL TOBAGO: A Contribution to the Folklore of the Yami," reference 10. For the prevalence of genealogical symbolism among the Yami, see Edmund Carpenter and Carl Schuster, op. cit., vol. 1, bk. 1, pp. 206-207.

soles (i.e. descending generations). This is extremely interesting from the standpoint of social anthropology, for it bounds the bilateral kinship group, as it exists in reality.[1]

We have a number of European examples. Most familiar is the myth of the birth of Dionysius from the thigh or knee of Zeus (Figure 32). The Greeks appear to have been as puzzled by this idea as we are and in their version they reversed the order of events to make it appear more plausible. The child is born first to Semele and then sewn into the knee of Zeus. The thread used to suture Zeus' knee is also of some significance and can be related to an initiation ceremony practiced in India up to the present day. Schuster notes that "the Greek epithets *dimhtor* and *dissotokos* meaning "twice born," applied to Dionysius, have their exact counterpart in the Sanscrit *dvija*, applied to a man of any of the first three classes ...who has been 'reborn' through investiture with the sacred thread."[2] Zeus uses the same thread to prepare Dionysius for his second birth.

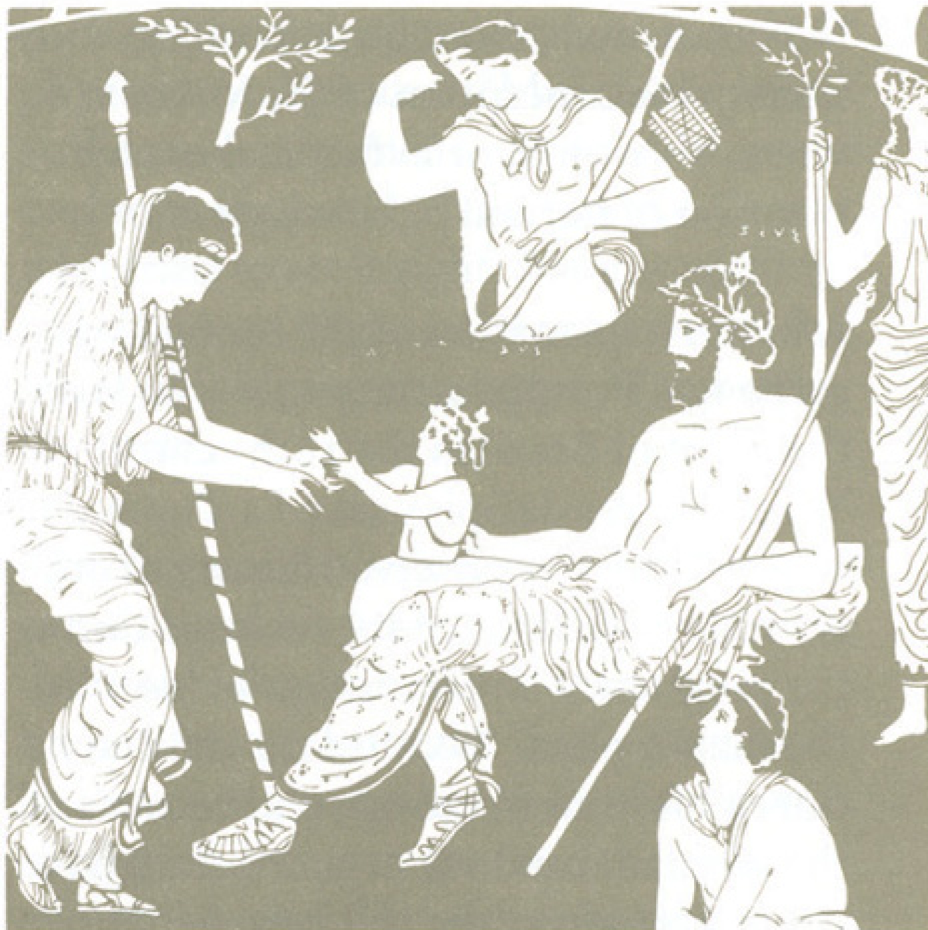

Figure 32: Birth of Dionysius, details from a Greek amphora, c. 410 B.C.

