Tracing Memory
A Glossary of Graphic Signs and Symbols in African Art and Culture

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CILTADE MISSION STATEMENT

The International Centre for African Language, Literature and Tradition is a non-profit scientific and cultural association which pursues the following objectives:

1. To assist in African development through the dissemination of knowledge and positive experience of African culture in its different forms.

2. To promote the positive and enriching aspects of Africa and its peoples for the benefit of all humanity.

3. To provide cultural and educational information gathered from intensive research such that new avenues for African development will be opened.

4. To put in place the necessary personnel and technical support to ensure not only the dissemination of research results but also, and most significantly, to ensure the integration of this work in Africa’s global development.

5. To function as a repository of African tradition for cultural and linguistic data drawn from primary sources.

This book has been produced as a part of CILTADE’s “Symbols in African Cultures” programme (SYCA).

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Books


Éléments de phonologie et de morphophonologie des langues bantu, éditions Peeters, 1993.


La Beauté des signes. Pistes et clés pour la pratique des symboles, CILTADE publications, Louvain-la-Neuve, 1996.

Articles/Essays on Symbolism


In Preparation

Les Traces du “Grand signe”. Une lecture de symboles initiatiques ohendo (Zaire), in collaboration with Ngonga-ke-Mbembe.

Anthropologie des signes (working title)
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Introduction
A New Perspective on Africa

Quest for knowledge, research
Map of Africa
Genesis of the Project

This Glossary is intended as a contribution to the general understanding of signs and symbols and has its origins in the following three observations:

- The numerous current works on signs and symbols have given little attention to African symbolism.

- In spite of the existence of several outstanding works on the subject which date back over the last fifty years, few examples of African symbolism are cited in publications on symbols in general.

- The “ghetto-ization” of Africanist studies has meant that many positive aspects of African culture have remained unknown to the larger public, thereby reinforcing clichés and depriving much of humanity of this continent’s rich cultural contribution.

This compilation of African graphic symbols attempts to address these issues by providing the reader with an easily accessible means of gauging the creative force of analogy in thought and perception that these symbols manifest. For the peoples who developed and continue to use these sign-symbols, they represent a gift from God to be used as tools to disclose hidden truths. By way of symbols, messages can be sent and received, passed from the visible world to the invisible.

No one can claim a complete understanding of the human capacity for symbolic thought. However, what knowledge we do have permits a more informed reading of these signs, for example, through the study of objects of worship, the medium which best exemplifies their use.

Intended Audience

This book is intended for anyone interested in signs and symbols regardless of their educational or cultural background. It will hopefully contribute to our knowledge and understanding of African religious objects as well as open new avenues of research in the field of African art. Artists themselves, both African and non-African, may in fact find inspiration in the union of beauty and meaning displayed in these signs. In a similar fashion, those working in the fields of semantics and semiology will be able to draw upon the conceptual fields constituted by the signs which speak of a vision of the world unique to these peoples and of the universal principles that this vision binds together in numerous ways. Finally, this work may also help to promote a new way of looking at Africa, its cultures and its spirituality.
Content and Limitations

As the title suggests, this work is a “glossary” in the sense that it is a systematic inventory of graphic signs and symbols classified by concepts and listed in alphabetical order without a great deal of additional commentary. In fact, my original intention was to furnish as much information as I could for each sign, which would inevitably have led to the creation of a more encyclopedic work. I realized rather quickly, however, that the information I had at my disposal was neither of the same nature nor of the same significance for all signs, and that such an approach would result in an unbalanced presentation of data. I therefore decided from the outset to limit myself to an inventory format which, moreover, allowed me to integrate the signs studied by other researchers which are found in this volume.

