

# Sex, Gender and the Androgyne

## A Metaphysical, Linguistic and Anthropological View

This paper will examine the concept of androgyny from a metaphysical, linguistic and anthropological perspective. Androgyny has often been represented by the figure of the hermaphrodite, a human with both male and female physical characteristics. I hope to show that androgyny originated first as a social idea and later as a metaphysical explanation for cosmology, creation, and the relationship of man to God.

This paper will not deal with intersexuality, the medical term for what was once called "hermaphroditism," a group of conditions in which there is a discrepancy between the external and the internal genitals (the testes and ovaries).<sup>1</sup> The condition was known to our ancestors.

Diodorus Siculus, in his work *Library of History*, mentions that some say that Hermaphroditus is a god and appears at certain times among men, but there are some who declare that such creatures of two sexes are monstrosities, and coming rarely into the world as they do have the quality of presaging the future, sometimes for evil and sometimes for good.<sup>2</sup>

I will also not deal with questions of sexual identity or the relationships between men and women in early times. My goal is to explain the important distinction between gender and sex and to explain the symbolism and history of the figure known as the androgyne.

## Androgyne and Hermaphrodite

The word "androgyne" is a combination of the Greek words for man (*andro-*) and woman (*gyné*). The word comes into English via the Latin word *androgynus*. The word "hermaphrodite" is derived from Greek god, Hermaphroditos, son of Hermes and Aphrodite, whose body was merged with the nymph Salmacis to achieve a more perfect form with both male and female attributes.<sup>3</sup> Like many Greek myths the earliest forms are lost to us but we do have evidence that the idea of dual sexuality has some antiquity in Greece.

The oldest traces of the cult in Greek countries are found in Cyprus. Here, according to Macrobius (*Saturnalia*, iii. 8), there was a bearded statue of a male Aphrodite, called Aphroditus by Aristophanes. Philochorus in his *Atthis* (ap. Macrobius loc. cit.) further identified this divinity, at whose sacrifices men and women exchanged garments, with the Moon. A terracotta plaque from the 7th century BC depicting Aphroditos was found in Perachora, which suggests it was an archaic Greek cult.<sup>4</sup>

Both the androgyne and the hermaphrodite represent a common idea expressed in medieval and Renaissance alchemy by the figure of the "Rebis" (from the Latin *res bina*, "double matter"), depicted as a double-headed figure (Figure 1). The Rebis was the end product of the "Great Work" in which opposing qualities were reunited. This "Chemical Wedding" was a union of opposites: hot and dry sulphur and cold and moist mercury where the color red represented the male and the color white represented the female parts. Another common element in the symbolism was the depiction of the Sun (male) and Moon (female) above, or in the hands of the figure (Figure 2).

---

1. Scientists estimate that intersexuality in one form or another occurs in approximately .018% of all births.

2. Wikipedia "Hermaphroditus".

3. The story appears relatively late in Greek history with Diodorus Siculus (1st century B.C.). The merger with Salamacis appears even later in Ovid (*Metamorphosis* 4.285-388).

4. Wikipedia, op. cit.

The connection made here between man's dual sexuality and cosmology is our first indication that we are dealing here with metaphysics and not science. The symbolism of two-headed figures is very ancient, as we shall see.



*Figure 1: Alchemical Rebis, German, 17th century*



*Figure 2: Two-headed figure holding sun and moon, Mainz, Germany (1752)*

# Divine Biunity

To fully understand the androgyne it will first be necessary to explain some of the metaphysical ideas that underlie religious expression and iconography. Ananda Coomaraswamy introduces his essay “The Tantric Doctrine of Divine Biunity” with the following epigraph from the Hermetic corpus: “You say, then, Trismegistus, that God is of both sexes.”<sup>1</sup> In all traditional religions, the Supreme Identity is conceived of as an identity of two contrasting principles, distinguishable in all composite things but unified *in divinis*. This polarity is expressed in a number of ways:

- Nature and Essence
- Being and Nonbeing
- God and Godhead
- Masculine and Feminine
- Heaven and Earth

The separation of these identities is necessary for the existence of composite things all of which are different in particular ways.

Nature then, “recedes from a likeness to God, yet even insofar as it has being in this wise, it retains a certain likeness to the divine being (*Sum. Theol.* 1.14.11 *ad* 3). Henceforth Essence is the Creator and active power, Nature the means of creation and passive recipient of form—“Nature as being that by which the generator generates” (Damascene, *De fide orthodoxa* 1.18). Of which the relation of man and woman is a likeness: the relation of marriage is a sacrament and rite because an adequate symbol and reflection of the identification of Essence and Nature *in divinis*.<sup>2</sup>

We find the same formulation in all of the major religions both in their doctrines, associated mythology and imagery. A short summary will make this clear.

## In the Vedas

In the Vedic tradition, the Supreme Identity (*tad ekam*) is both Being and Nonbeing (*sad-asat*). In the *Rig Veda* (X.24.5) we read, “When the conjoint pair were parted, the Devas moaned, and cried ‘Let them be wed again!’” which becomes the goal of both marriage and of religious praxis, from Tantric yoga to various forms of meditation. An inner reconciliation between active and passive functions is fundamental to enlightenment.<sup>3</sup>

The Supreme Identity is equally bipolar whether one thinks of “It” as masculine or feminine: so one asks with respect to the Magna Mater, Natura Naturans Creatrix, the Infinite (*viraj, aditi*), “Who knoweth Her progenitive duality? (*mithunatvam*, AV VII.9.10); and conversely, “He (Brahman) is a womb (*yonis ca givate*, VS 1.4.7.27).<sup>4</sup>

The progenitive duality is often depicted as a couple (*mithuna*) in Indian art (Figure 3) equivalent to the astrological sign of Gemini, sometimes depicted as a man and woman and not as twins.<sup>5</sup>

---

1. A.K. Coomaraswamy, in *Selected Papers*, vol. 2, pp. 231-240, The quotation is from Asclepius III.21  
2. Ibid., p. 231. Compare “recedes from a likeness to God” with William Blake’s “Contracted and identified into variety” or the Kabbalistic concept of *tsimtsum*.  
3. This is the doctrine of the two souls, higher and lower, found in all traditional religions. See below.  
4. A. K. Coomaraswamy, op. cit. p. 232. AV=*Atharva Veda*, VS= *Vajasaneyi Samhita*.  
5. For examples, see Mark Siegeltuch, “Crossed Figures,” p. 20. Available on Academia.edu.



Figure 3: (Left) Yaksa with lotus in hand (Right) Yaksa and Yaksi, Thanesar, India, 2nd Century B.C

The term *yaksa* appears in many contexts and refers generally to Brahman or other universal deities, tutelary deities of kingdoms or clans, deceased ancestors, or local tree spirits of good or bad character. In general, the *yaksa* represents the immanent Spirit that dwells within each being. *Yaksas* may be either male or female (*yaksi*) or depicted as productive couples (*mithuna*).

In the *Satapatha Brahmana* (ix.4.1.2-5) we read that "From Prajapati, when dismembered, couples went forth...birth originates from a *mithuna*." We will find a variant of this idea in Genesis (1.27) when we discuss Adam and Eve. The idea that God created a primal couple from whom all are descended is a very old idea with roots in the tribal world.

The ontology of the Vedic tradition is normally expressed in sexual terms as we see in the *Bṛhadaranyaka Upanishad* (1.1.4.-4).

Here the account of creation begins with the Spirit (*atman*) “alone in the aspect of Person (*purusha*)”. This person in the beginning “was of such sort as are a man and a woman closely embraced (*etavan asa yatha stri-pumansau samparisvaktalu*). He desired a second. He caused the Spiritual-Self of his to fall atwain (*atmanam dvedhapatayat*). Thence came into being ‘husband and wife’ ... He had intercourse with her: thence were human beings engendered (*manusya ajayanta*).” In the same way, He and She assuming other than human forms begat their life in these animal types.<sup>1</sup>

The First Man is the image of God by an act of generation. His birth is both an eternal and temporal event, coincident in Heaven but seen as two events from within the human state. In the words of St. Thomas, “On the part of the child there is but one filiation in reality, although there be two in aspect” (*Sum Theol.* iii.35.5 *ad 2*).

Divine androgyny takes many forms. Shiva and his wife Parvati (an incarnation of Shakti) are united in Ardhanarishvara, depicted as half male and half female.<sup>2</sup> The earliest images of Ardhanarishvara are dated to the 1st century. Figure 4, a bronze statue from Cambodia is dated from the 7th to 8th century A.D.



Figure 4: Bronze statue of Ardhanarishvara, Cambodia, Metropolitan Museum of New York

1. A. K. Coomaraswamy, *op. cit.*, p. 236.

2. Ardhanarishvara is a combination of three words *Ardha* (half), *Nari* (woman), and *Ishwara* (lord).

## In Buddhism

Buddhism began as a monastic religion concerned with intellection and contemplation rather than worship. For this reason, early Buddhist art is aniconic. Symbols such as the footprint, wheel or wisdom-tree were intended as supports for contemplation connected to the myth and not with the friar Gautama depicted in the form of a man.<sup>1</sup>

We must remember that an abstract art is adapted to contemplative uses and implies a gnosis; an anthropomorphic art evokes a religious emotion, and corresponds to prayer rather than contemplation.<sup>2</sup>

It is in later periods that we find more anthropomorphic representations such as the familiar seated Buddha. These images evolved with the spread of the religion and the influence of local cultures. Further, the roots of Buddhist doctrine are ancient and are only “original” in the sense of a return to origins. The same may be said for the development of the art which in its inception used existing Indian art forms. All of this to say that we should not expect to find androgynous images in the early periods. It is during the reign of Asoka (c. 240 B.C.) that we find the beginnings of both heresies and sects.

The Buddhist sects are divided into two main groups: those of the Hinayana (“The Little Raft”) and the Mahayana (“The Great Raft”). The former, whose scriptures are preserved in Pali, claim to represent the pure original teaching of Gautama, and do in the main preserve its rationalistic, monastic and puritanical features to a marked extent: the later whose scriptures are in Sanskrit, interpret the doctrine in another way, with a development that is mystical, theological and devotional.<sup>3</sup>

It is in Mahayana Buddhism with its emphasis on devotional practice that we find a full flowering of Buddhist art as well as an integration of the older art forms of India and the other cultures where Buddhism took hold.

The Mahayana is known for its mystical theology which has many parallels in Christianity and in Vedic scripture. It is in this context that we find Avalokitesvara, the Bodhisattva of our cycle of time, often depicted with feminine features and sometimes with multiple heads. The Buddha is accessible through the holy spirit of Avalokitesvara who has compassion for all sentient beings and in whom worshippers seek solace. A Nepalese copper and gilt statue of Avalokitesvara dates from the 9th or 10th century A.D. and accentuates his feminine nature (Figure 5).

A two-headed clay figure of Buddha was recovered from a sealed chamber at Khara Khoto by a Russian archaeological team in Eastern Turkestan (Figure 6). Two-headed images are common in northern Asia and elsewhere as we shall see. They normally are male/female though it is hard to tell in the case of Figure 6. It is most likely an adaption of a local tradition. A similar two-headed figure of the Vedic fire God, Agni, indicates that the form was not unusual and had older antecedents (Figure 7). Agni is sometimes depicted as Janus-faced but the frontal presentation suggests local influence such as the Naga of Assam who carved such figures.

Agni is a fire god and it is worth noting that in the Vedic rite of fire-making, two sticks (*arani*) designated male (*uttarani*) and female (*adharani*) are employed. The vertical male stick is inserted into a notch on the horizontal female stick and rotated to produce fire. The fire that humans use is seen as a reflection of the Divine Fire existing in Heaven which can be brought to earth using the appropriate ritual. The analogy to sexual intercourse and procreations is evident as it is with androgynous images.

- 
1. For the requisite background, see A.K. Coomaraswamy, *The Origin of the Buddha Image and Buddha and the Gospel of Buddhism*.
  2. A. K. Coomaraswamy, *The Origin of the Buddha Image*, p. 9. It is important to note that anthropomorphic images are not naturalistic portraits as we find in Renaissance depictions of Jesus. They are still symbols.
  3. A. K. Coomaraswamy, *Buddha and the Gospel of Buddhism*, p. 223.



*Figure 5: Nepalese copper gilt statue of Avalokitesvara (9th to 10th century A.D.)*



*Figure 6: Two-headed clay figure of Buddha, Khara Khoto, Turkestan (undated)*



*Figure 7: Stone image of Agni, Nataraja temple, Chidambaram, Madras, India (16th or 17th century)*



## In Judaism

We begin naturally enough with Adam and Eve. In Genesis 1:26 we read: "And God said, Let us make man in our own image, after our likeness... So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created he him; male and female he created he them." The likeness is exemplary and represents the "form" of humanity and not a specific man or woman. The Man Adam is a syzygy (a yoking together), a divine form from which God brings forth a woman so that Adam (the man) should not be alone. We can compare *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* 1.4 where Prajapati divides himself, desiring a second, because "for one alone there is no delight."<sup>1</sup>



Figure 8: *The Creation of Eve*, Heinrich Aldegrever (1540), National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

---

1. See A. K. Coomaraswamy, op. cit., p. 239, ft. 20.

In Genesis 2:22 we read that Eve was made from Adam's rib (Heb. *tsele*) but other translations are possible and include "side" and "rib cage".<sup>1</sup> A case can be made for "side" as we will see later though A. K. Coomaraswamy notes that the daughter of Manu is called the "rib" (Sk. *parshu*) through whom he generated the race of men.<sup>2</sup>

What is important here is the often confused distinction between sex and gender. Gender is a classification system while sex is about physical characterisation. This idea will be clarified as we proceed. The generation of the physical world is always seen as a reflection of a divine model.

"In this likeness," then, could never have been said had there not already been an archetype of this polarity in God—that is to say, of course, *in principle*, for we are not speaking of a composition *in divinis*. The Christian doctrine, moreover, like the Indian, envisages an ultimate reunion of the divided principles there where "there is neither male nor female; for ye are all one [Skr. *eki-bhuta*] in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:28).<sup>3</sup>

The male and female reunited are the Universal Man. Most of the sexual phraseology we find in religious and metaphysical writings is not to be taken literally.<sup>4</sup> I am reminded of the definition of anthropology as "the study of man, embracing woman."

### **Male and Female in Kabbalistic Thought**

In Kabbalistic thought, the *Sefiroth* are the "numbers" or "numerations" of the divine aspects of God. They are the eternal causes of all things, human and divine. They lie at the heart of Jewish esotericism and are the principle keys to the mysteries of the Torah. They are ten in number and are the esoteric complements to the ten commandments which form the exoteric basis of Jewish culture and education.

The *Sefiroth* can be depicted graphically in a number of ways depending on the nature of the relationships that are emphasized but the most common form is a tree with the *Sefiroth* enumerated from the highest to the lowest (Figure 9). The tree form will appear later when we discuss two-headed figures.

The Sefirothic tree is also described as a body with a left side (female) and right side (male). This depiction of the *Sefiroth* is one of the more archaic ideas in Judaism and can be connected to the earlier anthropomorphic *Shi'ur Komah* literature which deals with the measurement of God's body and the association of hidden names with various bodily organs. These older ideas were generally not acceptable to exoteric Judaism but they have ancient roots and are found in other cultures such as the Egyptian and Vedic where the measurement of a god's body is used to lay out temples or other sacred structures.

The primal unity of God and the descent of His radiance (*Shekhinah*) into matter is described in stages as a division of male and female functions, first transcendently and ontologically and then immanently. The sexual symbolism is always clear.

- 
1. For an interesting discussion see the "Stack Exchange: Biblical Hermeneutics" Web site cited in the bibliography of this paper.
  2. A. K. Coomaraswamy, op. cit, p. 239, ft. 20. This myth is also found in the Andaman Islands. Ribs may be likened to the branches of trees, since the origin of humans from trees is another widespread mythology. See Witzel, *The Origins of the World's Mythologies*, p. 363 and *passim*.
  3. Ibid., p. 240
  4. An obsession with the literal is the main stumbling block preventing a better understanding of religion and metaphysics. This applies as much to scientists who "debunk" religion as it applies to fundamentalists who claim to read the "words" of the Bible. They share a common misconception. Oral and manuscript cultures treated language as "sound" until the advent of printing. Both language and art were symbolic in intent and incorporated many "levels" of reference of which the literal was of least importance.

A radiation from the face of God enters the void of boundless receptivity as if into a divine mirror. The union of *Hokhmah* and *Binah* ("the higher union," in Kabbalah), the "father" and the "mother" is continual, and is referred to in the *Zohar* as "two companions that never separate."

