

# Tribal Genealogical Patterns: A Universal Language?

By Kiko Denzer

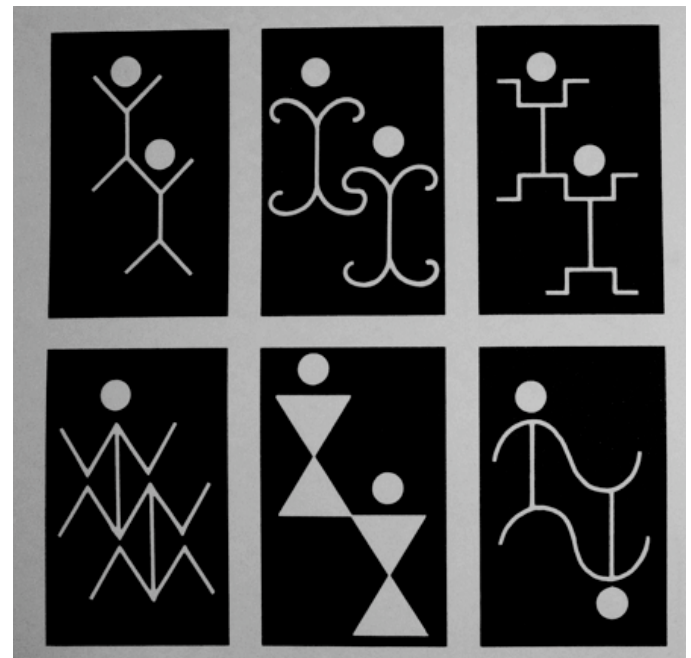
*'the folk has thus preserved, without understanding, the remains of old traditions that go back sometimes to the indeterminably distant past, to which we can only refer as "prehistoric"...' Had the folk beliefs not indeed once been understood, we could not now speak of them as metaphysically intelligible, or explain the accuracy of their formulation.*

— Ananda Coomaraswamy, "The Nature of 'Folklore' & 'Popular Art,'" *Quarterly Journal of the Mythic Society*, 27, Bangalore, 1936.

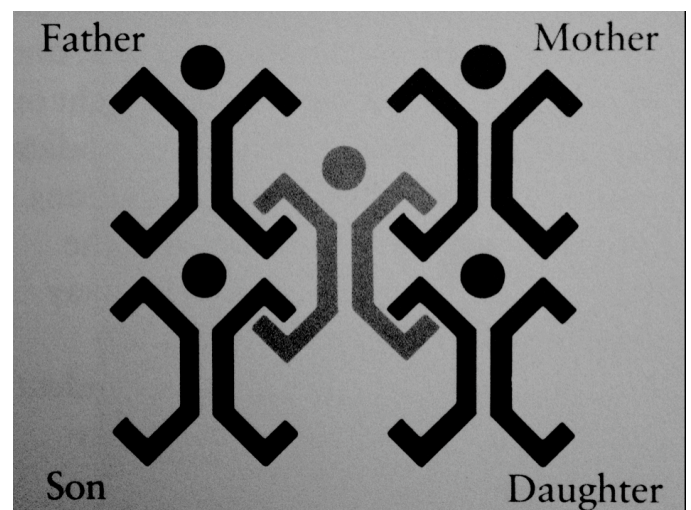
Carl Schuster, a little-known art historian, spent about thirty years of his working life wandering the world, often by foot, talking to traditional (or "primitive") people in remote places, collecting and/or recording the things they made, or that their ancestors had made. What he found was – perhaps – something like a universal language – a sophisticated, complex system of symbols and practices by which people told the story of who we are and where we come from. An aggressive cancer prevented him from putting the whole story down on paper, but some of it was published 20 years later by Edmund Carpenter, in a 12 volume set titled *Materials for the study of Social Symbolism in Ancient & Tribal Art: A Record of Tradition & Continuity*. (Later, it was condensed into a single volume called, simply, *Patterns That Connect*.) This article is based on an initial inquiry into those two texts.

Schuster began by pursuing an interest specifically in Chinese peasant embroidery. This earned him a PhD in art history. As he branched out, geographically and conceptually, he finally collected an enormous record of objects, patterns, and designs, from weaponry to tatoos, to tools, furniture, architecture, and even labyrinths. He was particularly interested in how particular themes and designs seemed to crop up, again and again, in different places, at different times, despite barriers of language, geography, history, and culture.