As a research tool, this format not only lends itself to the definition of symbolic fields for particular cultures and contexts, but it also provides the general public with an “open book” to which further contributions may be made by

Mukishi wa pwo Mask (Chokwe)

Chokwe populations occupy a territory covering parts of Angola, Zaire and Zambia. Mukishi wa pwo, a mask depicting a woman’s face, exalts the beauty of a woman and the blossoming of her femininity. It represents the mythic mother, the woman-spirit — dispenser of beauty and fertility of which she is the source. It is worn by a professional male dancer during certain ritual dances related to fertility. Woman do not use this mask as it is through men that women receive their fertility. The scored circles are Chokwe clan signs which symbolize welcome and integration within a group.
anyone wishing to do so. In this way, the symbolism of the signs can retain its living nature and be enriched by new connotations drawn from new situations.

Resulting from research conducted at CILTADE\textsuperscript{1} or from the work of other researchers, the sign-symbols assembled in this compilation have an essentially initiatory function. They are studied in structured social environments where students are initiated in the deciphering and use of signs according to each student's particular field of activity, e.g. divination, hunting, agriculture, professional activities as well as diverse ritual practices. In this respect, most of the signs possess a certain esoteric character which, without necessarily making them "forbidden" or "secret", are nonetheless involved in an individual's initiation and appropriate education. However, the ability to decipher a Serer symbol, for example, does not automatically follow from membership in this group nor from having simply lived with these people; the knowledge of signs is neither innate nor acquired by mere association, but rather the result of a long and patient apprenticeship.

Finally, the reader should not be surprised to find contradictory meanings listed under one entry. The seeming versatility and ambivalence of certain symbols stem from their lack of context — a sign only conveys its message when used in a very precise manner.

\textit{Phumbu Warrior Mask (Baphende, Zaire)}

One of the masks which play a role in initiation for the Baphende of the Kwango region. The phumbu warrior mask is categorized with the mbuya (sacred masks) which are considered as "the ancestral support of supernatural forces" and as the spirits of the dead returning to the world of the living to take part in the organization of society. The mask features pointed horns evoking the aggressive nature of the warrior whereas the chin is extended by a black goatee, sign of the maturity conferred by age which this function requires. The forehead is marked by the sign called "bearer of light", symbol of fertility and blood (Glossary: F9). The phumbu mask represents the defense of power and the established order (Mudiji, 1989).

\textsuperscript{1} International Centre for African Language, Literature and Tradition
Reproduced Works

This book would probably have never seen the light of day, at least in its present form, without the authorization to reproduce certain works. Many of the signs found in the Glossary come from the work of the following authors: Marcel Griaule and Germaine Dieterlen, *Signes graphiques soudanais* (1951); Geneviève Calame-Griaule, *Ethnologie et langage. La parole chez les Dogon*, (1965, 1987); Germaine Dieterlen and Youssouf Cissé, *Les fondements de la société d’initiation du Komo* (1972); Youssouf Cissé, “Signes graphiques, représentations, concepts et tests relatifs à la personne chez les Malinke et les Bambara du Mali” (1973); Philippe Jespers, “Signes graphiques minyanka” (1979) and *La croyance religieuse des Minyanka du Mali* (1992). Finally, my colleague Ngonga-Ke-Mbembe, with whom I have studied Ohendo initiatory signs, agreed to the inclusion of these signs in the Glossary.

Acknowledgements

I would like to take the opportunity to express my deep gratitude to all the aforementioned authors for the permission to use the results of their work in this volume.

In addition, Geneviève Calame-Griaule and Youssouf Cissé agreed to review the entries pertaining to their work and make any necessary corrections. They also made useful suggestions for the project as a whole. The collaboration of Geneviève Calame-Griaule proved to be even more valuable in that she agreed to describe and comment on the Dogon objects found herein.

Throughout the preparation of this book, I was supported by many other people whose understanding and friendship were evidenced by their concrete actions and sometimes by less conspicuous “signs”.

This book owes its beauty to the talents and care of several artists. The drawings are the work of Axelle and Gaëtan Faïk, the photographs of objects from private collections were taken by Bruno Maiter and those of objects from the collection of the Canadian Museum of Civilization by Richard Garner. The Table of Signs was produced by Chantal Seffer. Eric Tempels meticulously reread the different versions of the manuscript and the final version benefitted from Bruno Maiter’s rigorous critique — their judicious suggestions were an invaluable help.