Let it be made clear that all this is concerned with one unique principal action; *hokhmah* and *binah* emanate simultaneously from *kether*, the dark receptivity of the 'mother' being entirely filled with the luminous fullness of the 'father'; these two complementary principles are never in any way separate. They are not, therefore, really two; the created being, man, sees them as differentiated, being himself subject to distinction. In reality, *hokhmah* and *binah* are indivisible and inseparable aspects of *kether*, the One.<sup>1</sup>

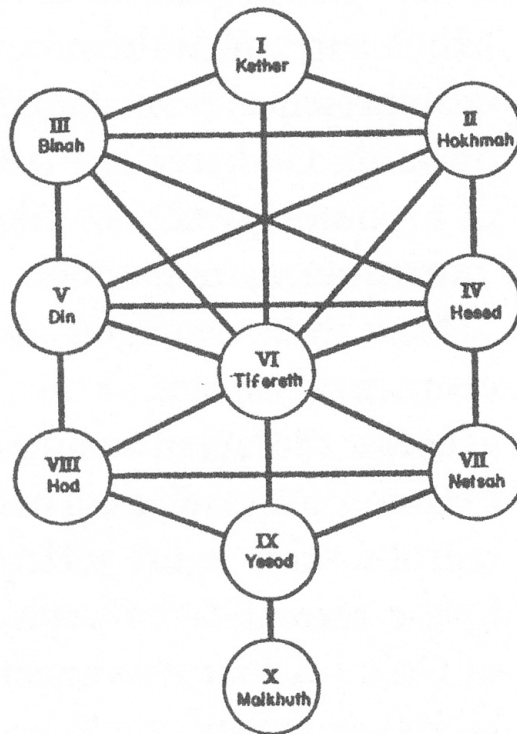


Figure 9: The Sefirothic Tree

Moving from God toward the creation of the physical world, the lowest *Sefiroth*, *Malkhuth*, represents divine immanence, the Kingdom or omnipresence of God. It is the archetype of *olam ha'asayah*, the sensory world of "fact," the corporeal world.

*Malkhuth*, situated at the lower extremity of the 'middle pillar', is not only the 'recipient' of all the emanations of the *Sefiroth* on the luminous or intelligible 'right side', and on the dark or unintelligible 'left side', but also of the central *Sefiroth*, the highest of which is *kether*, the superintelligible principle. In other words, *malkhuth* is the 'descent' of the *Shekinah* or omnipresence of the supreme, which is manifested on the one side by intelligible emanations united in the universal spirit and on the other by unintelligible emanations, the darkness of which becomes concrete in creative substance.<sup>2</sup>

1. Leo Scheyer, *The Universal Meaning of the Kabbalah*, p. 65.

2. Leo Schaya, op. cit., p. 49.

*Malkhuth* is often referred to as the “Daughter” or “Lower Mother” to distinguish it from *Binah*, the “Supreme Mother.” These names indicate the one maternal and receptive principle which is expressed transcendentally and ontologically as *Binah* and immanently in *Malkhuth*.

### Active and Passive Relations

The binary principle of male/female, active/passive is used as a model at every level of reference within the Divine unfolding. The product of these forces is described as the “child” in many traditions. This recurrent schema in art and metaphysics can be quite confusing for those unfamiliar with it.

Firstly, active and passive relationships can coexist within the same entity. In Greek mythology the Creator is Zeus who acts through the agency of Athena and Hephaistos. Athena is the goddess of wisdom who sprang from the head of Zeus. She is the mind of God (*he theou noesis*, or *nous*). She provides men with the knowledge of the arts. Hephaistos is a craftsman (smith) and is famous for his art. Athena inspires what Hephaistos creates.

In this relationship Athena’s function, in that she is the source of the formal pattern or cause of the work to be done, is essentially authoritative and paternal rather than receptive or feminine, we need not be surprised to find that the artist’s “inspiration” (*empnoia*, *empneusis*), or the “divine power” (*dynamis* = *Shakti*) that moves him, is referred to often as “the God”, the immanent “Daimon”, or Eros, that is to say the Spirit to whom the very word “inspiration” points.<sup>1</sup>

Athena is feminine with respect to Zeus and masculine with respect to Hephaistos. Similarly, the *Shekinah*, like the Vedic *Shakti*, has a dual nature. Gershom Scholem discusses this duality in Kabbalistic thought in several of his works on the Kabbalah. He quotes from the *Zohar*:

This is the angel who is sometimes male and sometime female. For when he channels blessings to the world, he is male and is called male; just as the male bestows [fecundating] blessings upon the female, so does he bestow blessings upon the world. But when his relationship to the world is that of judgment [i.e., when he manifests himself in his restrictive power as a judge], then he is called female. Just as the female is pregnant with the embryo, so he is pregnant with judgment, and is then called female.<sup>2</sup>

This passage links the female characteristics of the *Shekinah* with its restrictive and dangerous features acting as a restraint of the flow of life, a quality inherent in judgment (*Din*). On the other hand, when the *Shekinah* functions as an agent of the downward flow of blessings and energy it is understood as male and associated with the divine name, *Adonai* (Lord).

### Incest

A second point is that the active/passive schema helps to explain the presence of incest in mythology, folklore and religious expression. Saint Thomas speaks of “the Nature by which the Father begets” (*Sum. Theol.* 141.5c) when speaking of the conjoint principles (Essence and Nature) and Dante writes of Sophia (Wisdom) as “the bride of the Emperor of Heaven, and not bride alone, but sister and most beloved daughter” and further adds, “she exists in him in true and perfect fashion as if eternally wedded to him” (*Convito* iii.12). A. K. Coomaraswamy comments in relation to Dante’s Sophia:

Whom Dante also addresses as “Virgin Mother, daughter of thy Son” (*Paradiso* xxxiii.1). A similarly “incestuous” confusion of relationships is met with in the Indian, and even also the Islamic formulations ...in other words, the polarity of the

---

1. A. K. Coomaraswamy, *On the Traditional Doctrine of Art*, p. 21.

2. Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, p. 186. The quote is from *Zohar* (1, 232a). The *Shekinah* is sometimes referred to as the “Hand of Discipline” but also functions as the “hand that blesses.”

conjoint principles is not merely analogous to that of the male and female in one particular and marital relation, but in all possible reciprocal relations.<sup>1</sup>

These same “incestuous” ideas find expression in Christian iconography as expressed in a number of Renaissance paintings which emphasize the sexuality of Christ as evidenced by the display of his genitals (*ostentatio genitalium*) by Mary (Figure 10).<sup>2</sup> Jesus is both the Father and Son, the begetter and the begotten. Mary (often personified as the Church) was both his wife and mother. It is easy to see how these ideas can become meaningless or obscene once they are taken literally as they generally are today. Most people find the idea of a virgin birth inexplicable but the birth of Jesus is both an eternal and a temporal one and Jesus, the man, did not ascend to Heaven; only the “Son of Man” can ascend (John 3:13).

Many Renaissance artists like Leonardo da Vinci were well versed in the metaphysical underpinnings of Christianity and understood the symbolic meaning of these images and gestures. They were part of the esoteric side of Christianity which provided clues for those who were able to see beneath the surface. This veiled approach was quite common in medieval and Renaissance art and literature. The surface meaning could be understood by all but education was required to penetrate the deeper meaning.



Figure 10: Giovanni Bellini, *Madonna and Child*, c. 1470 (after Steinberg)

1. A. K. Coomaraswamy, “Divine Biunity,” p. 239, ft. 18.
2. See Leo Steinberg’s “The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and In Modern Oblivion” for a full analysis of the motif with many examples. See also “*Ostentatio genitalium*” on Wikipedia.

## In Christianity

The idea of the androgyne is quite common in Christian writing but less common in art. One unusual example was discovered in a monastery in Belgium, probably commissioned by Augustinian nuns in the 16th century. Jesus is shown with breasts, an image that would have shocked viewers in later time periods which is probably why it had been painted over. The restoration is recent.

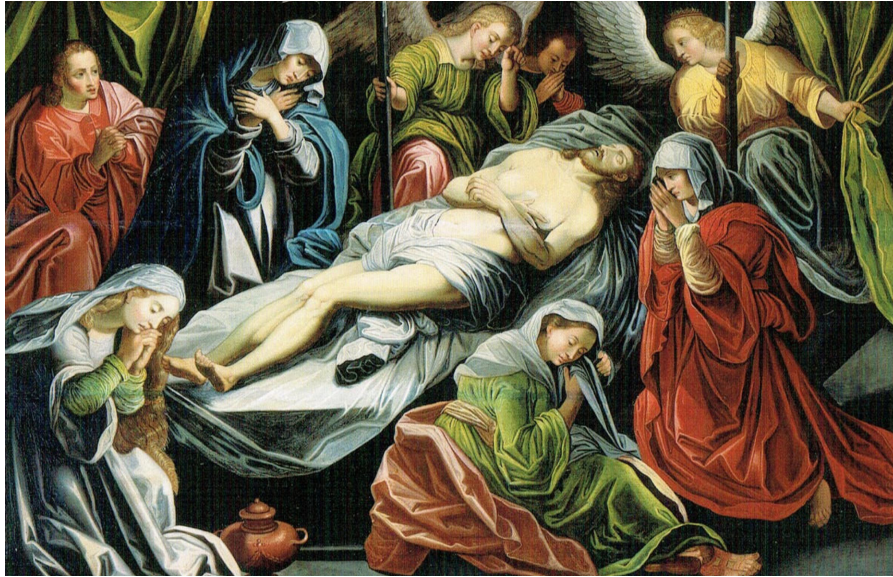


Figure 11: *Lamentation around the Remains of Christ*, (anon., c. 16th century), Museum of Notre-Dame à la Rose, Lessines, Belgium

A small number of Christian examples of androgyny are provided on the WisdomWords PPF Web site<sup>1</sup>:

- Epiphanius, the 4th-century Bishop of Salamis in Cyprus, related that the Quintillians, an early Christian group, claimed that one of their leaders, Priscilla, had a vision in which Jesus appeared as a woman.
- A statuette of Christ as a young boy from the 4th century, now in the Museo Nazionale delle Terme in Rome, depicts Christ with small breasts and curly hair. This piece was originally identified as a “seated poetess.”
- A 4th– or 5th-century sarcophagus in the Church of San Francesco in Ravenna, Italy, shows Jesus as youthful with short hair and small breasts.
- Arles, France, a sarcophagus from the late 4th century shows Christ standing on a small pile of demons. Even though Christ is bearded and has long hair, there is “a hint of gynomastia” (breasts) under his tunic.

### In the New Testament

The New Testament contains many of the metaphysical themes about the unification of opposites in Heaven found in Judaism and other traditions. I will offer a few examples from the many that are available.<sup>2</sup>

---

1. See <https://www.wisdomwordspff.org/2016/08/12/the-feminineandrogyneous-jesus/>

2. Three of my sources for quotations: A. K. Coomaraswamy, “The Tantric Doctrine of Divine Biunity”; Wayne Meeks, “The Image of the Androgyne”; Lloyd Graham, “Gender and gnosis: Making Male, making Jesus female.”

Let us start with the words of St. Thomas Aquinas (*Sum. Theol.* 1.93.6 *ad* 2): “The image of God belongs to both sexes, since it is in the mind, wherein is no sexual distinction,” written in reference to Galatians 3:28: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Jesus Christ.”

This can be interpreted as an indication of the more inclusive nature of Catholicism, but the deeper meaning is the metaphysical principle expressed by Aquinas in *Sum. Theol.* 1.93.6 *ad* 2: “All generation is from contraries” (*Omne quod generatur, generatur ex contrario*). The Spirit is the presence of the Divinity within us and it knows no such separation. When Jesus is asked by the Pharisees when the Kingdom of Heaven will arrive he replies that the Kingdom of Heaven is within you.

Wayne Meeks comments in passing that “Myths of a bisexual progenitor of the human race were very common in antiquity, as they have been in many cultures.”<sup>1</sup> He notes that the act of baptism among Christians was accompanied by a symbolic change of clothing; a rite of passage in which the old self dies and is reborn in a new garb.

However many varied resonances the early Church ritual clothing language may evoke, it is most fundamentally related to a particular myth. The “new man” symbolized by the clothing is the man who is “renewed according to the image of his creator” (Colossians 3:10; cf. Ephesians 4:24). The allusion to Genesis 1:26-27 is unmistakable; similarly, as we noted earlier, Galatians 3:28 contains a reference to the “male and female” of Genesis 1:27 and suggests that somehow the act of Christian initiation reverses the fateful division of Genesis 2:21-22. Where the image of God is restored, there it seems, man is no longer divided—not even by the most fundamental division of all, male and female. The baptismal reunification formula thus belongs to the familiar *Urzeit-Endzeit* pattern, and it presupposes an interpretation of the creation story in which the divine image after which Adam was modeled is masculofeminine.<sup>2</sup>

## In Gnosticism

The Gnostic Gospels, as they were named, were discovered in Nag Hammadi, Egypt, in 1945. They comprise 52 texts written in Coptic between the 3rd and 4th century A.D. and contain various sayings attributed to Jesus as well as stories about his life. Though labeled as gospels and associated with known biblical figures they are not considered canonical by Christians. Their origin lies in 1st century Jewish and Christian thought and a good number of the sayings and stories resemble those found in the canonical gospels. They are of some interest to scholars of early Christianity both because they are one of the few surviving sources for Gnostic thought and because they cast some light on the birth and growth of Christianity.

One text, the *Gospel of Thomas*, contains a number of quotes that deal with androgyny; in particular, the dual male/female nature of Christ, an aspect of Christianity that appears to have been particularly important in Gnostic thought.

A number of gnostic groups developed explicit corporate rituals by which the bisexual Image was renewed or recovered. Irenaeus tells of a “mystic rite” (*mystagogia*) of “spiritual marriage” practiced by some Marcosians in a “bridal chamber” (*nymphon*). Moreover, his vivid description of the way in which he said Marcus seduced wealthy women is evidently a parody of the Marcosian sacrament, for it closely parallels elements of the “Mystery of the Bridal Chamber” which are now known from the Gospel of Philip and other Nag Hammadi texts: “becoming

- 
1. “The Image of the Androgyne: Some uses of a Symbol in Earliest Christianity,” p. 185. In “History of Religions,” vol. 13, no. 3 (Feb. 1974), University of Chicago Press.
  2. Ibid. *Urzeit-Endzeit* means that the beginning of time mirrors the end of time. The word *Endzeit* is misspelled in the article. I have corrected it here.

one" with the Bridegroom, establishing the germ of light in the bridal chamber, receiving grace and Spirit.<sup>1</sup>

The reenactment of a sacred marriage (*hieros gamos*) is a practice known to many cultures, often connected to fertility and the well-being of the community. Ritual intercourse is viewed as a reenactment of the primal state before the separation of Heaven (male) and Earth (female).

Christians may have looked askance at these communal practices but they preserved the theme of reunification in their "pneumatology," which defines the nature of the human soul and its relationship to God and to salvation. This inner view deals with the individual and is only communal in a spiritual sense. This change of focus toward an individual identity in contrast to a social one is a result of the breakdown of tribalism in late Neolithic times. The major religions are, in one sense, a new type of tribe based on the written word but their focus is on the individual making them more inclusive but more inclined to proselytizing.

We read in the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas (logion 114):

Simon Peter said to them, "Mary should leave us, for females are not worthy of life." Jesus said, "Look, I shall guide her to make her male, so that she may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every female who makes herself male will enter heaven's kingdom."<sup>2</sup>

Lloyd Graham comments:

Although shocking to modern readers, the sentiment expressed by logion 114 is not unique or with precedent in Gnostic literature. A gender-transformation of the same kind is found in the *First Apocalypse of James*, which states that "the perishable has gone up to the imperishable, and the female element has attained to this male element."... Related sentiments, in which, in which females are again required to become male in order to attain salvation, can be found in Valentinian and Naassene writings. There are also references to the transcending rather than the exchange of gender as essential to spiritual progress.<sup>3</sup>

Graham goes on to provide textual and iconographic support relating these ideas to their counterpoint, the feminization of Jesus, discussed above. He finds support for these ideas in the practices of tribal peoples; in particular, the ancient idea that the father is the true source of the child and the woman the ground or nest (*nidus*) required for development.<sup>4</sup>

While the evidence he presents is clear enough his interpretations as well as those suggested by Wayne Meeks are based on a confusion between gender and sex. This leads them both into discussions of patriarchy, misogyny and the role and status of women in early Christian times which I believe obscures the meaning behind the symbolism. Statements condemning women, which are certainly common in the early church authors, are not representative of Christianity as such but reflect the anxieties of the monastic life and the social withdrawal that goes with it. We find the same warnings in early Buddhist writings.

We must understand that the Early Buddhist warning of sympathy with women is not a unique phenomenon, but rather one that is typical of monastic sentiment all the world over. It is based on fear. For of all the snares of the senses which Ignorance sets before the unwary, the most insidious, the most dangerous, the most attractive, is women.<sup>5</sup>

---

1. Meeks, op. cit., p. 189.

2. Quoted from Lloyd Graham, "Gender and gnosis: Making Mary male, making Jesus female," p. 3.

3. Lloyd Graham, *ibid*.

4. See Mark Siegel, "Birth from the Knee" on Academia.edu.

5. A. K. Coomaraswamy, *Buddha and the Gospel of Buddhism*, p. 154.



There are many sides to religion as Coomaraswamy notes:

To compare Nibbana—as the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* compares the bliss of Atman-intuition—to the self-forgetting happiness of earthly lovers, locked in each other's arms, would be for Buddhist thought a bitter mockery. No less remote from Buddhist sentiment is the view of Western chivalry which sees in woman a guiding star, or that of Vaishnava or Platonic idealism which finds in the adoration of the individual an education to the love of all.<sup>1</sup>

### The Two Souls in Man

In order to understand some of the language and imagery associated with androgyny, the metaphysical doctrine of the two souls must first be understood. It has prehistoric origins and is found in one form or another in all traditional religions and in many cultures and time periods.