A variant of this theme is central to the medieval Grail motif where the Fisher King is wounded "in his loins" and as a result, his kingdom suffers from drought and desiccation. Dr. Coomaraswamy and others have noted the connection between these stories and Sumerian and Indo-Iranian fertility

1. Carl Schuster,, ibid, pp. 95-96, ft. 130.
2. Carl Schuster, op. cit.., p. 103, ft. 141.

rites involving the Water of Life, soma, or related concepts involving periodic revivification of the life force.[1] In India, Indra struggles with Vrtra, the demon of draught. Indra's strength goes into the earth and becomes plants and roots; he is restored by drinking soma.

> Now in the soma sacrifice, the purchase of the soma by the gods from the Gandharva(s) [tree spirits] in exchange for Vak "because the Gandharva is fond of women" (*Satapatha Brahmana* III.2.4) forms the theme of a kind of ritual drama in which a Sudra represents the Gandharva. It is most significant in view of the fact that the offering is primarily to Indra, that the purchased soma is placed by the priest on the sacrificer's right thigh with the formula "Enter the right thigh of Indra," and the sacrificer then rises, saying "With new life, with good life, am I risen after the immortals."[2]

Similar tales are told about Tvastr, Prajapati, and Daksa, gods of fertility "injured in the loins" or paralyzed as punishment for sin.

In Europe, the belief in birth from the father persisted as late as the 18th century. Evidence can be found in Boswell's celebrated *Life of Samuel Johnson*. Boswell offers the following argument during a disagreement with his father over the right of his female relatives to share in the family estate.

> As first, the opinion of some distinguished naturalists, that our species is transmitted through males only, the female being all along no more than a nidus, or nurse, as Mother Earth is to plants of every sort; which notion seems to be confirmed by that text of scripture, "He was yet in the loins of his FATHER when Melchisedeck met him;" (Heb. vii. 10) and consequently, that a man's grandson by a daughter, instead of being his surest descendent, as is vulgarly said, has, in reality, no connection whatever with his blood.[3]

Schuster also provides a number of New World examples:

> The theme was current among the Carib Indians of the Antilles, and survives in South America at least among the Chocó and Uitoto of Columbia and the Umatina of south-central Brazil. For each instance here cited, presumably more could be found in surrounding areas.[4]

Despite the variations in these myths, certain elements reappear. Birth from the knee or leg is preceded by a swelling of the affected part, just as the womb swells prior to the birth of a child. Sometimes both knees are involved and a boy emerges from one and a girl from the other; or different races or social divisions spring from each. As Schuster put it, "the vagaries of these legends might be likened to the conventionalization of the artistic patterns which we have studied."[5]

R. B. Onians points out the similarity of these stories to those telling of birth from the head.

> We saw that the story of Zeus engendering a child in his head without the help of a mother was explained by the belief that the head contained the seed. There appears to have been preserved a striking variant in a folk-tale Zakynthos recorded some seventy years ago. It tells how the greatest king in the world in his virtue had resolved never to take a wife, yet would have

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1. See Ananda Coomaraswamy, *Yaksas*.
2. Coomaraswamy, op. cit.., pp. 131-132.
3. James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, p. 587, ft. 2.
4. Schuster, "Genealogical Patterns," op. cit., p. 83.
5. Ibid., p. 85.

> liked to have children and one day he sat and wept and 'there appeared to him an angel and said he must not weep; he would get a child out of his *atsa*. (This is a rare dialect word for part of the leg. Schmidt renders it *Wade*, i.e. "calf".) Soon after, one of the king's legs swelled and one day as he was hunting he stuck a thorn into it. Then all at once a wonderfully beautiful maiden with all her body armed and carrying lance and helm sprang out of his *atsa*'.[1]

The fact that both the head and the knee were once considered generative organs should no longer surprise us, given their coincidence in our genealogical iconography (Figure 15). Both the head and knees contain fluid, which the ancients likened to the sap of plants and trees. Hesiod and Alcaeus believed that the hot summer dried up men's knees and heads and made them feeble.[2] The head and knee were also thought of as the source of a man's *genius* (Gk. *psyche*), or procreative spirit. Pliny the Elder provides testimony:

> The knees of human beings also possess a sort of religious sanctity in the usage of the nations. Suppliants touch the knees and stretch out their hands towards them and pray at them as at altars, perhaps because they contain a vital principle. For in the joint of each knee, right and left, on the front side there is a sort of twin hollow cavity, the piercing of which, as of the throat, causes the breathe to flow away.[3]

Linguistic Evidence

The important role of the knee is also reflected in language. The term for the word "knee" is used alternatively to express concepts like "degrees of kinship" or "generation" in many Indo-European languages and in some non-Indo-European ones as well.

Jacob Grimm, the well-known linguist and chronicler of folklore, identified a large number of kinship terms found in Germanic languages that derived from the names for body parts, including head, nose, cheek, bosom, stomach, lap, womb, side, back, elbow, femur, knee, ankles, and nails.[4] Most familiar are the English words "genealogy," "genus," and "generation," all derived from the Latin *genu* ("knee").

Maurice Cahen provides more specific evidence for the Germanic languages.[5] Using medieval sources, he identified two distinct usages of the term for knee, one relating to a rite of adoption and the other to the calculation of degrees of kinship. In Old Norse, an adopted child is spoken of as having been placed on the knee (*setja i kné*) of his foster father. The compound verb *knésetja* (to adopt) and the substantive *knésetningr* (an adopted son) express the same idea. Cahen provided a number of historical examples of the practice involving Norse kings and cited similar evidence offered by J. Loth for the Irish.[6]

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1. R. B. Onians, *The Origins of European Thought*, pp. 178-9. For his comments on the *genius* and the sanctity of the head, see chapter 2 and passim.
2. Ibid., p. 177. See also, footnote 9 on the same page where Onians discusses the analogy between human body fluids and plants.
3. *Natural History*, XI, 103, 250. Cf. Apuleius, *The God of Socrates*, XV, 152.
4. Schuster, "Genealogical Patterns," op. cit., p. 100. The Grimm work cited is *Deutsche Rechtsalterthümer*, Leipzig, 1899.
5. Maurice Cahen, "Genou', 'Adoption' et 'Parente' en Germanique."
6. J. Loth, "Le Mot Désignant Le Genou au Sens de Génération Chez les Celtes, les Germains, Les Slaves, Les Assyriens."

> The Norse facts that we have just cited accord perfectly with the Irish facts that held the attention of M. Loth. They bear Hakon "to the knee of Aethelstan" as Cúchulain "to the knee of Fergus." The Scandinavian *knésetningr* and the Irish *glundaltae* both designate the foster child that is placed on the knees of the foster father.[1]

More interesting is the Scandinavian *kné-runnr*, which denotes a family line. The word *runnr* ("runner") has a number of meanings including "course" as well as the shoot of a plant, a meaning that is retained in modern English. The analogy of kinship terms with the plant world is a commonplace in many languages with the attendant notion of relatives as shoots or sprouts branching from a common stock.[2] The notion of a course, path, or line is entirely consistent with the *sutratman* (thread-spirit) doctrine where a sequence of knots—and by extension, body joints—can represent related individuals that are united by the continuity of the string. In time, the Scandinavian *kné-runnr* came to have the more general meaning of race, tribe, or family, as did its Anglo-Saxon equivalent, *cnéo-re*s.