I would also like to thank David Hamilton for ensuring the English translation of the Glossary and all those who contributed translations, namely, Lusia Chimiechero, Jennifer Nancy Brown, Véronique Bragard, Sue Black, and Jean-Pierre and Isabel Lemaître. Finally, I wish to extend my gratitude to the Canadian Museum of Civilization which, through the interest of Carmelle Bégin, Chief Curator and Jean-François Blanchette, Chief of Publishing, has welcomed this work as part of its Mercury Series.
As a final remark, I would like to point out that this Glossary represents only the beginning of what will undoubtedly be an unending process as long as there are signs to be deciphered and as long as symbolic and conceptual fields remain very much alive and tied to the evolution of thought and to the changing contexts in which signs are used. My sole purpose has been to create a basic reference tool, founded on the work of those who came before me and the research currently being conducted by members of CILTADE in the field of African symbolism, for anyone who may be interested in this subject.
Using the Glossary

The Glossary itself comprises six hundred and fifty graphic signs divided into alphabetically ordered sections. Each section represents a given “symbolic field” and is identified by a keyword:

1. The keywords are printed in bold typeface. They are not numbered.

2. When a keyword conveys a notion covering a wide symbolic field, words designating other realities pertaining to this field follow the keyword immediately, in a type of “sub-concept” entry.

3. The numbered entries provide definitions of the corresponding signs which share (with varying proximity) the core symbolism expressed by each keyword.

4. An arrow [ ] is used to cross-reference an analogy or close association of meaning:
   - between symbols (when placed within a numbered entry)

---

**Abundance**

*Abundance*, increase, development, multiplication.

   *
   *Union.*

   *
   *Both your hands*

   *
   *Water laden with vital forces*

   ➤ CIRCLE ➤ QUANTITY.
• between symbolic fields (when placed at the end of a the numbered entries for a given keyword)

Cross-referenced words are always capitalized.

5. Certain concepts may be represented by several signs.

6. Variations of a sign which are considered in their culture of origin to have the same symbolic value are identified here by the same number, and, if necessary for clarification, by an accompanying capital letter.

7. Certain signs can be analyzed into their component elements which retain the same meaning as they would have as autonomous signs in other circumstances. In this instance, only the principal sign is numbered, with the elements being identified by lower case letters.

8. When the symbolic meanings of a given sign are noted under separate entries, these are cross-referenced accordingly.

9. The names of the signs are given in italics with an asterisk indicating that this designation will be found in its language of origin in the Table of Names. Sometimes a sign does not bear a name per se but rather is identified by the thought or proverb it evokes. It is the latter which is provided here.

(Certain signs have been given designations in French only and hence, do not appear in the Table of Names. In such cases, the name appears at the end of the Glossary entry in italics but without an asterisk. ed.)

**The Table of Signs**

In order to make it easier to consult the Glossary using the signs themselves as the point of reference, the Table of Signs includes a schematic representation of all signs with the letter (referring to the section) and number by which they have been classified.
The Table of Names

Rather than overloading the body of the Glossary, the following information has been appended as a table (from left to right):

1. The Glossary reference number (n.b. The organization of the table reflects the alphabetical order of the Glossary sections.).
2. The known names of the graphic signs in their African language of origin.
3. The name of the language of origin.
4. The designated meaning of the name and/or the expression/proverb associated with the sign.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Language of Origin</th>
<th>Designated Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>dyèè</td>
<td>Bambara</td>
<td>Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>í bólo fla</td>
<td>Bambara</td>
<td>Both your hands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>nyama dyí</td>
<td>Bambara</td>
<td>Water laden with vital forces</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All the entries provided in this table do not necessarily appear in the text of the Glossary. Where one sign is known to have designations in several languages, it was considered preferable to list additional designations only in the Table of Names (once again, to avoid overloading the Glossary). In such a case, an asterisk appears in the body of the Glossary entry directing the reader to the additional information provided in the table.
The Index of Symbolic Fields

The Index lists both keywords and the words constituting the “other realities” subsumed by the key word. These are listed together in alphabetical order with keywords in bold type. The arrow [ ➤ ] cross-references words to their associated keyword.