We shall have to distinguish soul from spirit. Before we can know when, if ever, it is proper to render a given Sanskrit word by our word "soul" (*anima, psyche*), we must have known in what manifold senses the word "soul" has been employed in the European tradition; what kind of souls can be "saved"; what kind of soul Christ requires us to "hate" if we would be his disciples; what kind of soul Eckhart refers to when he says that the soul must "put itself to death." We must know what Philo means by the "soul of the soul"; and we must ask how we can think of animals as "soulless," not withstanding that the word "animal" means literally "ensouled". We must distinguish essence from existence.<sup>2</sup>

The metaphysical tradition teaches that there are two natures in us. In the words of St. Thomas Aquinas, "*duo sunt in homine*".<sup>3</sup> In Philo we find: "There are two minds, that of all (beings), and the individual mind: he that flees from his own mind flees for refuge to the mind of all in common."<sup>4</sup>

The terminology used to identify the two souls varies from author to author and from religion to religion.<sup>5</sup> Some examples include:

- Greek—*nous, psyche*
- Latin—*animus, anima*
- Hebrew—*ruach, nephesh*
- Arabic—*aql or ruh, nafs*
- Sanskrit—*atma, nama-rupa*
- English—Spirit, soul

Sometimes the same word is used (Soul, soul, Self, self, or *Atma, atma*) and the meaning must be understood from the context. The higher soul can be referred to in many ways:

- Inner Controller
- Intellect
- Soul of the soul

---

1. Ibid., p. 155.

2. A. K. Coomaraswamy, "Vedanta and the Western Tradition," p. 5 in *Selected Papers*, vol. 2: Metaphysics.

3. *Summa Theologica* II.2, q. 26, art. 4.

4. Quoted from A. K. Coomaraswamy, *What is Civilisation and Other Essays?*, p. 37.

5. Sometime the description is tripartite (Spirit, soul and body) where the body and soul are treated separately but are both considered part of the lower soul.

- Self-existent
- Pure mind
- Eternal mind
- Genius
- Synteresis
- Yaksha
- Daimon
- Holy Spirit

More importantly, at least in regard to the subject of this paper, the souls are respectively active (male) and passive (female). This is true for both men and women and is thus not a matter of sex. Since early thought is hierarchical, these twin forces are present in cosmology and creation.

*Purusha*, “the Male”, identified with Prajapati, is the essential principle of manifestation, and *prakrti* is the substantial principle. *Prakrti* is *pradhana*, “that which is laid down before all other things”; it is the amorphous, plastic, tenebrous and chaotic support of the worlds. It gives birth to existences and is therefore identified with Maya, the Mother of Forms, the Great Illusion that generates phenomena, the Earth Mother and Fertility Goddess, all of the multifarious and multiform aspects of the cosmic Matrix.<sup>1</sup>

The four elements (earth, air, fire and water) are seen as modifications of *Prakriti*, the primordial substance.<sup>2</sup>

The act of “creation,” as we have seen, implies a separation of Nature from Essence. Nature or Earth, thus “receding from likeness to God” is then, as it were, “fallen” into a state of passive potentiality (*prakrti, krtya*), complementary to the formative actuality of the solar Creator (*kartr*);...<sup>3</sup>

Plato expresses the same idea in a slightly different way.

This space (τοπος, χωρα) in which all things live and move and have their being, participates in the intelligible; it is imperceptible, indestructible, formless, void, and cannot be defined by or compared to any of its sensible contents.<sup>4</sup>

This all-receiving nature is sometimes compared to soft wax or other plastic medium which assumes the forms that are impressed upon it. It is the ground or support for the created world and can take on different appearances at different times. Thus the flux of the created world finds support in the formless void which is its container. Plato refers to this formless void as *physos* (equivalent to the Sanskrit *sunyata*) which is the nurse and mother of all becoming. The father is the formal world of eternal realities, the mother the void, the offspring the created world.

While we consider matter inert and subject only to physical laws this was not the view of our ancestors,

For men of earlier ages matter was like an aspect of God. In the cultures that are commonly called archaic, this perspective was immediate and linked with sensory experience, for the symbol of matter was the earth. The latter represented, in its

---

1. Adrian Snodgrass, *The Symbolism of the Stupa*, pp. 211-212. .  
 2. See Mark Siegeltuch, “A Brief History of Ether” on Academia.edu.  
 3. A.K. Coomaraswamy, “Rape of the Nagi” in *Selected Papers*, vol.1, p. 335. Adam and Eve are similarly “fallen”  
 4. A. K. Coomaraswamy, *Guardians of the Sun-Door*, p. 72.

perennial reality, the passive principle of all visible things, whereas heaven represented the active and generating principle.<sup>1</sup>

Humans were thought to be unique in that they occupied an intermediate position in creation between the physical and spiritual worlds. They contained all of these forces within themselves but needed to uncover their essential source in God. Any discussion of androgyny must be placed within this larger perspective.

Traditional religions teach that all people (male and female) can fight the good fight.<sup>2</sup> This war is waged between the Higher Soul and the Lower Soul and victory is seen as a conquest or a wedding.<sup>3</sup> Our powers of perception, expression, thought and action must be guided by Reason; not what we mean by reason—which Plato calls opinion and assigns a merely pragmatic value—but rather the Divinity within us. The Stoic, Marcus Aurelius, expressed it thusly:

Become conscious at last that thou hast in thyself something better and more god-like than that which causes the bodily passions and turns thee into a mere marionette. What is my mind now occupied with? Fear? Suspicion? Concupiscence? Some other thing?<sup>4</sup>

In the *Bhagavad Gita* (vi.5.6) we read: “Lift up the self by the Self, let not self sit back. For, verily, the Self is both the friend and foe of the self.” The same reading is provided in the Buddhist *Dhammapada* (103, 160, 380): “the Self is the Lord of the self” and one should “by the Self incite the self, and by the Self gentle self”. The last reference is to the taming of a horse, a common analogy in Plato and elsewhere. Paulo Veronese’s painting, “Virtue Restrains Vice” (Figure 12) symbolizes the relationship between the two souls.

What we see as contraries were viewed as existing in a hierarchy. The “warfare” between the flesh and the Spirit which St. Paul describes in Galatians 5:17, (“For the flesh lusteth against the spirit: and the spirit against the flesh, for these are contrary to one another”) is explained by St. Augustine in the following way:

This is said, St. Augustine explains, because the spirit desires to overcome the evil habit of the flesh, not the flesh itself, so that the flesh may become subjected to it as the natural order requires. The spirit wishes the flesh, which it loves, to be ruled properly, nourished and cherished “as also Christ does the Church.”<sup>5</sup>

Disorder in the individual and in society, is due to sin, a disruption of the order of nature. This relationship is to be observed, hopefully, between knight and vassal and husband and wife as a reflection of an ordered society. This is only possible if each individual is governed by these same ruling principles.

Modern commentators are used to seeing such forces as contraries. Medieval culture is commonly depicted as repressed. Durant Robertson writes:

We have been quick to supply “contraries” for purposes of generating “tensions” necessary to make our medieval ancestors seem modern. If we use “the Church” as one pole, a conveniently nebulous entity, we have a choice among several elements for the other: “paganism,” “obscenity,” or simply, “the flesh.”<sup>6</sup>

---

1. Titus Burckhardt, *Alchemy*, p. 58.

2. In medieval writings they speak of “virile virgins” which sounds like a contradiction but refers to their ability to stand up to their passions.

3. The underlying message of Shakespeare’s “The Taming of the Shrew.”

4. *Marcus St.*, XII.19, Loeb Classical Library.

5. Durant Robertson, *A Preface to Chaucer*, p. 22.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 17.



*Figure 12: Paulo Veronese, "La Virtu he Frena il Vizio" (after D.W. Robertson)*

Emotional repression is part and parcel of print culture and industrialization and it affected all aspects of social life including religion. Oral and manuscript societies have the opposite problems, impulsive behavior and paranoia, as we have rediscovered in our own times with the demise of print. The philosophies of the classical and medieval world were aimed at restoring harmony and calming peoples fears. In short, they had a civilizing influence.

## **Gender in Language**

The difference between gender and sex can be seen more clearly in linguistics where a distinction is made between natural and grammatical gender. Natural gender is a matter of sexual differentiation while grammatical gender is a classification system. The word "gender" comes into

English from the Latin *genus*, “kind,” “type,” or “sort.” Gender is a system for classifying nouns and their associated words such as adjectives and pronouns.

About 50% of the existing languages use gender and the number of genders can vary from 2 to as many as 20 but a smaller number is more common (2 to 4). The most common gender divisions are:

- animate/inanimate
- male/female/neuter
- male/female

Gender can be indicated by independent articles such as the French “la” (feminine), “le” (masculine) or “les” (plural masculine and feminine). It can also be indicated by an affix as it is in Bantu languages where a prefix is attached to nouns and their associated words to indicate gender. Bantu languages have a wide variety of genders shown in the chart below.

### Noun class

The following is a list of nominal classes in Bantu languages:

Singular classes		Plural classes		Typical meaning(s)
Number	Prefix	Number	Prefix	
1	*mu-	2	*ba-	Humans, animate
3	*mu-	4	*mi-	Plants, inanimate
5	*di-	6	*ma-	Various; class 6 for liquids ( <a href="#">mass nouns</a> )
7	*ki-	8	*bi-	Various, diminutives, manner/way/language
9	*n-	10	*n-	Animals, inanimate
11	*du-			Abstract nouns
12	*ka-	13	*tu-	Diminutives
14	*bu-			Abstract nouns
15	*ku-			Infinitives
16	*pa-			Locatives (proximal, exact)
17	*ku-			Locatives (distal, approximate)
18	*mu-			Locatives (interior)
19	*pi-			Diminutives

Figure 13: Gender in Bantu languages (Wikipedia “Bantu Languages”)

The way in which nouns are assigned gender can be quite varied and has no direct relationship to sex. Even where the genders are limited to masculine/feminine and neuter this is the case. The classic example is provided by Mark Twain in his *A Tramp Abroad*.

Every noun has a gender, and there is no sense or system in the distribution; so the gender of each must be learned separately and by heart. There is no other way. To do this one has to have a memory like a memorandum-book. In German, a young lady has no sex, while a turnip has. Think what overwrought reverence that shows for the turnip, and what callous disrespect for the girl. See how it looks in print -- I translate this from a conversation in one of the best of the German Sunday-school books:

Gretchen: "Wilhelm, where is the turnip?"

Wilhelm: "She has gone to the kitchen."

Gretchen: "Where is the accomplished and beautiful English maiden?"

Wilhelm. "It has gone to the opera."

English once had gender but no longer does. What makes German confusing for English speakers is that in English the pronouns (his, her, its, etc.) became aligned with the sex of their referents in the 14th century or so. As a result, men are "he" and women "she" and turnips "it". For whatever reason, ships are "she" but this only indicates the subjective nature of gender. George Lakoff writes:

For example, the title of this book [*Women, Fire and Dangerous Things*] was inspired by the Australian aboriginal language Dyirbal, which has a category, *balan*, that actually includes women, fire and dangerous things. It also includes birds that are *not* dangerous, as well as exceptional animals such as the platypus, bandicoot, and echidna.<sup>1</sup>

Classification is an important part of language and cognition. Our question is how the categories "masculine" and "feminine" came into being if they don't relate directly to sex and what has all of this to do with androgyny? To try and answer these questions we will turn to art history and anthropology.

## Two-Headed Figures

The idea of a pair of primal ancestors, like Adam and Eve, is quite ancient and occurs worldwide in the form of two-headed figures.<sup>2</sup> These are not Janus-faced but face forward. A short survey will illustrate the age and distribution of this motif.

Among the oldest known two-headed figure is this Neolithic example from Anatolia, dating from the middle of the 7th millennium (Figure 14). Other examples were found in Cyprus, Syria, and elsewhere in Anatolia (Hacilar).

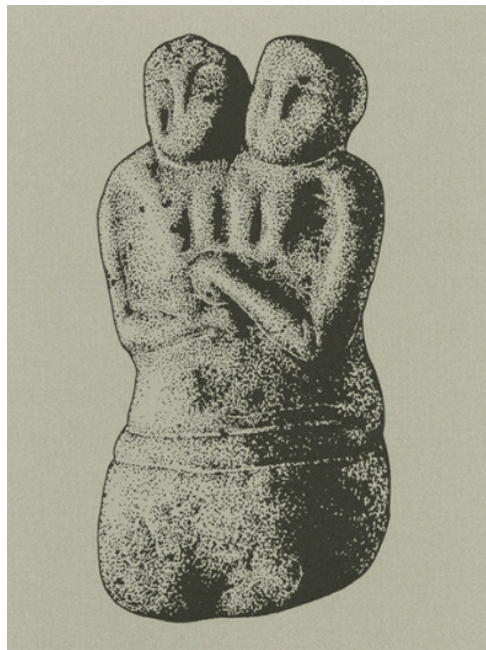


Figure 14: Figure in white marble, Catal Huyuk, Anatolia, Turkey (c. 6500 B.C.)

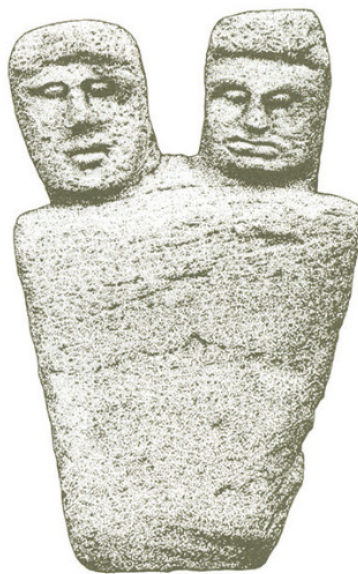
- 
1. George Lakoff, *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things*, p. 5.
  2. The same idea is expressed as crossed male/female figures. See Mark Siegeltuch, "Crossed Figures" on Academia.edu.

Another Neolithic example from the Vinca culture appears to be wearing a garment with reciprocal patterns (Figure 15).



*Figure 15: Double-headed pottery figurine, Gomolava, Yugoslavia (6 millennium B.C.)*

An example from Sicily (Figure 16) from classical times is of special interest since the triangular shape suggests that the artist modeled the form on a wooden prototype, such as a two-headed Y-post (discussed later). Durable material like stone survived but wooden Y-posts probably have older roots. Because wood is perishable, Y-posts are found mostly in tribal societies where they are made to the present day. Figure 16 is one of many dicephalus stelae from the same area.



*Figure 16: Stone stela, Selinuntum, Sicily (4th century B.C.)*

While the original idea was a primal couple representing the founders of the clan or tribe, the sex of two-headed figures can vary (male/male, male/female, female/female) or indeterminate such as these “idols” from Cyprus and the Middle East (Figure 17).

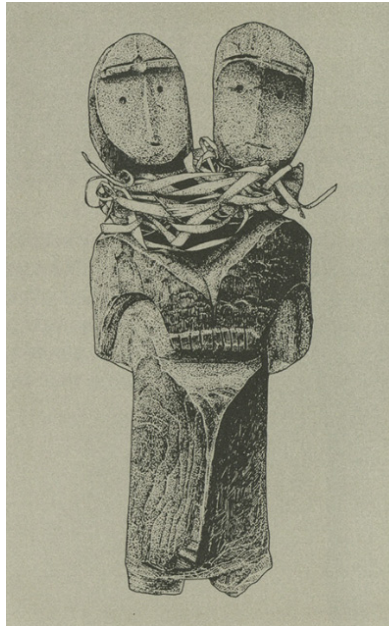


Figure 17: Two-headed figures from Bronze Age Cyprus, Syria, and Anatolia

Number	Description
203	Plank “idol” of pottery, early Bronze Age, Lapithos, Cyprus
204	Plank “idol” of pottery, early Bronze Age, Lapithos, Cyprus
205	“Eye-idol” of alabaster, Tell Brak, eastern Syria, Bronze Age.
206	Cappadocian marble “idol”, Kul Tepe, Anatolia, Turkey (c. 2000 B.C.)



Asia provides a number of examples such as Figure 18, an Ainu wooden image from Siberia used to prevent twins from falling ill.



*Figure 18: Ainu wooden image, Sakhalin, Siberia*

Figure 19 is a painted wooden carving of an image traditional among the Konyak Naga of India. The figures below may represent ancestors.



*Figure 19: Painted wooden figure, Assam, India*

Figure 20, three of ten staffs or “swords” recovered from a peat bog in northern Honshu, Japan, dates from the late Jomon period.



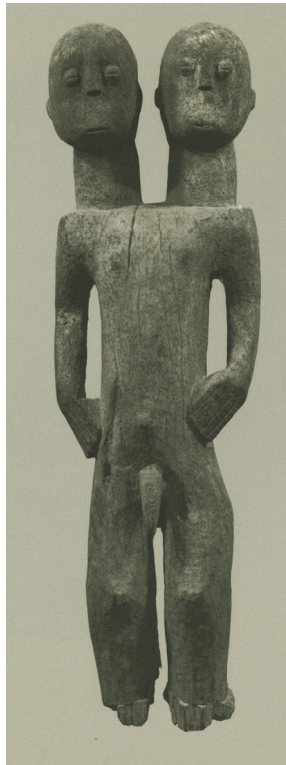
*Figure 20: Staffs recovered from a peat bog, Honshu, Japan (c. 1000-250 B.C.)*

Double-headed figures have a limited distribution across Central Africa which closely overlaps that of Y-posts. Figure 21, a double-headed stone sculpture from the Kissi tribe of West Africa includes what appear to be three children.