Loth explored similar matters within the Celtic, Germanic, and Slavic branches of the Indo-European family, adding Assyrian as well, a Semitic tongue.[3] As late as the 16th century the Irish word *glún* ("knee") was used to mean "generation," as in *glún ar ghlún* ("generation after generation"). In Russian we find *kolieno* ("knee") and the plural and distributive forms *koliena* and *pokolienie* for "race," "line," or "branch." Polish gives us *kolano*, meaning either 'knee,' 'generation,' or 'race,' and we find the same associations in Lapp, Finnish, and other Finno-Ugrian languages.[4]

Semitic evidence comes from two sources. The Old Testament has a number of references to the practice of legitimation or filiation, in which the father acknowledged paternity of a newborn by placing it on his knee (Figure 33 and Figure 34). In Genesis (50:23) we read:

> And Joseph saw Ephraim's children of the third generation: the children also of Machir the son of Manasseh were brought up upon Joseph's knees.[5]

1. Cahen, op. cit., p. 57.
2. In the same manner, the stem between two nodes (*kné*) of a plant is referred to by the Scandinavian word *leggr* ("leg").
3. J. Loth, op. cit.
4. R. B. Onians, op. cit., p. 176.
5. The situation is slightly different in Genesis (30:3) where Rachel adopts the children of her servant Bilhah when she cannot conceive with Jacob. See Loth (p. 145). Some scholars believe that this passage suggests that women once gave birth sitting on the knees of their husbands or other assistants but this does not seem feasible. The expression is more likely metaphoric. See Beneviste, "Un Emploi du nom du 'Genou' en Vieil-Irlandais et en Sogdien,"pp. 52-53, for a comment on this issue. Another reference to the practice can be found in Job (3:12) where he curses his birth. And let us add Boswell's New Testament reference quoted earlier, Hebrews (7:10).

Figure 33: Miniature of Abraham and Lazarus, Greek manuscript, Paris.

Loth remarks that this is not an adoption because Manasseh has already been adopted by Jacob. Rather, it is a metaphoric expression by which Joseph recognizes the children as belonging to his race.

The practice of legitimation appears to have played a significant role in the past when not as much importance was attached to biological paternity. The reasons for this are not entirely clear, but certainly the structure of kinship systems must have played a significant role. Aside from the fact that it may be hard to determine who has fathered a child, there must have been times when an appropriate marriage partner was not available. In this case, adoption was a suitable alternative. Add to this the common practice of fosterage (sending a child to a relative to be raised) and you have a more fluid situation than the modern nuclear family. From a religious standpoint, it was the acknowledgment of the child by the father, natural or adoptive, that mattered.

Figure 34: Miniature of Abraham and Lazarus, Greek manuscript, Mt. Athos, Greece.

The linguist Antoine Meillet summarized the matter succinctly when he noted that the Indo-European root **gen* ("knee") is related both to the root **gen*, a homonym meaning "beget" (L. *gigno*)—used to refer exclusively to the parental role of the father—and to a third meaning, "to know," "to recognize" (L. *gnosco*).[1] He concluded that the third meaning was the original one, and that the word came to mean "beget" when it was used in a more narrow juridical sense: to recognize a child as one's own. The word "genuine" (L. *genuinus*) reflects the same idea. The genuine child is the one placed upon the father's knee to be named and accepted as his own.[2]

The act of legitimation was part of the Roman rite of *sublatio* (Gk. *anaireisthai*) during which the newborn was first placed on the ground and then on the knee of the father.

> The custom of placing the child on the ground seems to have been at first a type of homage to Mother Earth. It is on the ground as well that, among the Latins and Germans, the dying were placed. The earth is the mother of men...: they come from her womb and return there. The *sublatio* consequently appears to be a most general act involving the recognition of the child by the father.[3]

1. Antoine Meillet, "LAT. genuinus."
2. Failure to recognize the child would mean that it would be abandoned or killed rather than "raised." This was the fate of the children of Kronos in Hesiod's *Theogony*, who were devoured once they were taken from the womb of their mother and placed on his knees. Schuster (op. cit., p. 101, ft. 138) notes that "there is no pronoun in the original specifying whose knees are meant and the passage is generally translated with 'her' (i.e., the mother's knees)." Benveniste (p. 52) translates the passage using "his" with the understanding that the rite of legitimation is involved.
3. Carpenter, *Patterns That Connect,* p. 191, translating Loth, op, cit., pp. 151-152.

Schuster believed that this practice was in essence a "symbolic return of the child to the place of its prior conception in the male, and thus a repudiation of the conceptive role of the earth-womb."[1] He found further support for this idea in the practice of couvade.

