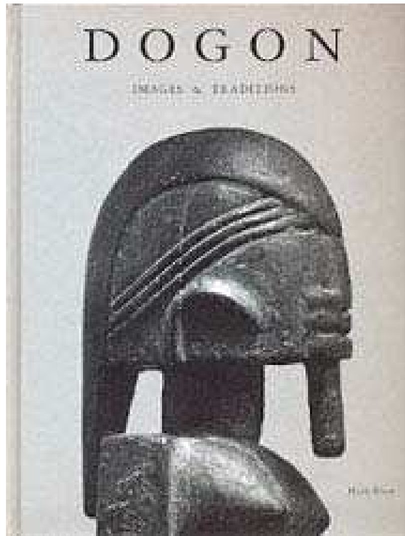

Blom, Huib
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ABSTRACT: This colossal volume combines detailed descriptions of the land, history, people, arts, and rituals of Dogon country, emphasizing the diversity and complexity of that region, and, by extension, of all African and non-Western societies.

When any anthropologist hears the name Dogon, s/he almost certainly thinks first of Marcel Griaule and his iconic *Conversations with Ogotemmelli* on Dogon religion (1965; originally published in 1948 under the title *Dieu d'eau* or God of Water). Griaule's ethnography has been influential, even ground-breaking, not only for introducing the Dogon to the wider intellectual world but for the wonderful portrayal of an integrated and consistent non-Western cosmology and philosophy—*too* integrated and consistent for critics like Wouter van Beek (1991; 2001; 2004) or earlier commentators including Mary Douglas (1967; 1968), Dirk Lettens (1971), and James Clifford (1983). Van Beek's complaint, as expressed in a fairly recent article, is that the coherent and sophisticated (and familiar) nature of Dogon mythology "was too good to be true" (2004: 49), since "all other African societies seem to operate under totally different cultural premises: nowhere else has a comparable set of myths, such an intricate web of associations between myths and institutions, ever been found in West Africa—or

for that matter anywhere else" (2004: 49-50). In a personal communication with me on the occasion of my own reference to Griaule in my textbook on the anthropology of religion, van Beek generously explained to me that the august author has intentionally sought to establish an indigenous African culture with "a philosophy on a par with Greece and India" and had solicited and constructed an unrealistically complete and integrated cosmology. A prime cause of this artificially consistent vision was the fact that Griaule paid his informants and kept returning for more information, so "they borrowed stories from elsewhere, filed ofF the serial numbers and fed it to him," including bits of Judeo-Christian as well as Bobo and Bambara myth. Ultimately, van Beek claimed to me, "In the case of Ogotemelli these elements came out in isolated statements and thoughts, and were reworked heavily by Griaule to make it into a system."

The point of mentioning all of this is not to beat Griaule again but to hail Huib Blom's new book for its explicit avoidance of some of the same classic anthropological errors. On the first page of this massive and impressive "photobook," as Blom calls it in a message he sent to me, he clearly states: "It would be wrong, however, to consider this country as an impregnable fortress inhabited by a homogeneous people living in isolation from the outside world" (p. 11). He even takes Griaule to task himself for having "unwittingly contributed to this simple view" of Dogon as single unified people and culture (although I don't know if van Beek would consider it so unwitting!).

Blom's book—a coffee-table type project of text and photographs—admirably conveys the complexity and grandeur of the cultures and regions generally known as Dogon. The tome consists of five chapters, the first of which, Dogon Country in Ancient Times, introduces the history and archaeology of a territory composed of three distinct geographic zones (plateau, escarpment, and plain) and settled by "successive waves of migrants" (p. 18). Once again he emphasizes that "the idea of a homogeneous and hermetic Dogon culture is false. It emanates as much from external cultural contributions as from an indigenous substrate" (p. 18). Two of these early cultural sources are identified, discussed, and depicted as Toloy and Tellem. After an enlightening analysis, Blom concludes that "the present occupants of the escarpment, plateau, and Seno plain form a heterogeneous population.… Migrations and territorial conquests span many centuries and do not concern the Dogon alone. The encounter between invaders and indigenous communities brought about a cultural and ethnic blending, the extent of which is difficult to evaluate" (p. 38).

The second and dominant section of the book is appropriately titled A Wide Territory, the more than 150 pages of which illustrate, literally, the various regions and peoples of the Dogon culture area. Each zone is shown in its history, art, architecture, language, and demography from Pignari and Bandiagara through Lowel Gueou and multiple settlements of Toro to the Seno plain. The overwhelming detail of the chapter is summed up well near its end, where Blom assesses that centuries of raids, wars, and moves, involving groups such as the Songhay, the Mossi, the Baman, and the Fulani led to the blending or displacing of societies: “This process of territorial dismantling, dislocation, and reconstruction of many villages repeated itself time and again. It was a recurrent situation that came to an end in the 19th century with the French colonization” (p. 207).

Chapter three, Architecture and Religion, provides almost 80 pages of words and images organized around four major cultic functions and their sacred places, including the *Lebe* cult and its house of the hogon or elder, the *Wagem* cult and its house of the patrilineal partriarch, the shamanistic *Binou* cult, and the Society of Masks (discussed more extensively in chapter five). He also includes other important sites such as the mosque, the menstruation hut, and the smithy, where a caste-like group of craftsmen (also made famous by Griaule) do their work. Finally, he names and describes a variety of Dogon altars.

The relatively short fourth chapter focuses on funeral sites and practices, which tend to be conducted in the dry season when there is a lull from agricultural activity. Blom presents in some detail the funeral for a hogon in 1985 and also adds some comments about funerals for women. The final chapter treats masks, for which the Dogon are perhaps best known. Linking the mask traditions to regional mythology and to the common distinction between the village and the bush (the latter being a place of ambivalence and invisible danger), Blom introduces some of the materials used in mask creation and then guides the reader through a presentation on mask types and uses, from the Great Mask (a metres-tall carving), *Satimbe*, *Mamoro*, and *Sirige* to the most recognizable of all, the *Kanaga* style, as well as a few others.

Blom ends with a one-page conclusion that offers a final warning about Griaule’s influence: “The popularization of the works of Marcel Griaule has generated a number of clichés that are hard to erase” (p. 385). However, as this weighty volume ably demonstrates—and as anthropology has come to appreciate and stress—“reality is at once more complex and simple. Any culture is molded by contact with the outside world. Dogon society has always had to

adjust its mode of subsistence to an everchanging world" (p. 385). These facts are perhaps well understood in territories of British colonialism, where 'tribes' were observably moving and blending—and sometimes being invented—before and during British administration. Dogon country, under French authority, is less well known to the Anglophone world, and most of its ethnography is still in French, as this book attests. Interestingly, all of the text is given in English and French on facing pages. And those pages are surrounded by literally hundreds of photographs of landscape, artifacts, buildings, and people. My only complaint—and it seems like a mildly trivial one—is that not one of these photos is in color; all are black and white. While that makes many of the images striking, it still would have been fascinating to see at least some of these images in color. Nevertheless, Blom has accomplished a remarkable achievement in this collection, not just of giving anthropologists and the public a view of the Dogon world but of gently but firmly reminding us that cultural change did not begin in the 1990s or even in the era of colonialism. Non-Western peoples are not 'peoples without history,' and we should always be quite cautious about the things we say and the assumptions we make about them.

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