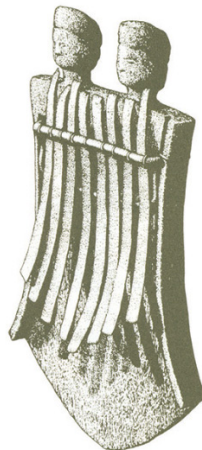
*Figure 21: Stone sculpture, Kissi, Guinea/Liberia/Sierra Leone, Africa*

Figure 22 is a wooden figure from Burkina Faso.



*Figure 22: Wooden figure from the Lobi, Burkina Faso*

Some musical instruments from Central Africa exhibit double-headed figures.<sup>1</sup> One example is presented here, a finger piano from Angola (Figure 23). Many peoples once believed that musical sounds were the voices of ancestors speaking to the living.



*Figure 23: Finger piano, Kasayi, North Angola*

---

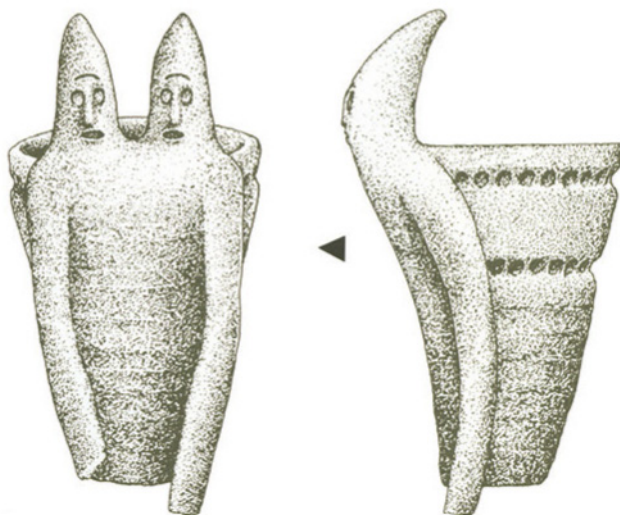
1. We see both human and animal heads on many stringed instruments both in Asia and Europe but no two-headed examples.

Examples can be found in the New World as well, particularly in pottery. When the motif first arrived is a matter of guesswork, but wooden examples probably preceded those in more durable materials. This two-headed image was carved by an Eskimo in the 19th century (Figure 24).



*Figure 24: Cup made from walrus tusk, Bering Strait Eskimo, Alaska*

A pottery pipe-bowl from a proto-Huron site in Ontario, Canada has two heads on a single body (Figure 25).



*Figure 25: Pottery pipe-bowl, proto-Huron, Benson Site, Bexley, Ontario, Canada (c. A.D.1540)*

A large-scale earthwork from Wisconsin features a two-headed figure forty meters wide and nearly a meter high (Figure 26). It is one of many human and animal earthwork sculptures in the area.

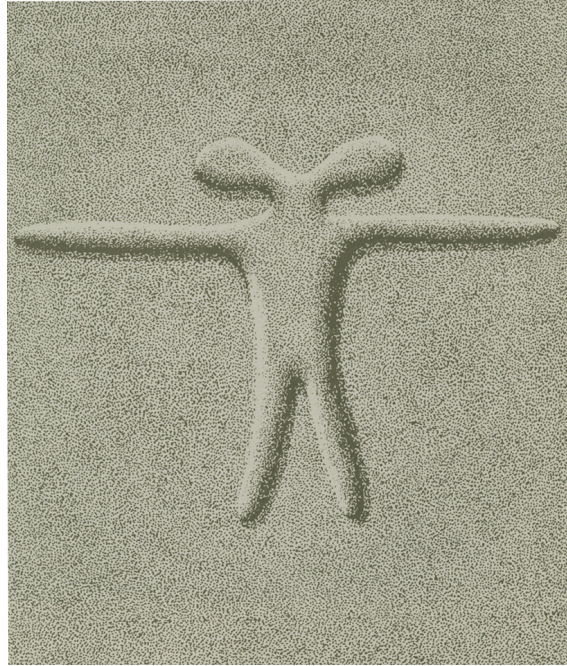


Figure 26: Prehistoric earthwork, Muscola, Grant County, Wisconsin

Surviving South American examples are mostly in pottery and stone (Figure 27).

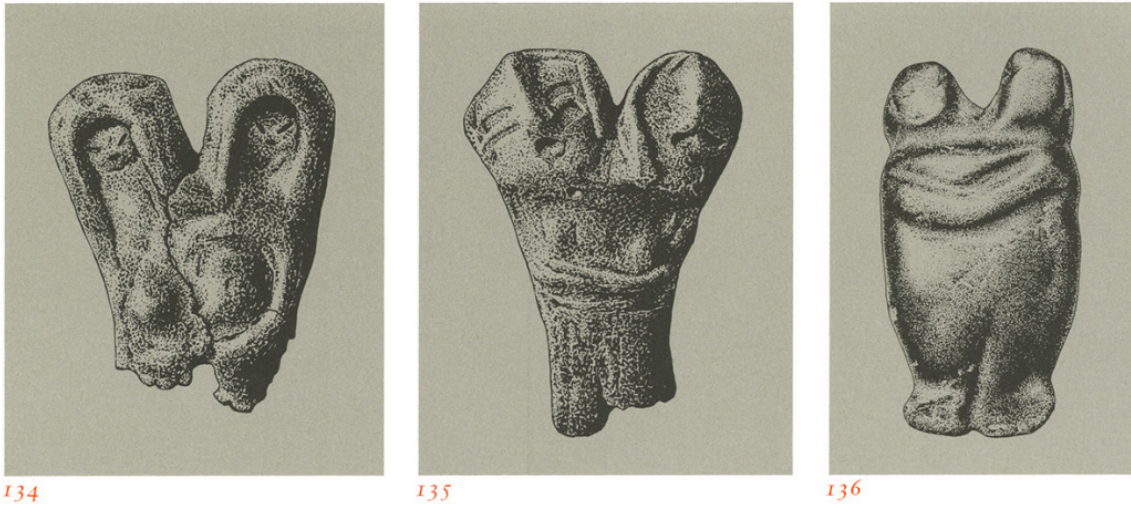


Figure 27: South American two-headed figures

Number	Description
134	Pottery figurine, Valdivia Culture, Coastal Ecuador (c. 2300 B.C.)
135	Pottery figurine, Valdivia Culture, Coastal Ecuador (c. 2300 B.C.)
136	Stone figurine, Ecuador, provenience unknown.

Some Central American examples are made of wood, such as this modern carving from the Choco of Panama in which the sexes are distinguished (Figure 28).

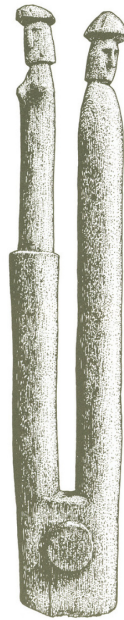


Figure 28: Wood carving, Choco Indians, Punta Pinas, Panama

## Wooden Y-Posts

The evidence we possess suggests that the two-headed figures we find in durable materials were originally made of wood. It is a commonplace in many cultures to equate the branching of a tree with the social divisions generated by marriage and procreation. We ourselves express our ancestry in terms of "family trees" "branches" and "roots" and these metaphors were there in the beginning. One of the many ways of expressing these ideas was to carve human heads or faces on trees limbs or posts. Carl Schuster collected examples from many cultures and periods. I will provide a few relevant examples out of many.<sup>1</sup>

Lets begin our brief tour in the Pacific where many examples survived into modern times. Figure 29 is a Y-post from New Ireland with carved heads on the ends. These kinds of posts were incorporated into stone walls surrounding sacred places. Entry into the sacred enclosure involved stepping through the crotch of post. Captured warriors were impaled on these posts before they were eaten.

Human sacrifice has been connected with Y-posts in other locations including Easter Island, but here the two-headed figure was made from stone, perhaps because wood was scarce. "According to native information transmitted to Palmer in 1870, the cup-shaped receptacle between the two human heads [in Figure 30] was designed to receive burnt offerings of human flesh at the time of cannibal feasts."<sup>2</sup>

- 
1. See also, Mark Siegeltuch, "The Social Symbolism of Horns," in which animal horns are described as a variant of forked sticks whose symbolism is social and involves the initial branching of the tribe or group via the first Man and Woman.
  2. Carl Schuster and Edmund Carpenter, *Social Symbolism in Ancient and Tribal Art*, vol 2, bk. 1, p. 29.



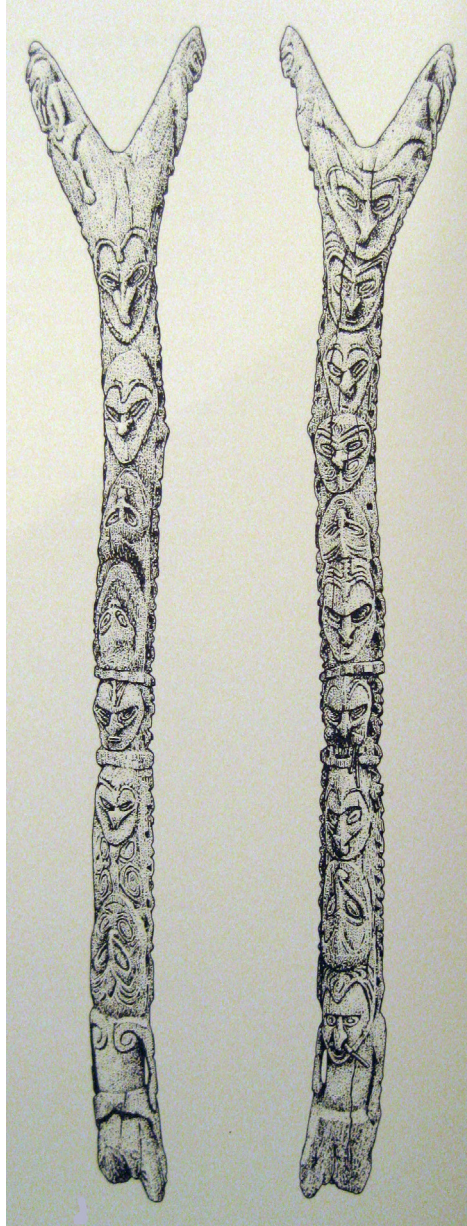
*Figure 29: Forked-post, New Ireland, Papua, New Guinea*



*Figure 30: Two-headed "Cremation" stone, Vinapu, Easter Island (Rapa Nui)*

Forked-posts were also documented in Australia, some of them used in conjunction with cannibalism.<sup>1</sup> In later periods, we find that forked-posts, both large and small, at the site of animal sacrifice or of offerings of food to ancestors or gods.

A housepost from New Guinea has faces on each branch and human figures on the shaft, some of them inverted (Figure 31).



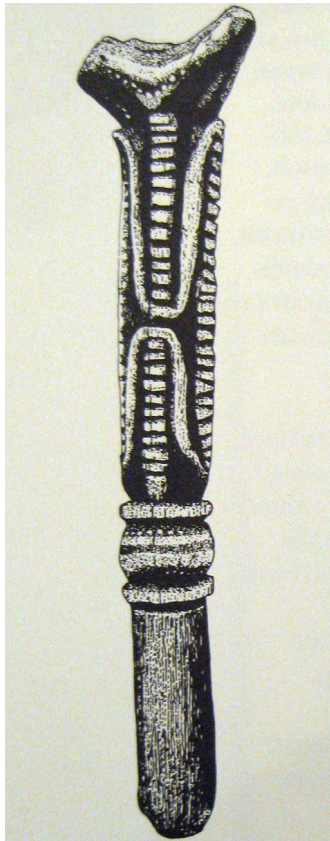
*Figure 31: Housepost (back and front), Middle Sepik, Papua, New Guinea*

Many examples are not figurative but exhibit the genealogical symbolism of linked human figures that Carl Schuster deciphered. Figure 32, a miniature model housepost from New Guinea is encircled by a common genealogical pattern in which the continuous lines represent connected bodies and the vertical lines spinal columns. The pattern is meant to represent the descent of generations from the original pair at the top.

---

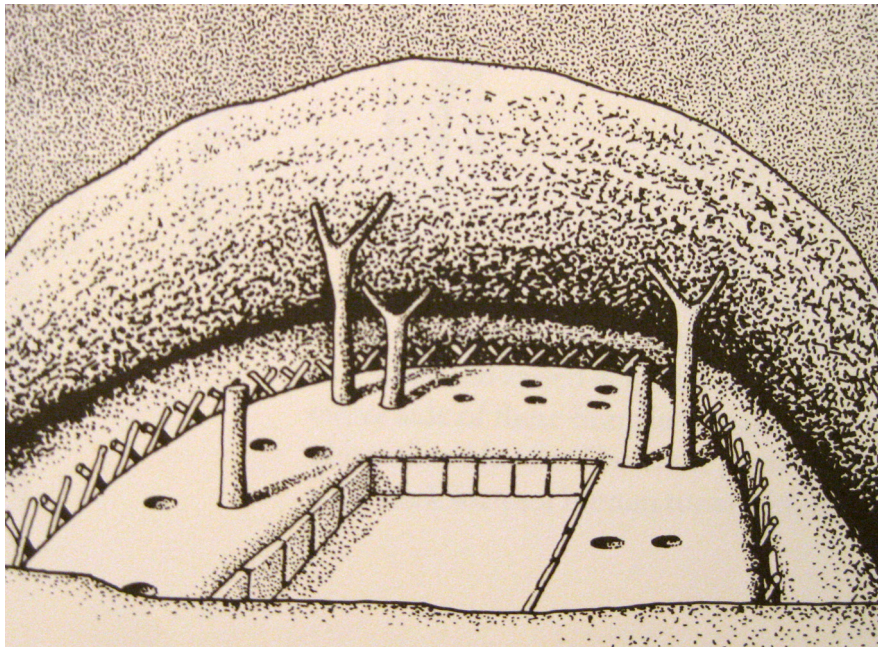
1. Carl Schuster and Edmund Carpenter, *Social Symbolism in Ancient and Tribal Art*, vol 2, bk. 1, p. 29.





*Figure 32: Miniature housepost, Sepik, New Guinea*

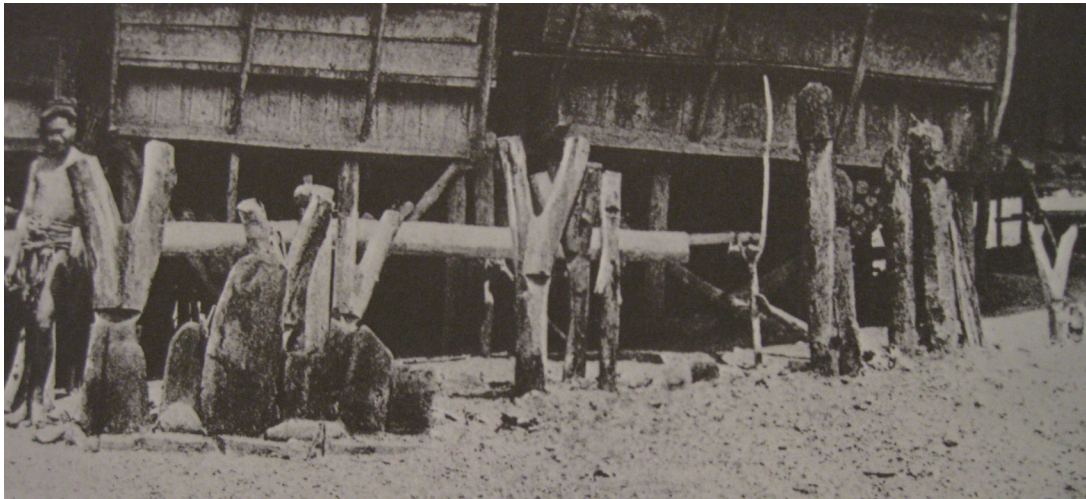
Moving into Polynesia, we find anthropomorphic posts in Hawaii erected in an underground ceremonial center (Figure 33)



*Figure 33: Y-Posts from underground ceremonial center, Hawaii*

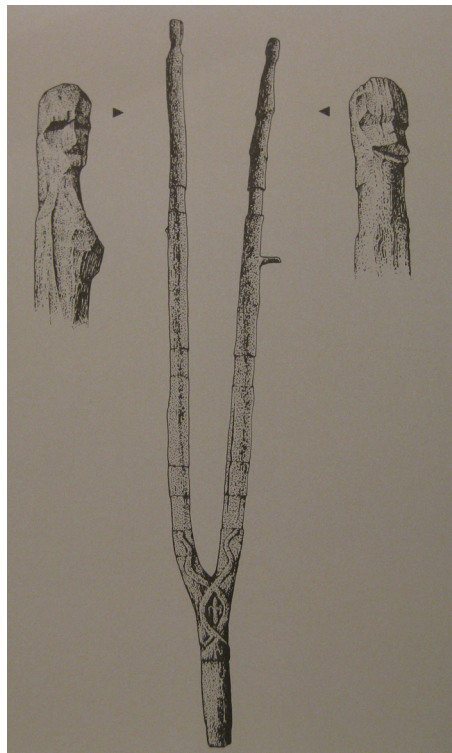
The Y-form is common in traditional architecture where it supports the cross-beams.