Absurdity ➤ Disorder, Madness
ABUNDANCE
Accomplishes woman ➤ Initiation
Accomplishment ➤ Initiation
Accord ➤ Agreement, Alliance, Commitment
Active forces (masculine) ➤ Energies
ACTIVITY

Featured Artifacts

Although this is not intended as a book on art, I thought it wise to include illustrations of religious objects as well as objects of everyday use which represent exceptional examples of many of the signs presented in the Glossary.

The objects featured here come from private collections and the collection of the Canadian Museum of Civilization. Those from private collections represent examples of the cultural heritage of the Bushong people from the Kasai region of Zaire. They feature abstract signs and have been chosen solely to illustrate their material use without sociocultural commentary.

The objects belonging to the collection of the Canadian Museum of Civilization are accompanied by a brief commentary which places them in their social context or describes their socio-religious function.

Certain objects provide examples of more complex combinations of signs such as the Dogon objects (pp. 54, 80, 101) analyzed by Geneviève Calame-Griaule.

Unpublished Sources and Bibliography

The unpublished sources referred to here are the research and results of field work done by CILTADE members. This work is kept at the Centre under the title “CILTADE Research and Archives” and catalogued according to the nature of the material:
The analysis of primary source data constitutes a priority for the Centre — there are approximately five hundred graphic signs currently catalogued under “Arts” and “Signs and Symbols” drawn from Central African cultures which remain to be decoded and defined.

The Bibliography encompasses all the work on African signs and symbols of which I am currently aware. It also includes other works on African cultures which struck me as pertinent to the understanding of the workings of symbolism. The reader will undoubtedly notice that these publications are primarily Francophone, which, for several reasons, were the sources most accessible to me. Given that my primary goal here was not the compilation of a bibliography and, moreover, that my principal sources are the results of as-yet-unpublished field work, I make no claim as to the Bibliography’s exhaustiveness. Additional bibliographic information will be made available as my work progresses.

**Terms and Abbreviations Used**

The terminology employed here is the same as that defined in *Symboles graphiques en Afrique noire* (1992):

- A graphic sign is a mark or set of marks considered uniquely for its appearance.

- A graphic symbol or sign-symbol, is a mark or set of marks which refers to a known meaning recognized in its culture of origin.

References to authors are noted in the text of the Glossary itself by abbreviations consisting of the first three letters of the author’s surname (this also applies to hyphenated surnames), followed by the publication date of the work concerned.

[CAL-GRI 1965, p. 88]  
[DIE & CIS 1972, p. 140, No. 20]
Bamun Pipes (Cameroon)

Symbol of rank and honour, Bamun pipes are constructed, generally by men, out of a variety of natural materials including clay, wood, copper, tin and other metals. In addition to their function of maintaining and consolidating friendships and social relationships generally, they also play a role in specific rituals including those related to farming, exorcism and rain, and thus possess an elaborate symbolic value.

As the Bibliography has been arranged alphabetically by author, the reader may easily locate sources by consulting the following list of author abbreviations:

**CILTADE Files**

MFU Mfunyi

**Bibliography (Books and Articles)**

BIT Bittremieux
CAL-GRI Calame-Griaule
CIS Cissé
DIE Dieterlen
FAÏ-NZU Faik-Nzuji
Akua-ba Fertility Dolls (Ashanti, West Africa)

Pregnant women or women who want to have a child carry with them a small *akua-ba* doll to protect their fertility or to become fertile in cases of sterility. Young girls receive a larger version of this doll from their mothers or their older sisters in order to attract both grace and fertility. By playing with their dolls, which they dress, care for and speak to like young girls everywhere, they progressively familiarize themselves with their future role as mothers.