

# Olmec Religion

by

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The Olmec religion or cult associations provide the best example of Mande: Malinke-Bambara cultural influences among the Olmecs. The best source of information on the Malinke-Bambara religion is **G. Dieterlen (1957) Essai sur le religion Bambara** . Dieterlen makes it clear that the Mande culture was transmitted within the **Komow** : traditional secret society of the Mande.

The two main deities of the Mande were Bemba and Faro. Bemba was the invisible Creator of mankind. Faro, was the visible god who was recognized as androgynous (male-female). The symbol of faro was twins. As a result, in traditional Malinke-Bambara society twins represented the two fold nature of Faro

We learn from the Dieterlen that the first Bambara-Malinke ancestors transformed into Birds and hyenas (Felines). This tradition led to the origin of the two major Mande cult associations **Kuno (Bird)** and **Nama (Feline), gyo/jo 'cult associations**

The Nama (feline) initiatory society was organized to maintain order within society. The members of this **jo** were to insure ceremonial unity and defeat sorcery The leader of the **Nama Jo** , wear mask which combine totems of **komo**, horns and the mask represented immense spiritual power according to **Zahan Dominique (1974), The Bambara** .

The **Komo** was administered by sculptor-smiths. Their role was to guard society from people committing antisocial acts and protect people from malevolent spirits.

The leader of the **Jo** cult association was the **Komo-tigi 'chief of the komo'** . The Komo, teaches initiates 'leadership', self-sufficiency, military prowess and scientific knowledge.

The komo acculturated the Mande children. Thusly the children in the komo were called **tigi-denw: 'children of the tigi'** . The children often served as tigi-tuguw "carriers of the torches'.

The children belonged to the **ntomo or n'domo** . The **ntomo** association was charged with making the initiates "noble".

And understanding of the traditional, pre-Islamic religion of the Malinke-Bambara allows us an intimate understanding of the Olmec religion.

The principal Olmec cult associations was that of the bird and the feline. This religious tradition of the Olmec, passed on to the Maya, are mentioned in the Book of Chumayel, which maintains that the three main cult associations that are suppose to have existed in ancient times were (1) the stone (cutters) cult, (2) the jaguar cult and (3) the bird cult. In lines 4-6 of the Book of Chumayel , we read that "Those with their sign in the bird, those

with their sign in the stone, flat worked stone, those with their sign in the Jaguar-three emblems-".(Brotherston 1979).

The Olmec left testimony to this religious tradition in their art. These documents in stone indicate that the Olmec had to cult associations that of the Bird Mask and that of the Feline Mask. The Book of Chumayel, corresponds to the glyphs depicted on Monument 13 at La Venta .

. On Monument 13, at La Venta a personage in profile, he has a headdress on his head and wears a breechcloth, jewels and sandals, along with four glyphs listed one above the other. The glyphs included the stone, the jaguar, and the bird emblems. Monument 13, at La Venta also has a fourth sign to the left of the personage a foot glyphs. This monument has been described as an altar or a low column.

The foot in Olmec is called "se", this symbol means to "lead or advance toward knowledge, or success". The "se" (foot) sign of the komow (cults) represent the beginning of the Olmec initiates pursuit of knowledge.

The meaning of Monument 13, reading from top to bottom, are a circle kulu/ kaba (the stone), nama (jaguar) and the kuno (bird). The interpretation of this column reading from left to right is "The advance toward success--power--for the initiate is obedience to the stone cutters cult, jaguar cult and the bird cult". The Jaguar mask association dominated the Olmec Gulf region.

In the central and southern Olmec regions we find the bird mask association predominate as typified by the Xoc bas relief of Chiapas, and the Bas Relief No.2, of Chalcatzingo. Another bird mask cult association was located in the state of Guerrero as evidenced by the humano-bird figure of the Stelae from San Miguel Amuco.

The religious orders spoken of in this stela are the Bird and Jaguar cults. These Olmec cults were Nama or the Humano-Jaguar cult; and Kuno or Bird cult. The leader of the Nama cult was called the Nama-tigi (see Nama chief Illustration 7 Stela No.5 Izapa) , or Amatigi (head of the faith). The leader of the Kuno cult was the Kuno-tigi (Kuno chief see Illustration 6 Stela No.5). These cult leaders initiated the Olmec into the mysteries of the cult.

Among the Olmecs this flame signified the luminous character of knowledge. The Kuno priest wears a conical hat(see Illustration No.6). The evidence of the conical hat on the Kuno priest is important evidence of the Manding in ancient America. The conical hat in Meso-America is associated with Amerindian priesthood and as a symbol of political and religious authority . Leo Wiener (1922, v.II: p.321) wrote that:  
"That the kingly and priestly cap of the Magi should have been preserved in America in the identical form, with the identical decoration, and should, besides, have kept the name current for it among the Mandingo [Malinke-Bambara/Manding] people , makes it impossible to admit any other solution than the one that the Mandingoes established the royal offices in Mexico".



Acculturation of children was an important part duty of the Olmec priesthood. As a result we find many examples of children being provided knowledge by the priest.

The Olmec child is very evident in Olmec art. To the Olmec childhood represent the primitive state of mankind, when man was pure and ignorant of nature. Thus the child in Olmec art represents the human being when he left his creator's hands: uncircumcised and androgynous.

Adults respected children very much. This view is supported by the motifs on Altar No.5 of LaVenta. On this monument we see a personage emerging from the stone altar with the glyph **po gbe 'Pure Righteousness'** on his headdress. He is carrying a babe in his arms resting on his lap.

On the other side of the monument we see two personages, each with a different helmet style. These scenes suggest that the Olmec child was to learn wisdom, this is illustrated by the animated conversation between the child and the priest.



On the right-hand side we see a priest and a child again. This time the priest has a snake on his helmet. Instead of carrying the child on his lap in this scene, the child is carried on the personage's side and wearing a jaguar mask. This indicates that once the child completed the initiation he was recognized a individual to be respected capable of giving advise to adults.



These examples from Olmec iconography make it clear that the Olmec religion is exactly the same as the pre-Islamic religion of the Malinke Bambara.

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