Couvade

Couvade is a custom observed in many parts of the world in which a father, before, during or after the birth of his child, takes to his bed and behaves as if he, and not his wife, were having the child. This simulated pregnancy and birth may take many forms but often the man adheres to a special diet and imitates the labor pains of his wife. Accounts of this unusual practice are widespread and much has been written on the subject. Tautain, writing in 1896, expressed the belief that the basic principle behind the couvade was filiation or legitimation, an affirmation of paternity.[2]

One significant account of the practice was provided by the Portuguese voyager Soares de Souza, who visited the coast of Brazil in the 16th century.

> When soares de sousa asked a Tupinamba husband why he observed dietary and other typical restrictions of the couvade during the pregnancy and parturition of his wife, the man replied: "because the child came out of his loins [*lombos*], and because all that women can do is to guard the seed in the womb where the child grows up.[3]

What gives meaning to all the elaborate drama of the couvade is the same idea that lies behind the stories about birth from the knees: a conception of the birth process based on an analogy to planting and sowing, where the source of seed in the male is the crucial element. That is to say, the act is intended to emphasize the priority of the male in the procreative act.

Knee as Penis

Given the importance of the knee in genealogical iconography and its mythical role as a generative organ, we should not be surprised to see it equated with the penis. In an interesting paper, Asa Fredell and Marco Quintela discuss a number of examples of the phallic knee as it appears in the rock art of Europe.[4] The figure of a man holding a decorated razor (*paletta*) has a penis emerging from his knee (Figure 35). The same odd configuration is displayed in a rock carving from Bohuslan, Sweden (Figure 36). The authors adduce many of the same linguistic examples discussed earlier in this paper to provide some background for these unusual images. In general, an association of the knee with, virility, procreation and descent.

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1. Schuster, "Genealogical Patterns," op. cit., p. 105, ft. 145.
2. For a general introduction to the subject, see Warren Dawson, *The Custom of the Couvade*. The value of the work is documentary as it has little to say about the meaning of the practice. See p. 186 for Tautain's comments; cf. Schuster, "Genealogical Patterns," op. cit., p. 104.
3. Schuster, ibid., p. 102, quoting from Gabriel Soares de Sousa's "Tratado descriptivo do Brasil em 1857". *Revista do Instituto Historico e Geographico Brasiliero*, Vol. 14, Rio de Janeiro, 1851, pp. 1-365.
4. Asa C. Fredell and Marco V. Garcia Quintela, "Bodily Attributes and Semantic Expressions. Knees in rock art and Indo-European symbolism.". Posted on Academia.edu.

Figure 35: Rock aengraving, Dos Santos Laiolo (Paspardo, Val Camonica, Italy)

Figure 36: Panel from Aby (Sotenaset, Bohuslan. Sweden)

The noted art historian, Leo Steinberg (1920-2011), made the following comments in a letter to Edmund Carpenter when he read Schuster's observations on the symbolic meaning of the knee:

> I find the bent knee, used as a thrusting member in rape scenes both in Hellenistic antiquity and again, far more explicitly, from the 16th century onward, eg Titian's *Tarquin and Lucrece* [Figure 37]. Is this an irrelevant accident, or do those Renaissance masters of body language revert to an archaic tradition?[1]

1. Edmund Carpenter and Carl Schuster, *Social Symbolism in Ancient and Tribal Art*, vol. 1, bk. 3, p. 685.

Figure 37: Titian, Tarquin and Lucrece

It is also worth noting that the penis was sometimes marked with a face (Figures 38 and 39) like other joints.[1] In English, the term “joint” is a slang word for penis.

