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TASSILI PAINTINGS: ANCIENT ROOTS OF CURRENT AFRICAN BELIEFS?

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Abstract

The Central Sahara is a huge gallery of prehistoric and historic rock art. The earliest paintings, called round heads for the way in which the human face is represented, belong to groups of dark-skinned populations living in the Algerian Tassili and neighbouring mountains. During a humid period starting at 10,000 BP these hunter-gatherers produced several thousand images which are surprisingly similar to some of modern African elements.

Keywords: Sahara, Tassili, round heads, hunter-gatherers, rituals, ethnography

Round head paintings

Before 10,000 BP the Central Sahara experienced different regional climates. While high altitude regions had significant rainfall causing the creation of lakes, they were surrounded by extremely dry lowlands (Maley, 2004). The onset of a wet climate in the lowlands in the 10th millennium BP, which corresponded with the beginning of the Epipalaeolithic phase, represented an important change in the Central Saharan environment. Thanks to the possibility of



Fig. 1. A stone city on the Tassili Plateau.



Fig. 2. Round head male figures with characteristic attributes: horns, half-moon like objects on shoulders, bows, bracelets, body paintings (Tin Tazarift, Tassili).

human and animal mobility throughout the whole Sahara, new subsistence strategies developed, the sites became much more numerous and grinding equipment appeared.

The archaeological record testifies that the Epipalaeolithic hunters were a complex society with excellent quality of lithic tools and pottery. Several burials were found in the Tassili and in the neighbouring Libyan Acacus; laboratory examinations of cutaneous remains have confirmed dark-skinned individuals (Aumassip, 1980–1; Mori, 2000). Although we do not possess direct dating from the Tassili paintings, several elements indicate that in this revolutionary period also a new rock art style appeared, namely the round head paintings (Soukopova, 2012).

The round head complex is dominated by anthropomorphic figures. However, the male figures are four times more numerous than the female ones and they are also aesthetically different. Males are represented with body paintings, masks, horns and half-moon like objects attached to their shoulders. They are often adorned with bracelets and they are holding short sticks and bows. For the women, their only decoration is body painting. The male attributes are not simple decorative elements but they are functional indicators within the society producing round heads. Symbolism is perceptible in virtually all the painted compositions, representing masks, fantastic creatures, dances and processions.

The landscape in the Tassili is characterized by agglomerations of rock shelters called stone cities. Frequently, one stone city contains abundant paintings, whereas the next site is completely devoid of

any rock art even though it possesses suitable shelters. Sites containing paintings therefore attracted other images which were added to already existing figures. The paintings themselves suggest that painted sites were chosen as sacred places for special occasions, such as rituals or ceremonies, and the images are associated with specific rituals. Thus, the depiction of a certain kind of masks refers inevitably to the ritual they were used in, and they may have been depicted in secret shelters in which these masks were stored. Since the majority of the painted figures are men it is evident that ancient rituals were mostly performed by male members of the hunting society.

The ethnographic record

Comparing the round head rock art with the ethnographic record of sub-Saharan populations we find striking similarities. In many traditional societies the main rituals of the year are performed by men. In numerous rituals female participation is forbidden, and women are not allowed to acquire a deep spiritual knowledge, such as the mythological creation of the world, which is reserved exclusively to men (Griaule, 1965).

A frequent element in the round head art, namely the masks, is equally common in modern African societies. Only selected males may touch secret masks which are used on various occasions, the most frequent being those related to the death and ancestors, and to (especially male) initiations. The Dogon in Mali also undertake the boys' initiation rituals in the shelters used for the storage of masks and after each ritual the paintings already existing on the wall are repainted

(Palau Marti, 1957). In the Tassili, many round head paintings have also been repainted.

Body paintings are largely used in sub-Saharan Africa and they are an important part of the boys' and girls' initiation rituals (Ten Raa, 1969; Lee, 1979). The symbols on the human body are often directed towards the spirits, to ask for protection and to enhance fertility. Also sticks play a role in boys' initiation rituals as they signify wisdom and peace, and the bow is a sign exclusive to post-initiation adult male hunters. In numerous African societies clubs are a phallic symbol representing the sexual maturity of initiated men (Goodman, 1988). Current African religions are all concerned with fertility and growth, often represented by the symbol of horns. Considering the attributes, we can postulate that many of the round head paintings were produced by initiates and they may represent the initiation rituals undertaken in the selected shelters.

Many round head male figures wear a bracelet which in 90% of cases is depicted on the left hand. The ritual and spiritual distinction of the left and right sides is very marked in African societies, where each side is assigned different qualities. The Songhay in Niger believe that evil spirits enter the human body through the left middle finger, and that is why they wear big rings on this finger to protect themselves against the harmful power (Stoller; Olkes, 1987). The representation of bracelets in the paintings may therefore have been addressed to malicious spirits.

A special kind of animal is characteristic of the round heads, namely a fantastic quadruped represented always with the head downwards. Very similar indeterminate animals exist in South African rock art, where they are interpreted as rain animals. They are managed by a special kind of people called rain men or shamans of the rain, who in a trance state catch a rain animal, lead it through the sky to a hill and kill it so that its blood will fall as rain. The animal head is downwards as a sign of oncoming death (Lewis-Williams, 2004). Rain animals depicted on the rock wall testify that rain rituals occurred in these shelters.