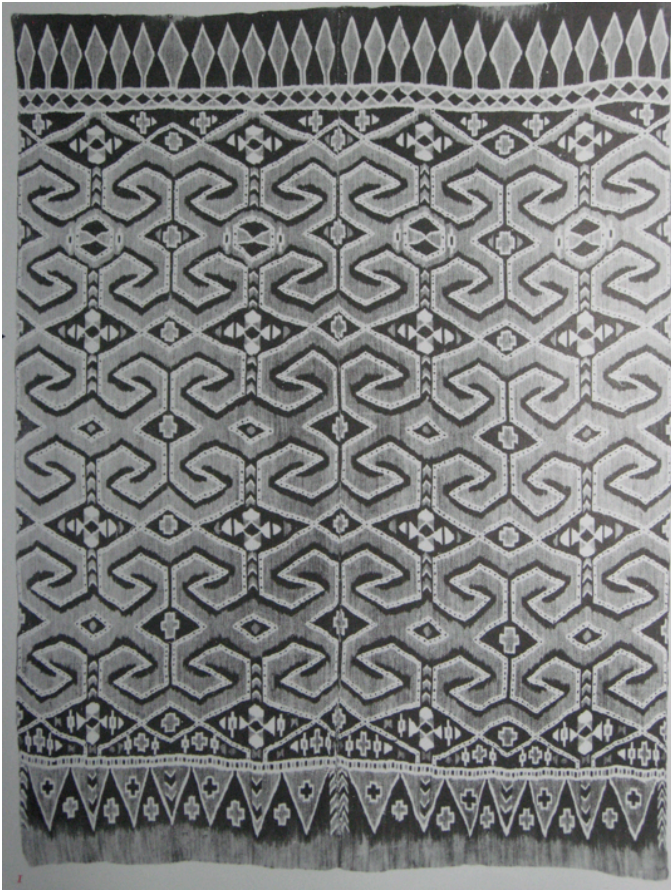
One of the most common patterns he found was based on these symbolic icons that clearly represent individual people, arranged "to depict descent...linked arm-and-leg with diagonally adjacent figures":



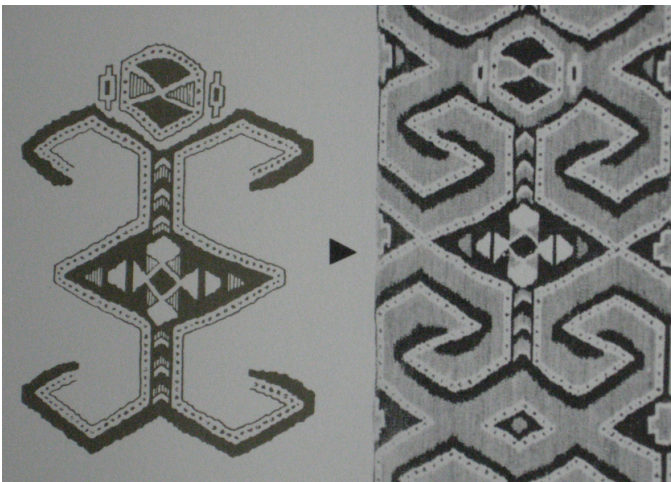
"This is a graphic representation of the puzzle of procreation itself...." (p. 48-49)



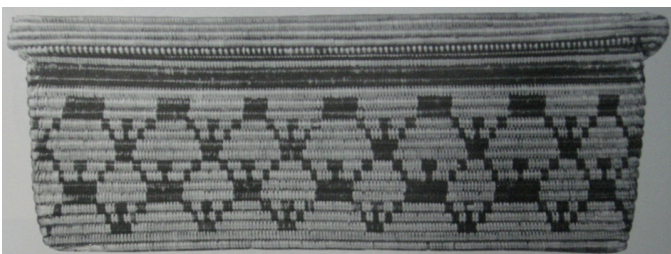
Variations on the same pattern occur all over the world, in textiles, on pottery, in tattoos and body painting, on buildings, etc.



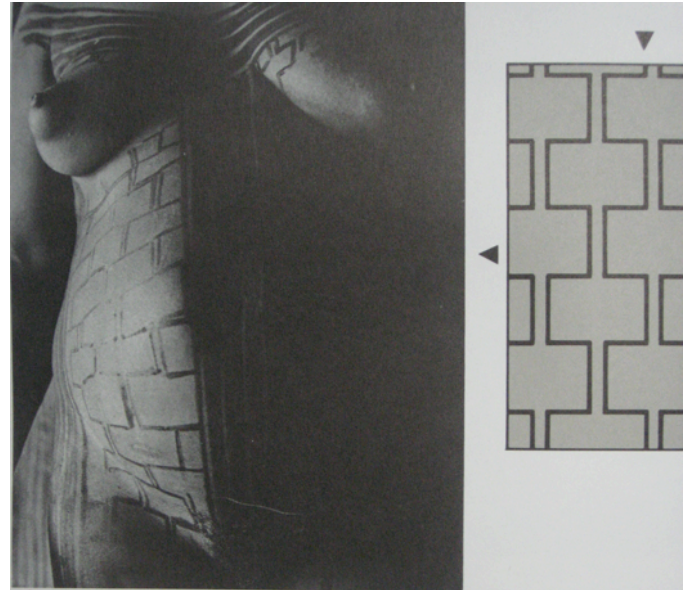
from this Indonesian ikat carpet from the Celebes...