Among the Nias of Indonesia, miniature Y-sticks existed alongside Y-posts and megaliths, all associated with ancestors and often, human sacrifice (Figure 34).



*Figure 34: Nias house with ancestral figures, Indonesia*

The Y-post is also known in Siberia. Figure 35, which features two small human heads, is from the Ude of eastern Siberia. The post was collected by the Russian explorer, Vladimir Arsenyev, in the 1930s, but he was not able to obtain any information about it from the residents. Perhaps they no longer knew what the symbolism meant. It was referred to as “the shaman post”.<sup>1</sup>



*Figure 35: Forked post, Ude, Samarga River, eastern Siberia*

---

1. Carl Schuster and Edmund Carpenter, *Social Symbolism in Ancient and Tribal Art*, vol 2, bk. 1, p. 57.

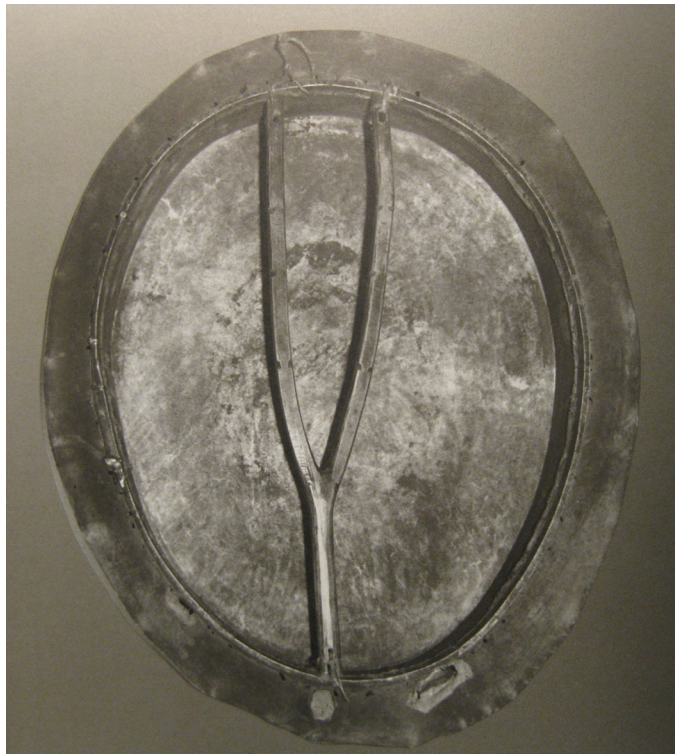
A shaved stick (*inao*) from the Ainu of Sakhalin resembles two human heads on a forked, shaved stick (Figure 36). The stick was put at the top of a tree to which a sacrificial bear was bound during the bear festival.<sup>1</sup> Space precludes any further discussion of shaved sticks but they share the same arboreal symbolism as many of these other art forms. Each shaving represents a generation, like the limbs of a tree.<sup>2</sup>



*Figure 36: Aino inao, Sakhalin, Russia.*

Forked posts and double-head images appear as shamanic equipment among the Ostyaks, Enets (Samoyads), Koryaks and other northern peoples. An Ostyak's shaman's drum displays carved faces on each of its supporting "arms" (Figure 37). Similarly, a clothed two-headed figure described as the "spirit of the tent" was found among the Nganasan or Tavgi Samoyads on the Taimyr Peninsula in the far north of Asia (Figure 38)

1. Carl Schuster and Edmund Carpenter, *op. cit.*, p. 59.
2. See Carl Schuster, "The Aino Inao; Some Comparative Considerations,"

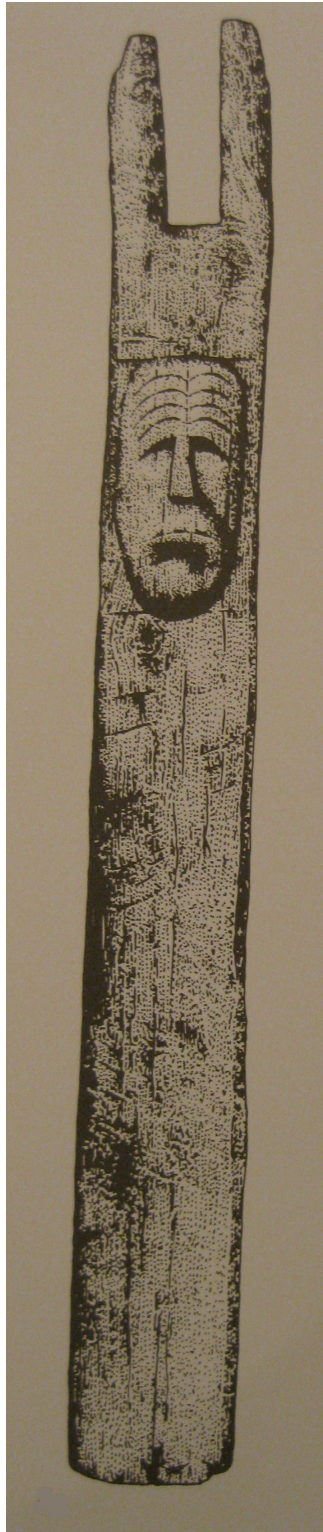


*Figure 37: Ostyak shaman's drum (inside), Siberia, Russia*



*Figure 38: Wooden image, Nganasan, Siberia, Russia*

Y-posts and two-headed figures are also found in North and South America but fewer examples exist. A Delaware housepost (Figure 39), one of twelve that lined the walls of the Big House, has a human face and a fork at the top. A pair of Lenape-Delaware drumsticks feature male and female heads (Figure 40).



*Figure 39: Delaware housepost, Dewey, Oklahoma*



*Figure 40: Drumsticks, Delaware, Oklahoma*

Central and South America provide a number of examples both in wood and clay. Figure 41, an ancient Peruvian memorial post with a single head.



*Figure 41: Nazca grave-post, southern Peru (c. AD 100-1300)*

Another example from Peru is part of a spear-thrower, or a ritual object resembling a spear-thrower, with both a male and female head (Figure 42).



*Figure 42: Bone finial of a spear-thrower, Chancay, Peru (AD 1300-1450)*

In Africa, Y-posts are found primarily in West Africa but occur as far east as Ethiopia. A wealth of examples exist. The Dogon of Mali carve anthropomorphic posts with female figures (Figure 43). Many posts are segmented and notched, where each division represents a generation. Dogon beliefs about creation are pertinent to the subject of this paper.

The Spirit drew two outlines on the ground, one on top of the other, one male and the other female. The man stretched himself out on these two shadows of himself, and took both of them for his own. The same thing was done for the woman. Thus it came about that each human being from the first was endowed with two souls of different sex, or rather with two principles corresponding to two distinct persons. In the man the female soul was located in the prepuce; in the woman the male soul was in the clitoris.<sup>1</sup>

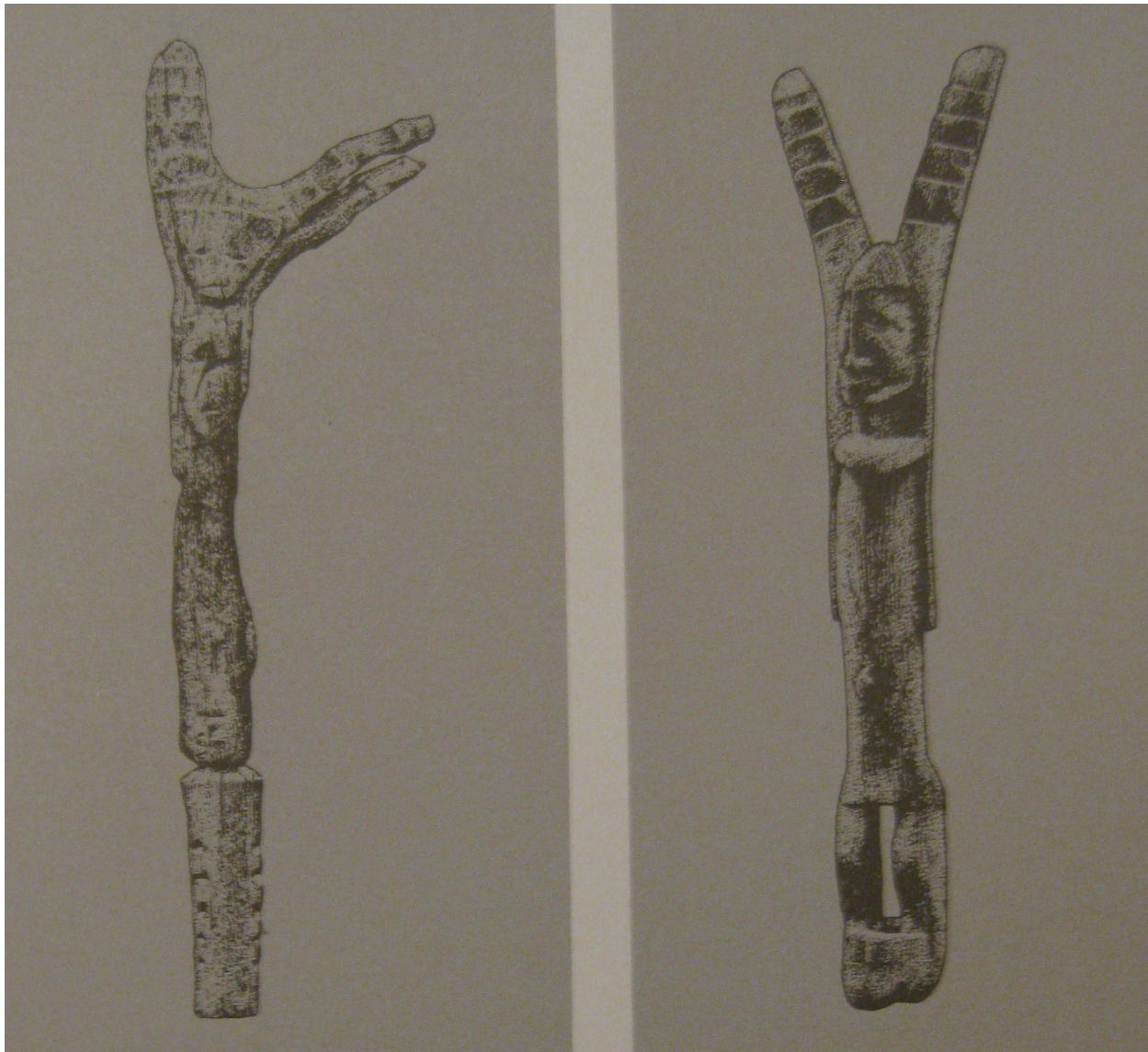


Figure 43: Dogon wooden figure (left) and "spirit ladder (right)," Mali

---

1. Marcel Griaule, *Conversations with Ogotemmel*, p. 22. Circumcision removes the man's female soul and excision the woman's male soul.



Many Y-posts serve as grave markers. A Moro funeral post in Sudan has both naturalistic ancestor figures in addition to more conventionalized figures with legs, torsos and upraised arms (Figure 44).



*Figure 44: Moro funeral post, Nilotic Sudan*

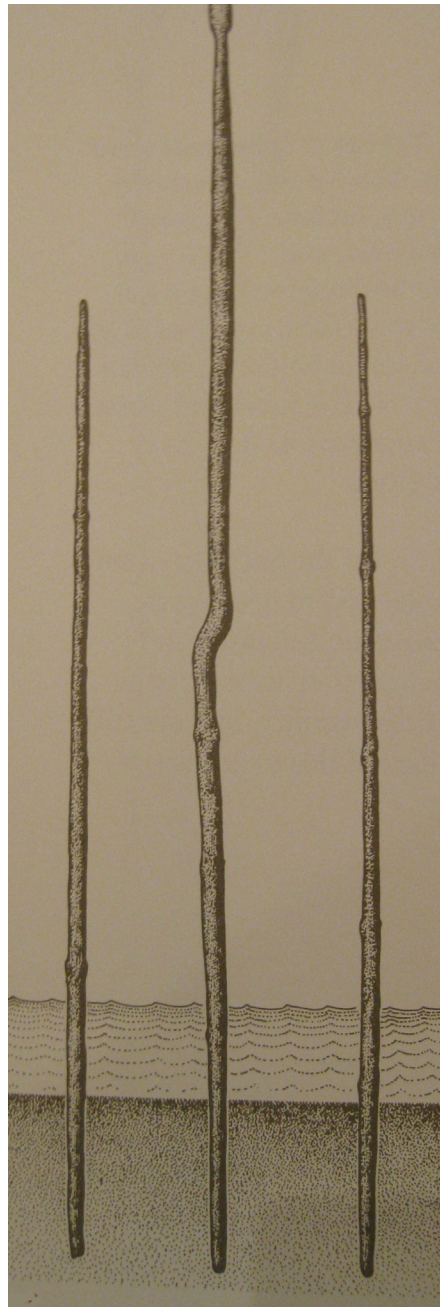
From the Mbaye of Moissala, Chad, a photograph shows an eldest brother, at the death of his father, sitting before a shrine of miniature forked-posts (Figure 45).



*Figure 45: Funeral rite with forked-posts, Sara tribe, Chad*

Other examples could be adduced from the Ivory Coast, Upper Volta, Ghana, Cameroon, Nigeria, Congo, Ethiopia and Madagascar.<sup>1</sup>

European examples are rare probably because most wooden posts did not survive. One exception is Figure 46, three poles excavated from a Neolithic lacustrine deposit in northern Germany, dated from the 4th millennium. The center pole is single-headed and it is likely that the carver used the kink in the trunk to suggest steatopygia, as is common in many Paleolithic images. Two shorter posts flank the central one and appear to have been attached by cords to the main post. They may have represented children of what would be a clan ancestress.



*Figure 46: Three poles in lacustrine deposit, Ahrensburg, Germany (c. 4th millennium)*

---

1. See Carl Schuster and Edmund Carpenter, *Social Symbolism in Ancient and Tribal Art*, vol. 2, bk. 1.

# Genealogical Symbolism

Carl Schuster believed that Paleolithic peoples developed a system for illustrating their ideas about genealogy.<sup>1</sup> 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 (Figure 47).

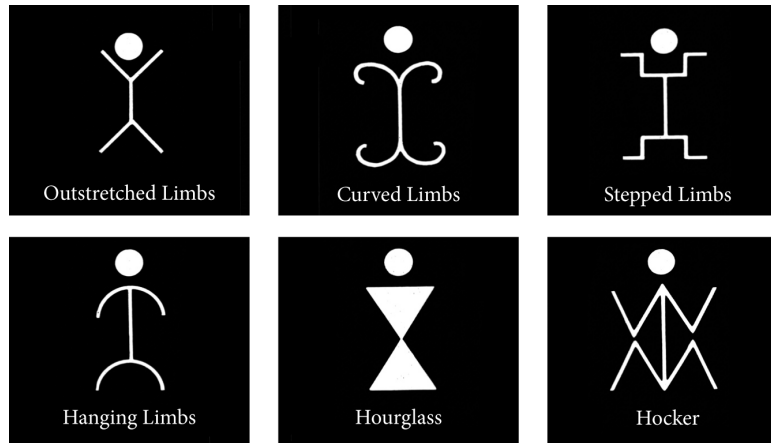


Figure 47: Schematic rendering of basic genealogical elements

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 48). The notion is that people grow out of one another in the manner of plants grown from a cutting.

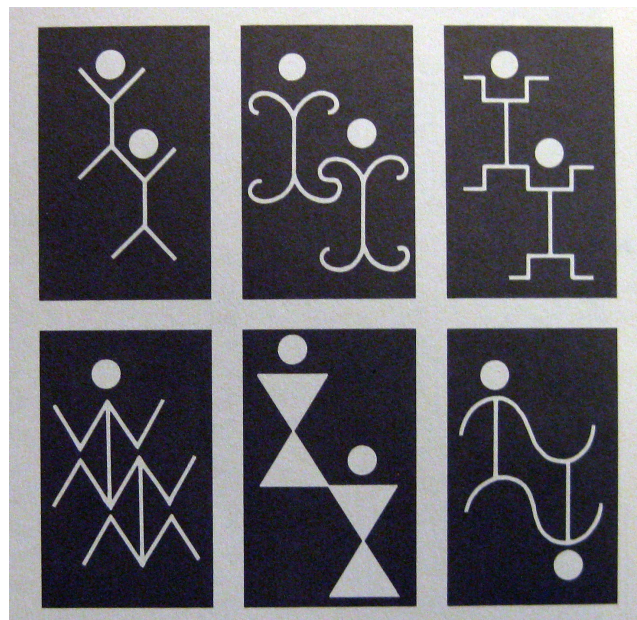


Figure 48: Descent

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.

Figures can also be linked horizontally, arm to arm and leg to leg, to depict relationships within a single generation (Figure 49).