Another characteristic element of the round head art are so-called great gods. These large male figures, from around 1.5 m to 4 m high are always depicted in the central part of the wall in a dominant position. With their hands raised and often surrounded by smaller figures apparently in worship, they represent



Fig. 3. A Round head mask representing a stylized mouflon (Aouarnhat, Tassili).

an important figure in spiritual life. Since they are all situated on the Tassili Plateau, they may have belonged only to these most elevated altitudes. Places and natural features are fundamental elements in all African religion and African people all over the continent consider rocks and caves to be the dwelling place of the spirits; spectacular mountains are regarded as sacred and high mountains are believed to be inhabited by God (Mbiti, 1969).

At least one of these figures, the great god of Sefar, has an enigmatic large oval between his legs which has mostly been interpreted by European scholars as a false tail (Muzzolini, 1995). However, if the Masa, a population living today near Lake Chad, could see the figure, they would probably interpret it in a completely different way. The Masa believe in a powerful god called Matna, a feared spirit responsible for death and playing an important role in initiation

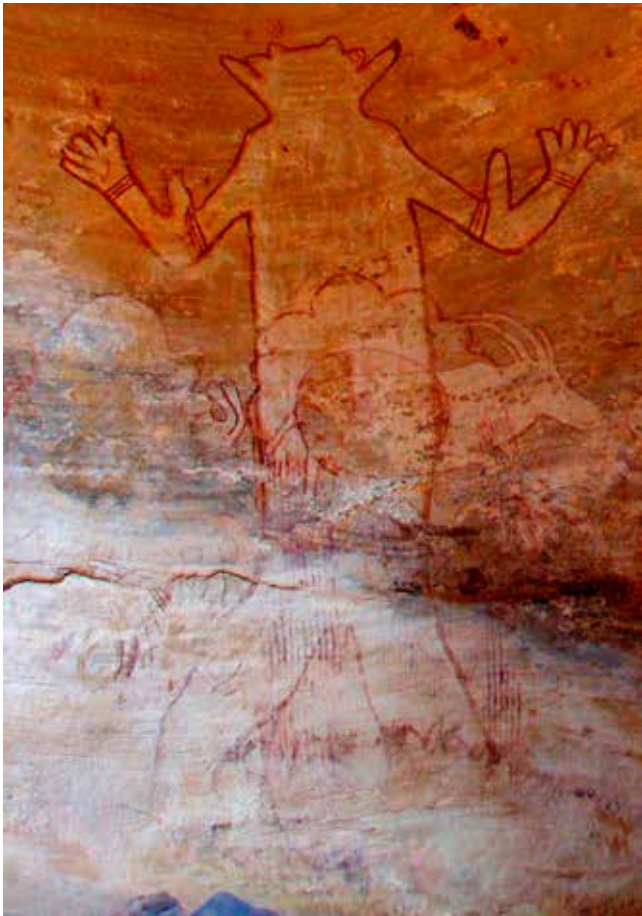


Fig. 4. The Great god of Sefar with raised hands, horns and an enigmatic oval between his legs.

rituals. He usually affects a person in the form of a disease and to assure his favour animal sacrifices must be carried out for him.

The main characteristic of Matna is his enormous scrotum affected by elephantiasis (Melis, 2002). Elephantiasis of the scrotum is a huge swelling of male genital organs caused by a tropical illness which is not rare in humid areas of Africa and it was certainly present during the wet Epipalaeolithic period. Indeed, the big oval between the great god's legs looks exactly like enormous genitalia and such a hypothesis has already been proposed (Soleilhavoup, 2007), but it was rejected by the rationally thinking Western academic community.

Cultural continuity

The onset of desert conditions from around 3,000 BP was the definitive end of the round head art. These hunter-gatherers might have adopted the pastoral economy from their neighbours but some groups of

hunters certainly abandoned the Central Sahara. They migrated towards sub-Saharan Africa as the main rivers were still flowing southwards into the Chad basin.

Today, in the regions south of the Tassili we find impressive affinities between elements represented in round head art and those existing in traditional African culture. One of the main characteristics of African culture in general is its conservatism. Although the economy changes, essential values do not change in time: the primary task of women is still to procreate, then to take care of children and the hearth, while men ensure a good passage of events through rituals. This functional behaviour is deeply rooted in the same prehistoric tradition.

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ROCK ART: WHEN, WHY AND TO WHOM?

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Indian rock art covers a very long period of time. Generally each canvas has been painted by generations of painters superimposing on the earlier paintings, belonging to different stages of subsistence economy, right from the purely hunting gathering stage to the beginning of agriculture and even till modern times. But sometimes all rock art is clubbed together and considered the work of prehistoric men of the stone ages. In view of the very long period of rock art tradition, general statements regarding the entirety of rock art are bound to be misleading. For example, motives, subject matter and style of painting underwent changes with the passage of time on account of changes in the subsistence pattern. The motives of painting during prehistoric times, when man was completely dependent on nature and during the early historic period when he had learnt to tame and modify the natural agencies according to his needs, would not have been the same. It is true of preliterate tribal societies also. A closer study of rock art reveals that the art of each region has its own distinct personality even though the canvas, the pigments and the style of painting remain the same.

In order to study and understand the artistic creations on a canvas it is necessary to study and separate the superimposed figures from the underlying ones. It is only after separating the paintings of each period that we may know the subsistence economy of the painters of different periods. It is a universal truth that nothing comes out of nothing. A painter is a product of the society and environment in which he lives and the impulses that he receives from his perceptions. He paints only such things that make their imprint on his mind. It is essential, therefore, to understand the complete background and environment in which these were produced and to pinpoint who the painters were. In the rock art of central India, especially the Mirzapur region, at least four stages or periods of painting activities have been recognized on the basis of the superposition of