to this California Indian basket:



to the simplified version seen painted here on the body of a Yamai-Cuma Brazilian Indian:



Body decoration suggests an interesting relationship between sophisticated social notions of genealogy and heritage, and the practical arts of survival. Schuster collected examples of primitive "clothing" like this fur quilt, pieced together from many skins of many animals, all of the same species and thus of similar enough size that the skins could be fitted together into a single, useful whole:



Note how the alternating bands of "upside-down" and "right-side-up" skins bear a striking resemblance to the iconographic patterns of the simple stick figures. Note also the similarity between "wearing" a family of foxes and "wearing" a family of your own ancestors, painted directly on your own skin.

The point, here, is not to try and argue that specific artifacts share one particular meaning, but to examine and follow some of the patterns left by our ancestors. Those patterns constitute a set of intelligible tracks that tell something about what we all do, how we move and where we go. Eventually, we all arrive at a meaning, and to me the interesting thing about Schuster's work is how different groups of humans make similar marks and tell similar stories. Sometimes such evidence gets used to argue about where people came from and how (for just one example), they got from the Asian to the American continents. But such questions seem less interesting to me than the evidence of a shared story, common to others of our kind, no matter where we are or where we come from.

Of course, symbols and practices vary from place to place, and such evidence as survives the ravages of time and the vagaries of man can never be "conclusive" in the ways that science demands – but I came across Schuster's evidence while pursuing art, not science. Art, it seems to me, seeks no conclusion, but rather looks for inspiration, motivation, imagination, by which to strengthen and empower both the unique and individual hand of the individual artist, and the whole family of ancestors and progeny.

Art provides at once method for the artist, but also a matrix in which all the unique and varied individual experiences and expressions of individual artists empty into a common pool of meaning. Like the proverbial blind men trying to describe the elephant, each artist must accurately relate her own experience, but no one artist can make sense of the whole without considering the experience and knowledge of all the others.

Culture, then – made by the art of human hands, minds, and hearts – must serve to inspire us all, not only with working knowledge, but also with the imaginative means to grasp the entire elephant. Imagination fills in the inevitable gaps. It helps us see the beauty of a whole sculpture in a small remaining fragment exhibited in a museum. It allows us to imagine a whole reality from partial evidence.

We should probably laugh at the arrogance of calling prehistoric evidence "partial." The word itself suggests the possibility of a whole that we could hardly hope for even if we did have a time machine that could take us back to live among the people whose artifacts we study. Symbols cannot replace culture, and "meaning" separated from practice works about as well as a body drained of blood. Still, just as we can marvel at the beauty of a sunset, or remember a picnic under a favorite tree

when we find its dried leaf tucked into the pages of a book, the work of Carl Schuster offers a doorway into a world that all of us come from, tho few get the opportunity anymore to even imagine it, much less visit, as Carl did.

When he wasn't wandering, he lived in a little cabin in the woods outside of Woodstock, NY, where he sorted, arranged, and organized his evidence, creating a practical index by which anyone could find any individual item quickly and easily (he cross-referenced each one many different ways). He catalogued the entire archive in twenty or thirty languages – and corresponded regularly and extensively with other researchers – in all those languages – to share what he was learning. He regularly heard from and wrote to such notables as Claude Levi-Strauss, Schuyler Cammann, and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, among others. People from various fields sought his advice and expertise because he had examples and visual evidence on many topics. For example, the Kinsey Center sought him out for comment on the possibility of Paleolithic "sexual aberration." His reply described example after example of actual objects, and his comments on how they might or might not answer the inquirer's question. (p. 939)

An aggressive cancer cut short Schuster's career when he was in his 60s. A friend and associate named Edmund Carpenter offered to try and prepare part of his work for publication. Carl "seemed relieved, but doubtful." Carpenter goes on to say that Schuster's doubts "were justified. No one, save Carl, could have finished this work as he wished, and I doubt that he could have done so himself, even with several lifetimes." (MSSSATA, p. 942) Still, Carpenter (himself a notable anthropologist and author who lived with and studied "primitive" peoples from the Arctic to the Tropics) spent a good part of two decades making good on his promise.