Figure 38: Huasteca black-on-white pottery vessel, Mexico

1. Figures 37-40 are from Schuster, “Joint Marks,” op. cit..

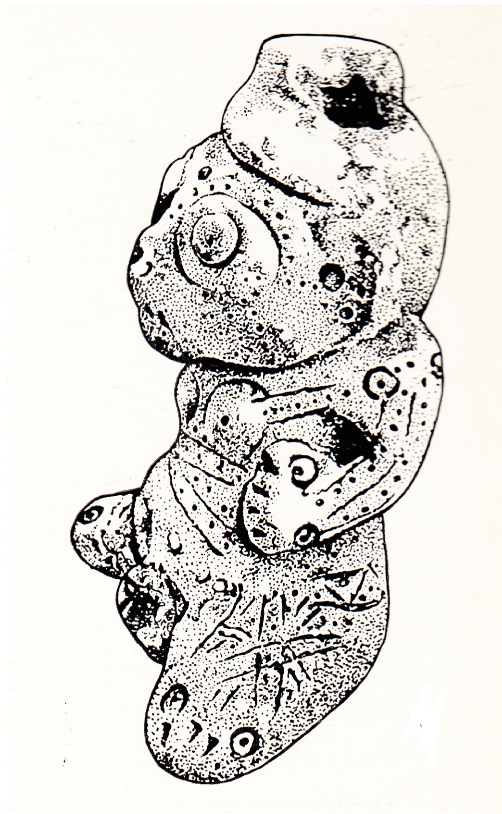

Figure 39: Pottery figurine, Maracay, Venezuela

Schuster noted that even when joint marks were displaced as they are in a number of South American petroglyphs (Figure 40), their significance as eyes or heads was still understood.

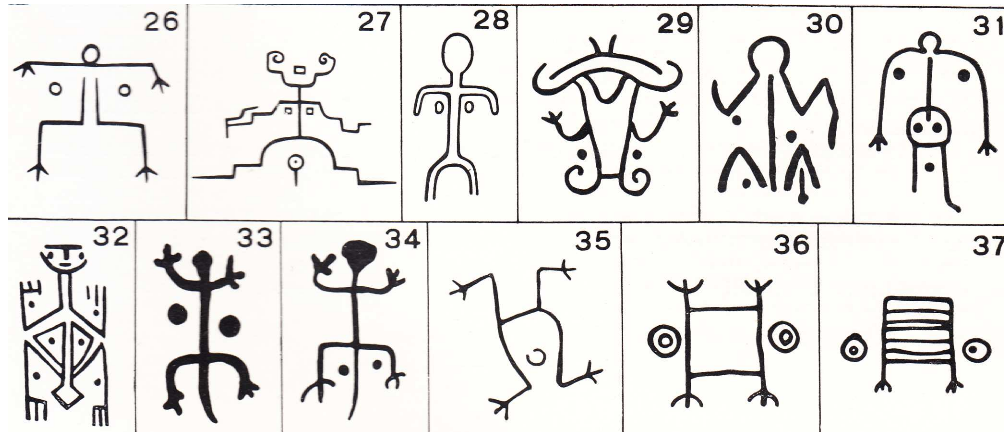

Figure 40: Petroglyphs (26-27) Brazil/Columbia border; (28) Chile; (29-34) Venezuela; (35-37) British Guiana

The displacement of the joint marks as we see in image 34 above helps to explain the existence of a secondary face, such as that in Figure 41. The legs and tail of the creature can be used as the outline of a new face with the displaced joint marks serving as eyes.

Figure 41: Petroglyph from Nicaragua

In Figure 42 the penis forms the nose and the displaced joint marks the eyes. The sense of humor exhibited here does not disguise the traditional association between body joints and ancestors which lies at the root of genealogical iconography.

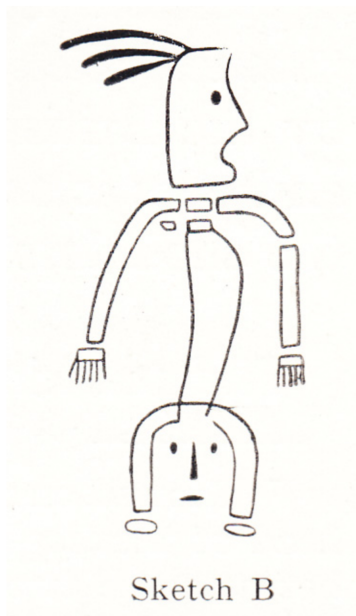

Figure 42: Petroglyph with genital face

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