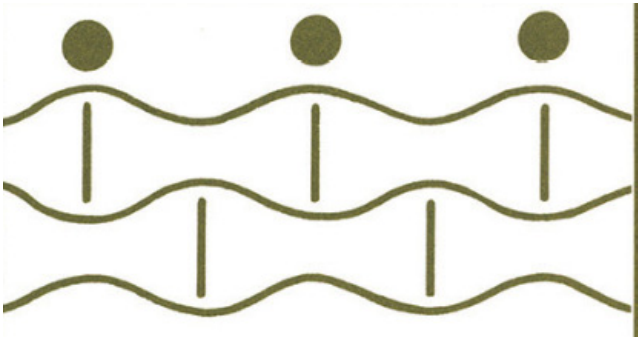


Figure 49: Relationship

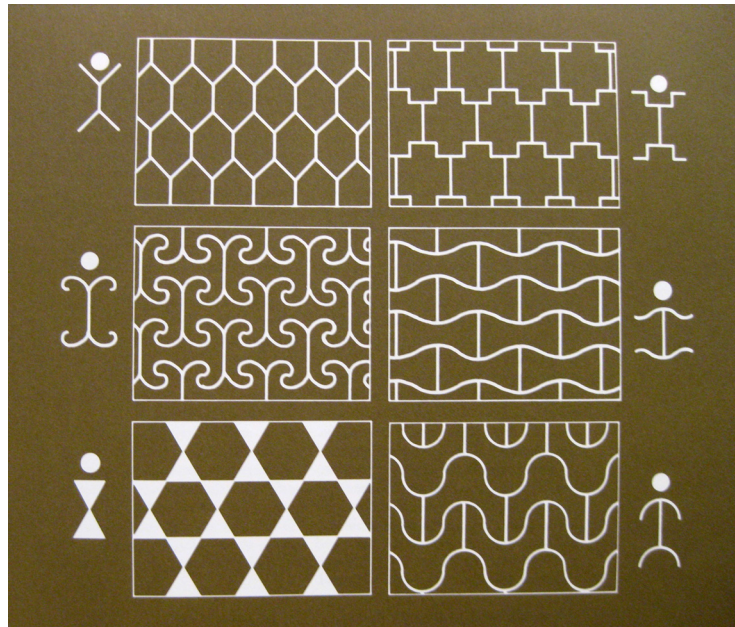
A cotton *ikat* from Sulawesi, Indonesia (Figure 50) contains a repeated human figure with distended ear lobes and a prominent spinal column. Each limb forms a "Z" to link with an arm or a leg diagonally above and below.



Figure 50: Sulawesi cotton ikat, Indonesia

We would be fully justified in referring to the cotton *ikat* in Figure 50 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 (Figure 51). 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.<sup>1</sup>



*Figure 51: 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 52).



*Figure 52: Red ochre with inscribed hour-glass figures, Blombos Cave, South Africa*

---

1. See Mark Siegeltuch, “Geometric Art” available on Academia.edu.

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.<sup>1</sup>

## Gender and Kinship

The notion of gender is related to the social structure of tribal societies as expressed in both kinship systems and in art. The genealogical system that Carl Schuster discovered should not be confused with kinship systems, which define the rules of marriage, inheritance, and people's mutual obligations. Kinship systems are generally too complex for graphic representation (even for anthropologists) and must be remembered. Kinship systems vary widely from culture to culture and many have changed substantially over time.<sup>2</sup>

Genealogical patterns are less complex and are basically alike wherever they are found. They enable you to place yourself in the great chain of being and trace your ancestry back to the First Ancestor and forward to you. They also place society within a cosmological framework and help to explain the mysteries of death and rebirth. Despite these differences, there are intriguing points of contact between this graphic depiction of the social and cosmic order and the features of many working kinship systems. Certain features appear basic and appear in both genealogy and kinship.

Discounting modern societies that accord equal weight to the male and female line (called "bilateral" or "cognatic" kinship), many peoples practice "unilinear" kinship. In a unilinear system, the children of a marriage belong to either the father's group ("patrilinear") or the mother's group ("matrilinear"). To maintain a unilinear system, a person must marry outside of his or her group (exogamous marriage). This prevents incest and fosters interdependence between the different kinship groups within the society.

Exogamous marriage requires at least two groups which we can call Moiety A and Moiety B though four or more groups are the norm (Figure 53). In many cultures it is believed that a person comprises the union of his mother and his father. Returning to the imagery of Figure 51 the symbolism become clearer.

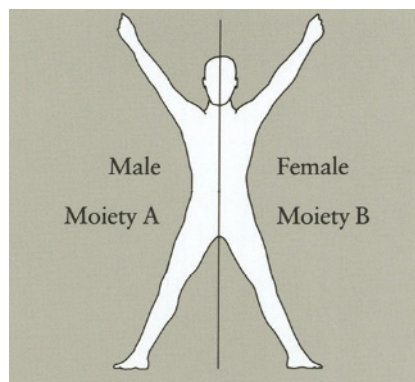


Figure 53: Dual parentage of the individual

The anthropologist, Edmund Carpenter, remarks:

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.
2. Contrary to popular opinion, kinship systems are not always based on biology and can be formed from a variety of relationships. See Marshall Sahlins, *What Kinship Is...And Is Not*. They are remarkably flexible and have adapted to the changing conditions that humans find themselves in.

The significance of [Figure 50] 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.<sup>1</sup>

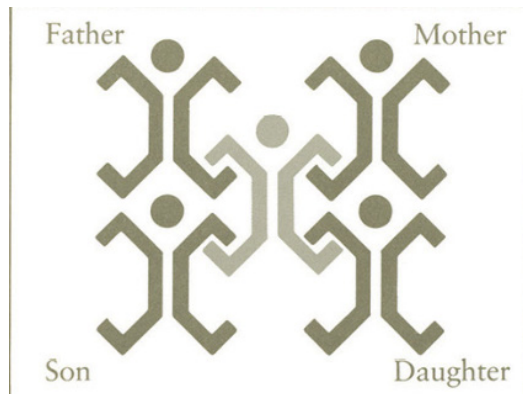


Figure 54: Schematic illustration of genetic relationships depicted in Figure 51.

It is clear that Figure 54 can never serve as a kinship chart but it is a good way to represent the endless continuity of the genetic process. Genealogical patterns can be used in many ways to depict social and cosmic relationships that are more abstract than actual practices and can thus serve as cognitive models or “image schema” as they are termed.

### Split Genealogical Figures

One of the most common genealogical motifs is the split figure, which emphasizes the dual parentage of the individual. A schematic example is shown in Figure 55.

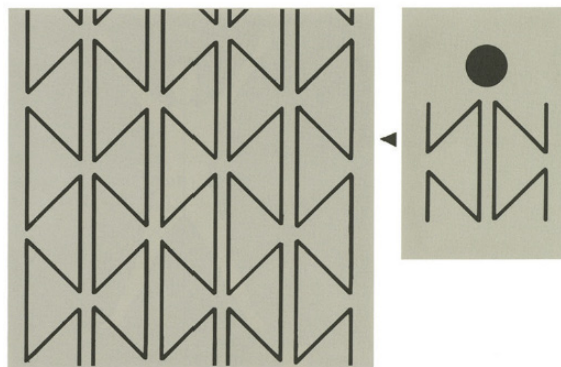
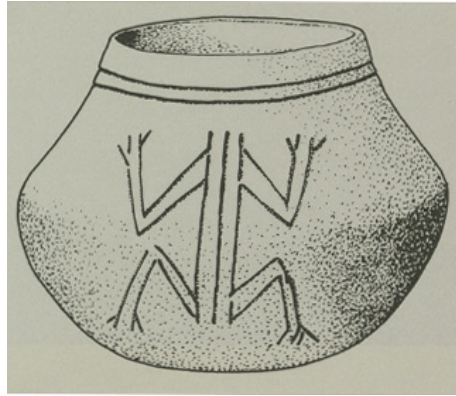


Figure 55: Schematic of a split figure

Examples are so common in ancient tribal art that we must limit our sample to a select few.

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 56: Neolithic pottery vessel, Czech Republic*



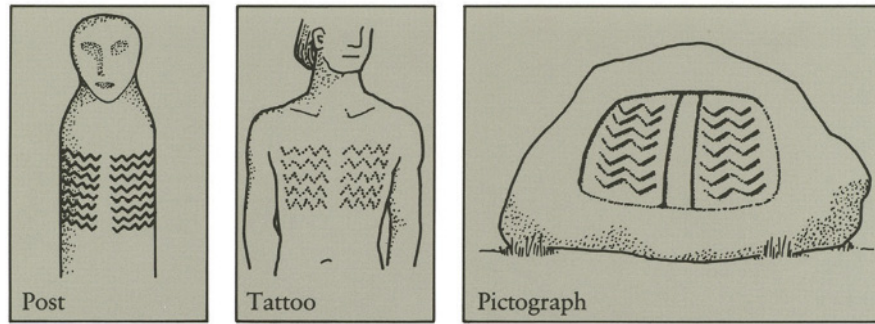
*Figure 57: Petroglyph, New Mexico*



*Figure 58: Engraved motif, Papua, New Guinea*

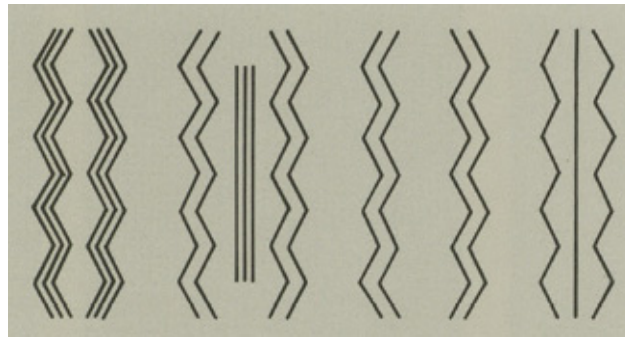
Split patterns were commonly tattooed on bodies, painted on robes, or carved on posts. Here the single head serves as the founder of the clan or tribe whose stacked bodies are split to indicate dual parentage in each generation (Figure 59).





*Figure 59: Descent from a common ancestor*

These M and W patterns are discussed in more detail elsewhere but each row represents a generation.<sup>1</sup> The blank band in the center is often depicted as the spinal column of a First Ancestor (Figure 60). It is easy to see how Adam's rib or side is associated with Eve and how they both descend from God (or the God-head if we wish to be literal).



*Figure 60: Spinal divider between opposing moieties*

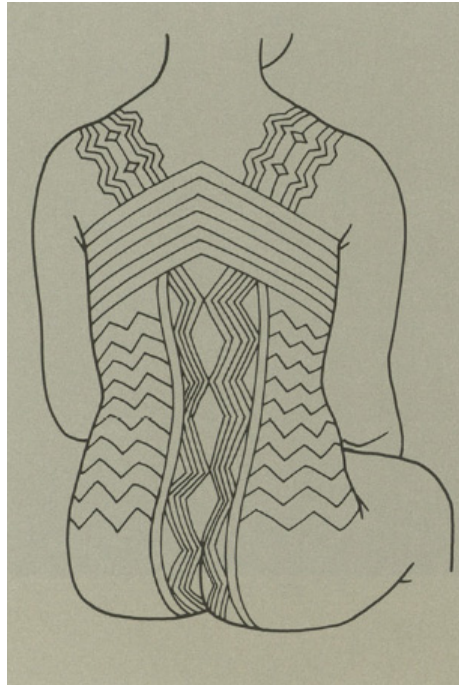
The tattoo of a Tukanoan man from the northwestern Amazon displays his ancestry (Figure 61).



*Figure 61: Tukanoan male, northwestern Amazon, Brazil*

1. See Mark Siegeltuch, "The Water Symbol," available on Academia.edu.

A drawing of a tattooed woman from the New Hebrides emphasizes the separation (identity) or union (marriage) of the two moieties that represent the heritage of the individual (Figure 62).



*Figure 62: Drawing of a tattoo on a Aoba woman, New Hebrides*

The same type of body decoration is shown on a Uitoto man from Peru (Figure 63).



*Figure 63: Painted Uitoto male, northeastern Peru*

Again, on an engraved stone from Patagonia probably meant to represent an ancestor, similar to the *churingas* of the Australian aborigines (Figure 64).

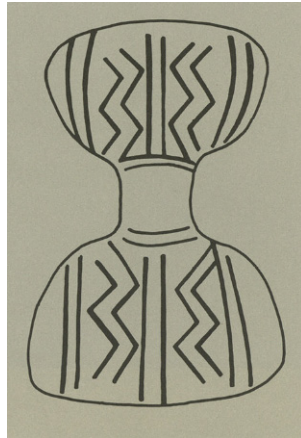


Figure 64: Engraved stone figurine, prehistoric Patagonia

### Split Fur Garments

In 1960, Carl Schuster presented a paper at the Sixth International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences in Paris; four years later releasing an expanded version under the title, “Skin and Fur Mosaics in Prehistoric and Modern Times.”<sup>1</sup> His opening statement is worth quoting in full.

The purpose of this paper is to consider a technique of cutting animal skins into decorative patterns, to identify the special character of the patterns produced by this technique, and to establish their influence in the decorative art of prehistoric times (as preserved to us in pottery and other imperishable materials); also to inquire, at least to some extent, into the historical implications of this technique, such as, for example, the question of the type of culture in which it arose, the closely allied question of its antiquity, and the question whether habits and customs associated with this technique may not underlie much of the symbolism of heraldry.<sup>2</sup>

It was his belief that the genealogical system he uncovered has its origins in the creation of fur garments. Schuster offered an example to support his hypothesis, a robe from the Tehuelche Indians of southern Patagonia, dating from the 19th century (Figure 65). While of no great antiquity, it represented a very archaic method of garment manufacture that had parallels among other hunting peoples.

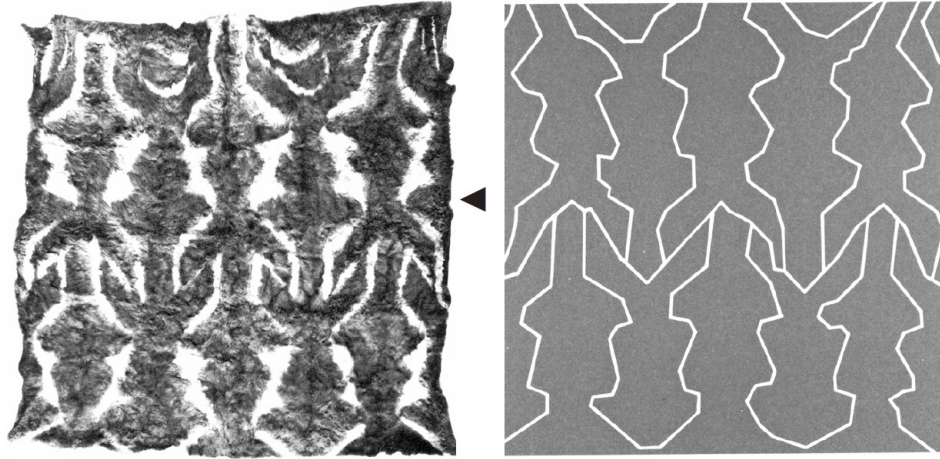
The garment is composed of twelve guanaco skins trimmed in such a way that they fit together in alternately upright and inverted columns of two skins each.<sup>3</sup> In order to achieve a rectangular shape, two of the twelve skins had been split down the middle (along the lines of the animals’ backbones) and the split edges of the resulting halves were faced outward.

---

1. In *Festschrift für Ad. E. Jenson*, Munich, 1964, pp. 559-610. I have summarized his findings in my article “Review of Carl Schuster’s “Skin and Fur Mosaics in Prehistoric and Modern Times” available on Academia.edu.

2. Ibid. p. 559.

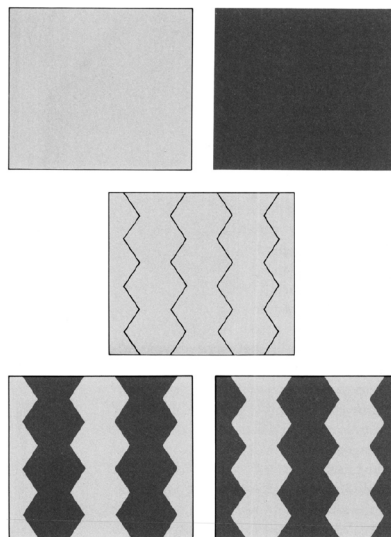
3. The guanaco (*Lama guanicoe*) is a small South American lama, resembling a deer, with a soft, thick, fawn-colored coat.



*Figure 65: Tehuelche robe, Argentina*

Schuster suggested an experiment to his readers to help them understand how such designs were made (Figure 66):

1. Take two rectangular sheets of paper of equal size but different color.
2. Place the lighter over darker.
3. Draw three columns of telescoped triangles and two columns of half-triangles.
4. Cut out the design.
5. Rearrange the colors so they alternate, placing the flat side of the half columns on the outer edge to form a rectangle.



*Figure 66: Method for constructing an interlocking design*

This simple mosaic technique has a long history and is known to many cultures. It produces garments that are both beautiful and economical, for no material is wasted. Further, it permits the construction of a wide variety of compartmented, interlocking patterns that can be sewn together to create larger garments.

The Tehuelche, a nomadic hunting people who survived into the 19th century, had preserved an ancient method of garment manufacture that dated, in all probability, from Paleolithic times. Now we arrive at a matter of singular importance, the similarity of the guanaco skins to human figures.