It was a task of near-mythical proportions, like Cinderella sorting seeds from cinders, by hand. Schuster's archive, now housed in the Museum für Völkerkunde, in Basel, Switzerland, includes something on the order of 80,000 negatives, a quarter of a million photographic prints, 5,670 bibliographic references, and 18,000 pages of correspondence (typed, single-spaced, with narrow margins – in 30 languages).

Carl had published some articles, but even at the end of his career, he resisted publishing the theories and conclusions that motivated him – he wanted more evidence. Perhaps he also preferred the ongoing and participatory process of collection, consideration, and correspondence to the static, status-generating effects of publication. After all,

when you write something down, the ink and paper and libraries and bibliographies, the academic canon and its guardians all conspire to kill what can only live by repetition, use, and revision.

Carpenter's work, then, like that of any good apprentice, necessarily involved repeating, using, and revising what he found. He started by trying to arrange Carpenter's own published writing into something whole. "The result," he writes, "was redundant, at times contradictory, and revealed little of what lay in the archives." He spent several more years trying to augment and combine Carl's published work with his correspondence, to explain the ideas and theories. The resulting text, he says, "was unreadable." Finally, after years of wading through masses of information and trying to figure out Carl's "final plans" Carpenter discovered the key "in the data themselves. They are, I believe, the same ones Carl discovered, but never recorded. No wonder he left no editing instructions. The only realistic instructions were: study the data." (p. 943)

Finally, 20 years later, Carpenter published a 12 volume book with 7,000 illustrations. It is, necessarily, a fragmented and fragmentary work of imagination, but by condensing Schuster's enormous knowledge and experience, he makes it possible to see a whole that is at once as common as dirt, and as hidden as the clay on which we build the cities of the world. We know the clay is there, but we only see it when we buy it in small bags from the craft store, to give to our kids to play with – or sometimes, when we work in the garden, or take off our shoes and walk in wet mud, with no destination in mind, and no schedule to abide by – and recognize that the same stuff that gives life to plants and worms also gives life to us.

Under any circumstances, it would be difficult and challenging to try and make sense of another man's lifework, much less one who worked in the remotest regions of the globe. On this topic, Carpenter quotes Schuster's mentor, Ananda Coomaraswamy, who wrote that "Perfection is death; when a thing has been altogether fulfilled, when all has been done that was to be done, potentiality altogether reduced to act (krtakrtyah), that is the end: those whom the Gods love die young. This is not what the workman desired for his work, nor the mother for her child." (p 933, from AKC, p. 287-288, Selected Papers, I. Roger Lipsey, ed., Princeton, 1977)

Fortunately, despite Carpenter's impressive and wonderful contribution, the work remains unfinished: we have not yet achieved perfection, nor can we. But we can enter into the conversation;

we can participate. We can marvel. We can celebrate the miracle and beauty of life. Coomaraswamy said that "We must build as did the Gods in the beginning" [as the Indian books express it], and went on to suggest that

*What we require is a rectification of humanity itself and a consequent awareness of the priority of contemplation to action. We are altogether too busy, and have made a vice of industry.* (AKC, "Is Art a Superstition, or a Way of Life?" in *The Essential AKC*, p 162, 170)

Of Carl's interest in the folk symbols he collected, Schuyler Cammann writes that personally, Carl was more interested in meanings, but since they are so susceptible to various and arguable interpretations, he focused professionally, in papers and presentations, on "demonstrating the wide distribution of certain popular symbols, and the interrelationship of various art media, showing how these linked together people and cultures, and had done so from the earliest times." Cammann goes on to say that Carl avoided "discussions of the meanings which interested him so deeply, feeling that it was almost impossible to explain these except to others whose thoughts ran in the same channels."

Clearly, one of the people whose thoughts not only ran in this channel, but also helped to make it more navigable for others, was Coomaraswamy, whom Carl admired and "follow[ed]...in demonstrating that folk symbols constitute a definite form of language, communicating the thoughts of "primitive" peoples of the present, as well as those of their ancestors." (MSSSATA, p. 16)

Quoting René Guénon, AKC says, indeed, that "'the folk has thus preserved, without understanding, the remains of old traditions that go back sometimes to the indeterminably distant past, to which we can only refer as "prehistoric"...' Had the folk beliefs not indeed once been understood, we could not now speak of them as metaphysically intelligible, or explain the accuracy of their formulation." ("The Nature of 'Folklore' & 'Popular Art,'" *Quarterly Journal of the Mythic Society*, 27, Bangalore, 1936. Opening quote in MSSATA)