Although all of the pelts are identical, their lighter-colored underbodies form a pattern corresponding roughly to the seams visible on the skin side. By pure coincidence, each pelt looks like a human figure, and the resulting design resembles the most common & basic of all genealogical patterns: an all-over pattern of alternately upright & inverted figures joined limb-to-limb.<sup>1</sup>

Such a view is certainly within reason considering the importance of game animals in a hunting culture and the role of totemism, that mystical affinity between men and animals. A stone ceremonial axe from northern Patagonia provides further support for this idea (Figure 67).

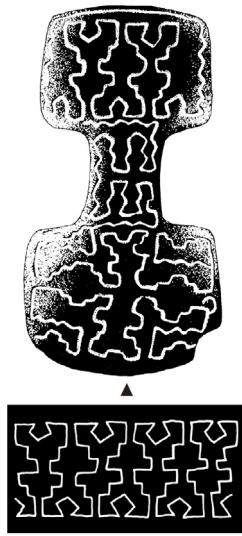


Figure 67: Stone ceremonial axe with detail, Argentina

The design incised on the axe, outlined separately here, is clearly intended to represent a series of interlocked and inverted human figures. It is equally clear that the artist, although working in stone, was familiar with the cutting lines used by seamstresses to produce fur mosaics. Schuster provided a hypothetical reconstruction of the dichromatic skin mosaic that may have served as the model for the incised design.

### The Symbolism of Splitting

How does all of this relate to gender and androgyny? While the splitting of the furs in the Tehuelche robe may have arisen from the need to create a rectangular border, its symbolic character cannot be overlooked, particularly in light of the supporting evidence Schuster was able to gather. In the first place, the Tehuelche not only split the guanaco skins to form the robe, they also *simulated* the splitting on the reverse or skin side of the robe by painting vertical bands through the centers of the two columns of inverted skins (Figure 68). These bands follow the lines of the animals' spinal columns.

---

1. Carl Schuster and Edmund Carpenter, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, bk. 2, p. 304.

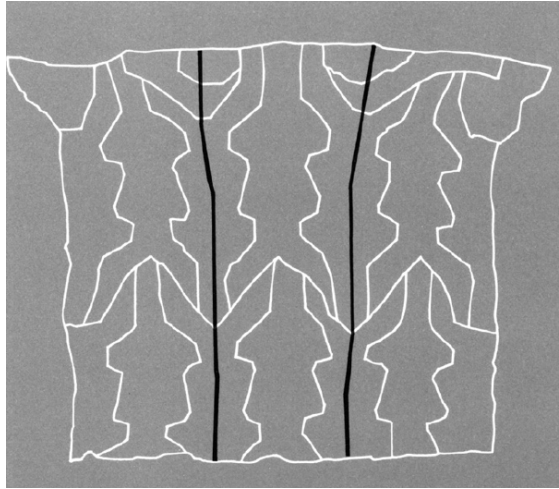


Figure 68: Drawing of the skin side of the Tehuelche robe

The symbolism connected with splitting was not limited to the Tehuelche and it has a genealogical character wherever it is found.

Insight into this symbolism is provided by animal sacrifices among certain modern peoples of East Africa. Jensen found that splitting a sacrificed animal along its spine was explicitly associated with the conception of social alignments within a tribe, or with political truces between tribes, for example, in splitting a sacrificed animal to neutralize the bad effects of real or presumed incest, ie of a contravention of marriage regulations.<sup>1</sup>

Jensen also found examples in the Old Testament of practices that, while not specifically related to marriage, involved the sanctity of a contract binding two parties.

According to Genesis (15:9–10), Abram, following God’s direction, divided a heifer, goat & ram ‘in the midst, and laid each piece one against another.’ That evening after a burning lamp ‘passed between these pieces’ the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying ‘Unto thy seed have I given the land’ (15:17–18). Later He spoke of this ‘covenant which they made before me, when they cut the calf in twain, and passed between the parts thereof.’ (Jeremiah, 34:18).<sup>2</sup>

An analogous example of simulated splitting can be found among the Plains Indians of North America who created robes from the integral hides of large animals, such as bison. One hide equaled one robe.

To prepare a robe like the one pictured here, a woman cut out a long narrow strip from the part that covered the animal’s spinal column to split the hide in two (Figure 69). This strip was too tough to be worn and was used instead to make straps and moccasin soles. The two halves of the hide were then stitched together and the resulting seam was covered with an or ornamental pattern, sometimes painted, sometimes embroidered over with beads or porcupine quills, called a “blanket strip” (Figure 70). The blanket strip might be removed from a robe and hung separately in a teepee. It played a prominent role in marriage ceremonies where it was referred to as a “marriage belt.”

---

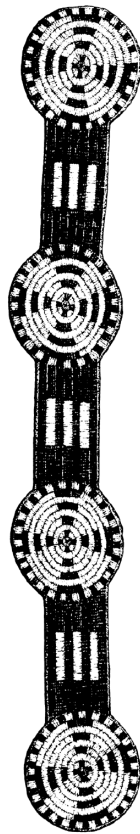
1. Ibid., p. 313. The work cited is Alfred Jensen, “Beziehungen zwischen dem alten Testament und der nilotischen Kultur in Afrika,” in *Culture in History, Essays in Honor of Paul Radin*, pp. 449-466, New York, 1960. The words “diploma” and “diplomat” ultimately derive from a folded (split) document, originally a parchment (skin).

2. Carl Schuster and Edmund Carpenter, op. cit., vol. 2, bk. 2, p. 313.



*Figure 69: Pawnee buffalo robe*

By uniting the two halves of the split robe, blanket strips represented the union of two opposing moieties through marriage. When they were separated from the robe, the symbolism was retained.



*Figure 70: Blanket strip*

Motifs that resemble blanket strips commonly appear as rock art in North America (Figure 71).

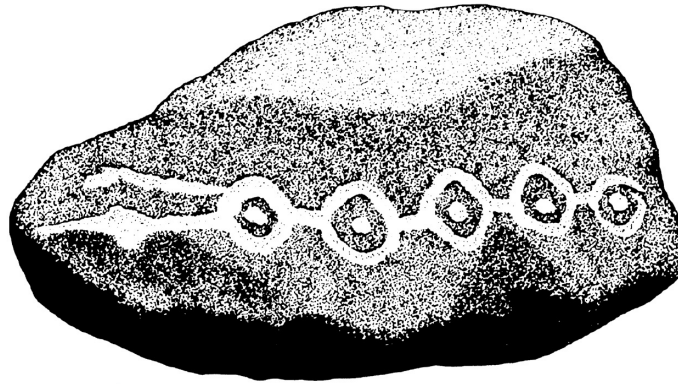


Figure 71: Petroglyph, Nevada

The splitting of some of the skins would then imply, on the symbolical level, a splitting of the social fabric. No matter which came first, the social pattern of the robe, the symbolism is, in any case, as striking as it is natural; and I find it easy to believe that it would have occurred to people who, surely for many millennia in remote prehistoric times, traditionally made and wore such robes.<sup>1</sup>

### Reciprocal Patterns

A question remains: how did the technique of tailoring fur garments come to emphasize each half of the split with a contrasting color? The skin side of the Tehuelche robe is a single color. On the fur side, however, each skin is dark in the center and light around the edges and this may have suggested the dichromatic symbolism common to mosaic garments and the iconographic patterns derived from them. In fact, complementary mosaics were known to the Tehuelche. Samuel Lothrop found one such *quillango* of guanaco skins, which was painted with a reciprocal pattern on the skin side (Figure 72).



Figure 72: Tehuelche Indian wearing a native robe (*quillango*), Argentina

---

1. Schuster, *Festschrift für Ad. E. Jensen*, op. cit., p. 565.



The pattern consists of hourglass figures made in alternating bands: dark bands with white dots opposing light bands with dark dots. The hourglasses are connected at the waists by horizontal bars, meant to represent arms. The fact that the design is painted on the robe rather than being cut from skins and then stitched together is of less importance than the fact that it was applied to the skin side of a fur robe. This particular pattern is so common in tribal art that examples can be found in a wide variety of media, such as this vessel from northern Argentina (A.D. 500) (Figure 73).

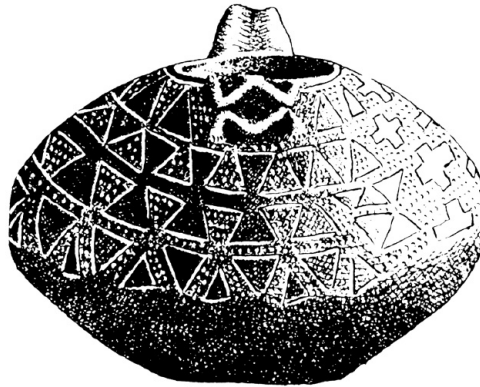


Figure 73: Pottery vessel, Argentina

Schuster supported the historical evidence he had gathered about the antiquity of fur and skin mosaics with modern accounts of traditions surviving among Asiatic peoples such as the Kirghiz of Central Asia, the Tavgi- Samoyeds (Nganasan) of northern Siberia, and the Ugrians of the Ob River Basin (Voguls, Mansi, and Ostyaks or Khanti). These groups were still using mosaic techniques to construct their own clothing from fur, reindeer skin, cloth, and felt. The Russian ethnologist A. A. Popov provided a detailed description of the mosaics made by Samoyed women out of reindeer hide (Figure 74).

Ornaments cut out of hide & cloth with the sharp point of a knife. A piece of hide or cloth of one color is placed on top of a piece of another color, and in order to prevent them from shifting during the cutting, they are tacked together through the middle by a thread, A. The four strips which result from this cutting are then stitched together in such a way that the "teeth" of one strip engage the cutout spaces of the other, B.<sup>1</sup>

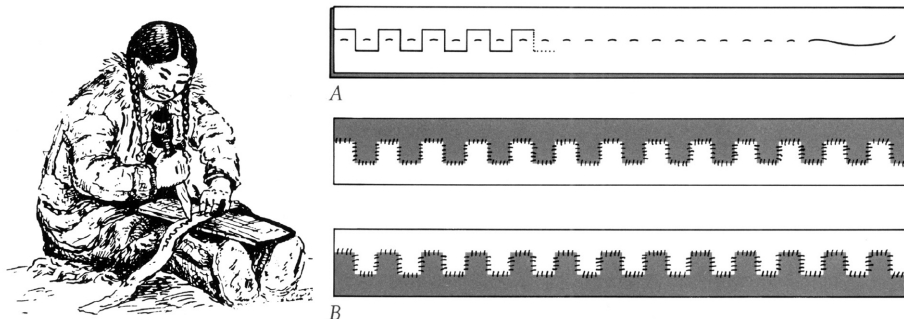


Figure 74: Samoyed woman making fur mosaics, Siberia.

1. Carl Schuster and Edmund Carpenter, op. cit., vol. 2, bk. 2, p. 319.

These dichromatic mosaics may not be composed of interlocking animal skins but many of them exhibit the same anthropomorphic symbolism. A woman's sewing bag from the Voguls of the Ob River Basin is composed of a series of interlocked figures referred to as "heads" or "skulls" by the Vogul (Figure 75).



*Figure 75: Vogul sewing bag with detail, Siberia*

One Obugrian design motif used to construct mosaics is referred to as "half-man" or "man-stump" (Figure 76). This stumpy little fellow is completed by being linked to a partner of the opposite color, surely more than a marriage of convenience.



*Figure 76: Vogul design element, "Half-man"*

Of course, in the context of a dichromatic mosaic, the term "halfman" could also be interpreted in other than purely technological terms. If such mosaics convey, as I have proposed, a significant social symbolism, then each "half-man," even if he appears to be complete is not really so until he is united (or, so to speak, reunited, after being cut out of skin) with his marital partner, in the form of an identical figure of the opposite color.<sup>1</sup>

---

1. Schuster, *Festschrift*, op. cit., p. 597.

Carl Schuster summarized his findings:

All these considerations may be regarded as leading to two conclusions: first, that a whole class of design-patterns, consisting of series of connected human figures, as they occur in many different cultures in all parts of the world, and in all kinds of materials, which I have elsewhere called "genealogical patterns", may very well have evolved originally out of the patterns formed by the interlocking of animal skins in prehistoric garments, and that such patterns might thus be the oldest ever evolved by mankind; secondly, that in the symbolism of skin robes, and more specifically in the device of skin mosaics, which evidently developed long ago from techniques practiced in the making of such robes, we really have a kind of prehistoric or primitive *heraldry* – that is to say a symbolism of marital relationships which, though less elaborate than the medieval European heraldry familiar to us, foreshadows many of its characteristics, and may very well be ancestral to it.<sup>1</sup>

## Androgyny, Gender and the Social Structure

The basic idea of androgyny finds its roots in exogamous marriage in which two groups are united. The individual is believed to contain elements of both parents. The concept of gender is not associated with sex but with the male and female moieties, both of which contain men and women. This is not the only form of gender classification, as we have noted, but it is certainly the most common and may be the oldest. The neuter gender can be assigned to any elements outside of the two moieties (such as spiritual beings).

It is further likely that certain plants and totemic animals are identified with each moiety as is the case with certain Australian aboriginal groups. We also find genealogical patterns superimposed on those of animals in Paleolithic art (Figure 78). Totemism is a large part of heraldry, both paleolithic and medieval. The word "totem" itself is derived from the Proto-Algonquian word for "co-resident" – via the Ojibway *do.de.m* "patrilineal clan".<sup>2</sup>

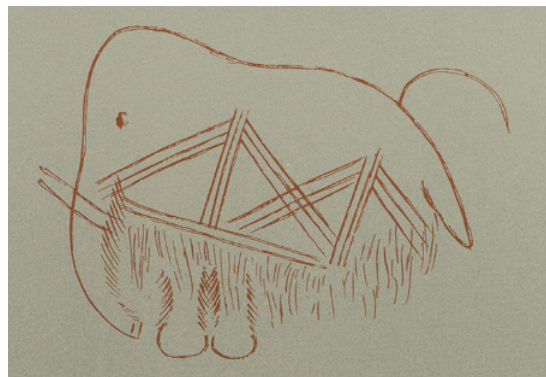


Figure 77: Pictograph of mammoth with motif on body, Dordogne, France

We possess very little knowledge about the early history of language and the origin of the classification system we call gender but social structure is a likely place to start. The evidence from anthropology, generally ignored by linguists, suggests that thought patterns of the kind reflected in gender distinctions are reflected both in art and social organization.

What is more evident is that the concept of androgyny has the same social roots as evidenced by the widespread image of the two-headed figure and the genealogical symbolism of splitting.

---

1. Schuster, *Festschrift*, p. 566.

2. Marshall Sahlins, *What is Kinship*, p. 19.

## From a Social to a Personal Identity

One question remains. How did a social identity become a personal one as expressed in the metaphysical and religious doctrines such as the two souls in man discussed earlier in this paper?

We think of the individual as existing in society but in the tribal world the priorities are reversed, the society exists within the individual. The art of prehistoric man provides testimony to the corporate nature of human identity in early times and persisting in the tribal world until recent times.

Marshall Sahlins discusses the observations of Jorgen Johansen in his classic study of Maori culture:

Yet an even more striking expression of the unity of the person and the group as a whole, the one and many, is what Johansen describes under the heading of the "kinship "I," the first-person pronoun, by current tribal members to refer to the group as a whole, to narrate its collective history, and to recount the feats of ancestors long dead as their own doings—even as they may speak of tribal lands as personal possessions.<sup>1</sup>

Using the first person, a Maori chief relates the history of his tribe as direct experience though he was born long after the events he is describing.

A chief of part of the *Ngatiwhatua* tribe tells an old piece of tribal history as follows: "According to our knowledge the reasons why Ngatiwhatua came to Kaipara was a murder committed by the Ngatikahumateika. This tribe murdered my ancestor, Taureka...My home was Muriwhenua because of this murder. Then I tried to avenge myself and Hokianga's people were defeated and I took possession of the old country."<sup>2</sup>

This helps to explain the ideas of transmigration and rebirth we find in historical periods both in religion and folklore. The "I" that leads many lives is not the individual but the group. In traditional religions it is the Lord who transmigrates and whose presence within us is our Spirit.

Marshall Sahlins also speaks of the "mutuality of being" or "intersubjectivity" found in tribal societies and notes that in Polynesian languages relatives are referred to as parts of one's body.<sup>3</sup> Carl Schuster found an ancient association between the body joints, first in the hands and later in the entire body, with relatives or classes of relatives.

If, as it seems very likely, relationship was first reckoned on the joints of the fingers, the same method of reckoning could have been easily extended or transferred to other joints of the body. It is probably in terms of such an extension of transfer that we must understand the "joint-marks" that are firmly established in the artistic traditions of so many peoples in both hemispheres.<sup>4</sup>

The identification was not merely for mnemonic purposes but reflected a deep sense of corporate identity with one's ancestors. This is reflected most graphically in the amputation of phalanges in mourning for the dead as depicted on cave walls from as early as 25,000 B.C. and still practiced by some peoples in the 20th century.<sup>5</sup> Carl Schuster summarized the reasoning behind these practices as follows:

- 
1. Marshall Sahlins, *What is Kinship*, p. 35, quoting Jorgen Prytz Johansen, *The Maori and His Religion*.
  2. *Ibid.*
  3. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
  4. Carl Schuster, "Genealogical Patterns in the Old and New Worlds," p. 91.
  5. See Mark Siegeltuch, "Handprints and Finger Amputation."

The basic notion seems to be: "For each joint, a relative; for the death of each relative, a joint." In other words, fingers are so closely associated with relatives that they become identified with them and are therefore sacrificed for them. The sacrifice is, as it were, a partial death of the individual, by which he partakes in the death of a close relative,<sup>1</sup>

Culture and art both emphasize the embodiment of the individual within the group.

What is crucial in traditional Ashanti law, moral values, ritual practice, and personal sentiment is the notion that the *abusua* as lineage is "one person," *nipa koro*. This, again, is no metaphor. It is another way of expressing the fact ...that a lineage is of "one blood" *mogya koro*, transmitted matrilineally from a single common ancestress.<sup>2</sup>

This group identity is represented graphically in many ways. Many genealogical patterns depict lineages. Any of the basic units of the system can be stacked in the manner of a totem pole or tree with branches (ramiforms). Each headless body represents a single generation. A head often appears at the top indicating the founder of the lineage or the First Ancestor of the tribe (Figure 78).

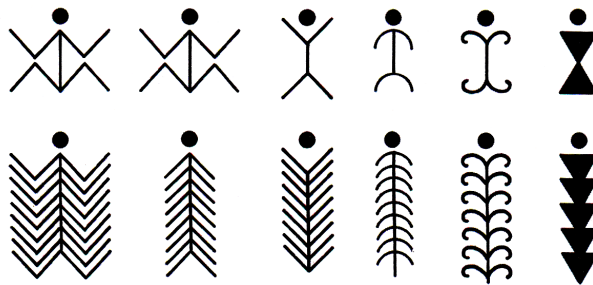


Figure 78: Multiple bodies stacked to indicate generations

These forms are frequently found on cave walls in Paleolithic and Neolithic sites and are generally described as "plant forms" (Figure 79). The term is apt as a metaphor but no realistic depictions of plants exist from these time periods.

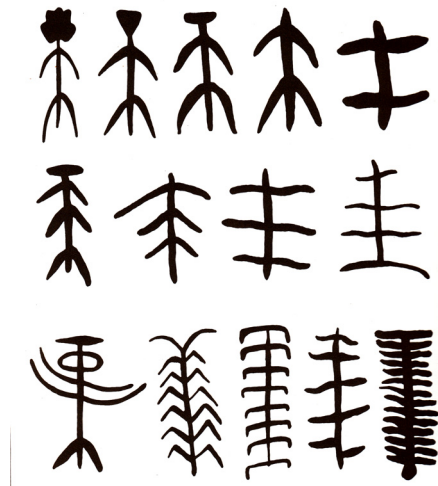


Figure 79: Iberian petroglyphs (Neolithic).

1. Carl Schuster and Edmund Carpenter, *Materials for the Study of Social Symbolism in Ancient and Tribal Art*, vol. 1, bk. 3, p. 753.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 1. He is quoting Meyer Fortes, *Kinship and the Social Order*.

More naturalistic multi-limbed figures are found in many later cultures and time periods (Figure 80).

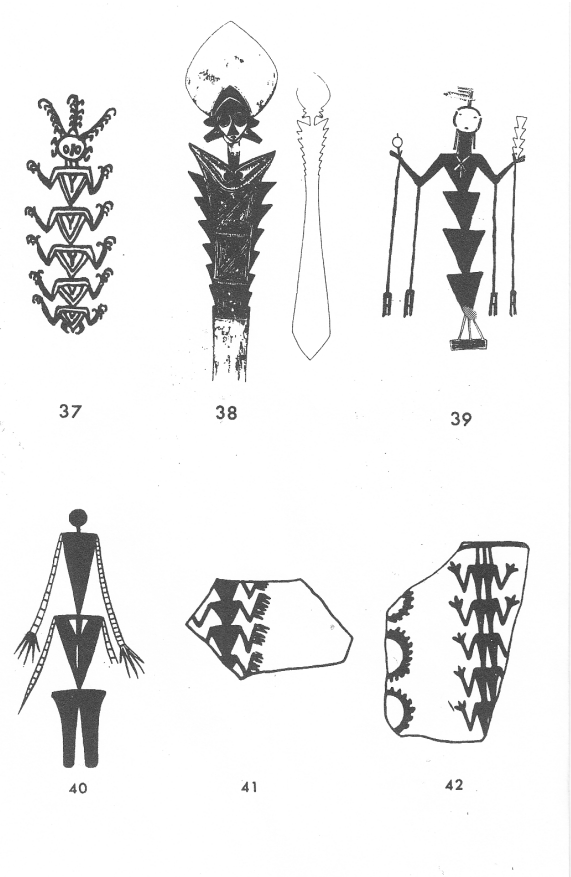


Figure 80: Multi-limbed figures

Number	Description
37	Motif from a bark book of the Bataks, Sumatra.
38	Carved and painted decoration at the end of dance paddle, Solomon Islands.
39	One of four identical "cloud-men," painted in four different colors on buckskin, Navaho.
40	Painted design on a biconical vase, Petreny, Bessarabia (2nd millennium).
41	Painted pottery sherd, Tepe Giyan, Iran (4th millennium BC).
42	Painted pottery sherd, Tepe Moussian, Iran (4th millennium BC).

The same form is used to create mnemonic devices such as notched sticks, used originally to count ancestors (Figure 81).

Another related form is the Heavenly ladder where each rung represents a generation. A person can climb to heaven by moving back in time, generation by generation, finally reaching the First Ancestor at the top.<sup>1</sup> These ladders often serve practical applications, such as Figure 82, a Moi house ladder with breasts, representing a female lineage, that provides access to a raised house. The term "house" itself can refer to a group or clan (e.g., the House of Stuart).

1. See Mark Siegeltuch, "Heavenly Ladders" available on Academia.edu.

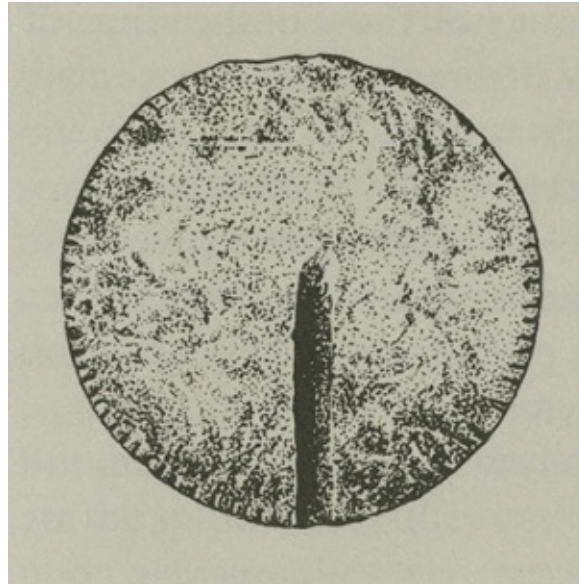


*Figure 81: Kogi man using mnemonic device (Columbia)*

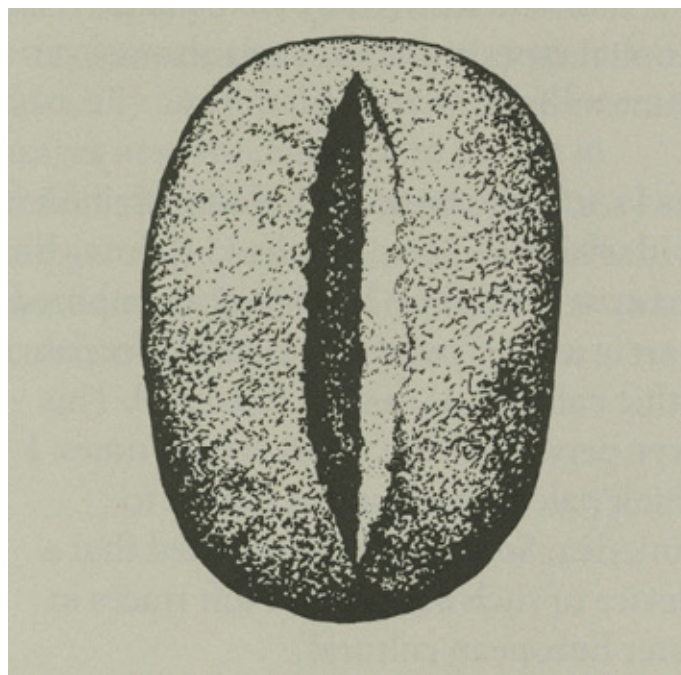


*Figure 82: Moi house with anthropomorphic ladder, Darlac, Vietnam*

Lineages can also be depicted in circular form. Old and New World examples of notched disks are plentiful. Figure 83 is one of several Paleolithic examples found at Brno II and Predmost (East Gravettian cultures, circa 26,000 B.C.). The large groove represents the First Woman and the smaller ones her ancestors. These disks were cached or carried as a source of power and well being by their owners. Similar “vulva stones” existed in Neolithic times and in New Guinea until recently (Figure 84).<sup>1</sup>



*Figure 83: Disk cut from a mammoth molar. Brno II, Moravia, Czech Republic*



*Figure 84: Grooved pebble, Biami, Obeimi, Western District, Papua, New Guinea*

---

1. See Mark Siegeltuch, “The Shameless Woman” available on Academia.edu.



## The Group and the Individual

The anthropologist Edmund Carpenter writes:

Western notions of individualism provide little guidance in understanding tribal concepts of the self. These concepts vary widely in particulars, but often share one basic notion: the supreme expression is reunion with the tribe, its ancestry & Founder. Achieving this goal means divesting oneself of private identify.<sup>1</sup>



*Figure 85: Aborigines examining a churinga, Strangeways Range, near Alice Springs, Australia*

The focus in early and tribal societies is on unity. Individuals are born and die but the One remains as their source and the sink. A person's relationship to the whole is expressed by kinship relations and marriage. Unanimity is achieved by limiting the scope of the individual.

Much curious ethnographic detail support this observation. Many tribesmen, conceal personal names. Asked their identity, they may name their tribe. Certain tribes prohibit facial features on human images. Others limit this prohibition to eyes. Either way, images remain unidentifiable. Various rationales are offered, but the prohibitions themselves are consistent: minimize private identity; maximize tribal identity.<sup>2</sup>

The Wintu of northern California preserved these ideas and attitudes once common among hunter/gatherers. The anthropologist Dorothy Lee:

When I asked Sadie Marsh for her autobiography, she told me a story about her first husband, based on heresy. When I insisted on her own life history, she told me a story which she called "my story". The first three quarters of

---

1. Schuster and Carpenter, bk. 2, vol. 5, p. 1236. Figure 85 from Spencer and Gillen, *The Aranta: A Study of a Stone Age People* (1927).

2. Ibid.

this, approximately, are occupied with the lives of her grandfather, her uncle and her mother before her birth; finally she reaches the point where she was “that which was in my mother’s womb”, and from then on she speaks of herself, also.<sup>1</sup>

She starts with the group and only delimits herself at the end. One more story related by Dorothy Lee helps explain Figure 83, the Brno disk. She is writing about the anthropologist, Raymond Firth, who worked among the Tikopia of the Solomon Islands.

There was one such occasion during a ceremonial cycle, when he saw several women assembled in a house. He asked a friend what the women were doing there, and received the answer: “The Atua Fafine (the chief Goddess) it is she.” For all his efforts, it is impossible for him to make this sound logical and acceptable to people who know that ten women are plural; to people who learn from early childhood that the singular comes first, before the plural; who, when they decline and conjugate start from one and go on to many, who soon learn the one plus one equals two, and later learn to speak of the one and the many, implying the distinction and the hierarchy even when they are questioning it.<sup>2</sup>

### **Religion as Retribalization**

The androgynous figure does represent a kind of marriage in religious, metaphysical and alchemical thought but the idea is not a social one. It is an ontology or more properly, a pneumatology, in which the psychic nature of the individual is represented as two “souls” which are reflexions of the role of humans as mediators between the world of the senses and God. To achieve salvation the lower soul must be subordinated to the higher thus revealing the Divinity within us. In the eastern traditions this is referred to as “non-attachment”.

The social ideas of early humans underwent a transformation in Neolithic times with the emergence of writing and the breakdown of tribalism in certain parts of the world. What is essentially a *social* identity becomes an *individual* one. Writing allowed a measure of detachment which made these older ideas conscious for the first time but which turned them into religious doctrines and practices which came to replace the older unselfconscious tribal values.<sup>3</sup> The religion of the city state could serve as a new form of tribe with more explicit beliefs and written laws.

Most of the ideas and artistic concerns of the world’s major religions have roots in the tribal world but the emphasis has been transferred to the individual who must achieve salvation (rather than rebirth) through the religious teachings. The older idea of rebirth via reconnection to the body of one’s ancestors is abandoned in favor of personal resurrection. Resurrection in God made sense to newly detribalized peoples, one of the reasons that the major religions were successful in converting people from a more ancient way of life. God the Father came to replace the First Ancestor and the religious community (the body of Christ) replaced the social body. The image of the androgyne in later periods reflects these changes.

### **Mark Siegeltuch**

#### **New York City**

**August, 2023**

---

1. Dorothy Lee, *Freedom and Culture*, p. 140.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 81.

3. The same process can be seen in language. All people speak grammatically whether they know it or not but once writing made speech visible, its unseen structure became clear spurring the growth of rhetoric and religious commentary.

# Bibliography

Burckhardt, Titus. *Alchemy*, s Vitae Press, Louisville, Kentucky (2006).

Coomaraswamy, Ananda K. "The Tantric Doctrine of Divine Biunity" in *Coomaraswamy: Selected Papers/His Life and Work*, Vol. 2: Metaphysics, pp. 231-240. Edited by Roger Lipsey. Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press (1977). Bollingen Series, Vol. LXXXIX.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Yaksas: Essays in the Water Cosmology*. Edited by Paul Schroeder. Indira Gandhi Centre for the Arts, New Delhi. Oxford University Press (1993).

\_\_\_\_\_. *Buddha and the Gospel of Buddhism*. Asia Publishing House (1956).

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Origin of the Buddha Image & Elements of Buddhist Iconography*. Fons Vitae, Louisville, Kentucky (2006).

\_\_\_\_\_. *On the Traditional Doctrine of Art*, Golgonooza Press, Ipswich, England (1977).

\_\_\_\_\_. *Guardians of the Sun-Door*, Fons Vitae Press, Louisville, Kentucky (2004).

Graham, Lloyd D. "Gender and gnosis: Making Mary male, making Jesus female." Available on Academia.edu.

Griaule, M. *Conversations with Ogotemmêli*. London, Oxford University Press (1965).

Lakoff, George. *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things*. University of Chicago Press (1987).

Lee, Dorothy. *Freedom and Culture*. Waveland Press, Inc., Prospect Heights, Illinois (1987).

Meeks, Wayne A. "The Image of the Androgyne: Some Uses of a Symbol in Early Christianity." In *History of Religions*, Feb., 1974, Vol. 13, No. 3 (Feb., 1974), pp. 165-208. Published by The University of Chicago Press. Available on JSTOR.

Robertson, Durant W. *A Preface to Chaucer*. Princeton University Press (1962).

Sahlins, Marshall. *What Kinship Is...And Is Not*. University of Chicago Press (2013).

Schaya, Leo. *The Universal Meaning of the Kabbalah*. Sophia Perennis, Hillsdale, N.Y. (2005)

Scholem, Gershom. *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Schocken Books, New York, N.Y. (1946).

Schuster, Carl. "Genealogical Patterns in the Old and New Worlds." *Revista Do Museu Paulista, Nova Série*, vol. X(1956/58), Sao Paulo, Brazil.

Schuster, Carl and Carpenter, Edmund. *Materials for the Study of Social Symbolism in Ancient and Tribal Art*, three vols. New York, Rock Foundation, (1986-1988).

\_\_\_\_\_. *Patterns That Connect*. New York, Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Observations on the Painted Designs of Patagonian Skin Robes." *Essays in Pre-Columbian Art and Archaeology*, Samuel Lothrop, ed. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA., 1961, pp. 421-447.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Skin and Fur Mosaics in Prehistoric and Modern Times," in *Festschrift für Ad. E. Jensen*, Munich, (1964), pp. 559-610.

\_\_\_\_\_. "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.

Siegeltuch, Mark. "Crossed Figures: A prehistoric motif and its relation to later artistic, metaphysical and mathematical ideas." Available on Academia.edu.

\_\_\_\_. "The Symbolism of Horns." Available on Academia.edu.

\_\_\_\_. "The Shameless Woman." Available on Academia.edu.

\_\_\_\_. "Handprints and Finger Amputation." Available on Academia.edu.

Snodgrass, Adrian. *The Symbolism of the Stupa*. Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, New Delhi, India (2007).

Stack Exchange: Biblical Hermeneutics: "Is the translation "rib" for the Hebrew *tsela* in Genesis 2:22 justified?. <https://hermeneutics.stackexchange.com/questions/20122/is-the-translation-rib-for-the-hebrew-%D7%A6%D6%B5%D7%9C%D6%B8%D7%A2-tsela-in-genesis-222-justifie>

Steinberg, Leo. "The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and In Modern Oblivion." October 25 (1983). MIT Press.

Witzel, E. J. Michael. *The Origins of the World's Mythologies*. Oxford University Press (2012).

## Illustration Sources

All the figures in this paper are taken from Carl Schuster and Edmund Carpenter, *Materials for the Study of Social Symbolism in Ancient and Tribal Art*, unless otherwise indicated.