

portrayed they were always accompanied by a man (even a male child would do). A woman's sole activity seems to have been that of a sexual partner, apart from a possible childbirth scene and two images where the woman is engraved quietly beside a man. The High Atlas populations were definitely male-dominated, judging from the human representations in their rock art.

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## LEADING ROLE OF MALE HUNTERS IN CENTRAL SAHARAN PREHISTORIC RITUALS

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### Abstract

The oldest rock paintings of central Sahara, called 'round heads' for the way in which the human head is represented, were produced by dark-skinned hunters during a humid period starting 10,000 years before present. These paintings present apparently nothing from everyday life; the scenes represent rituals, dancing, sophisticated masks and fantastic creatures. Both men and women are depicted. However, men are not only more numerous but they also appear as active protagonists of this extremely elaborate spiritual world.

### **Keywords: hunters, rituals, ethnographic record, Tassili mountains**

The round head paintings are found in a limited area of southern Algeria, southern Libya and northern Niger. They are most numerous in the Algerian Tassili n'Ajjer mountains where rock shelters are particularly abundant. In the Algerian Tadrart and Libyan Tadrart Acacus mountains the round head images are less frequent because of the lack of suitable rock walls, and in the Nigerian Djado mountains they have been so far documented only in a few shelters. Although we still lack reliable direct dating of these paintings, the data from archaeology and climatology applied to the rock art suggest that the earliest paintings were created by the Epipalaeolithic and then Mesolithic populations (Soukopova 2012). Thanks to the abundance of local resources in the Early Holocene, these hunting societies were partially sedentary and they demonstrated a high level of material culture, mainly by the production of sophisticated lithic tools and excellent quality decorated

ceramics, produced as early as the 10th millennium before present (Aumassip 2004).

## **Spiritual world**

The round head art, consisting of thousands of images, is characterized by the lack of everyday life scenes. The majority of human figures are depicted with elaborate body paintings, with particular body attributes and/or they are represented while dancing or in apparently worshipping behaviour. The non-common character of the paintings is confirmed by the representation of various kinds of masks, both associated with human figures and painted as isolated objects, as well as by the depiction of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic fantastic creatures.

Several species of wild animals are represented and they are often associated with the ritual scenes. The most frequent are mouflon and antelope which were the protagonists of these hunters' spiritual world, followed by bovid, elephant and giraffe. However, the dominant position in round head art belongs to humans as they are much more numerous than animals.

Both men and women are represented, showing that this hunting society was basically egalitarian. A deeper analysis of the complex nevertheless reveals that the role of men in the spiritual side of society was more significant. The male figures are four times more numerous than the female ones (Sansoni 1994) and they are also aesthetically different.

Except for the style, the round head art may be recognized by its characteristic elements associated with the anthropomorphic figures, the most frequent being the masks, horns, half-moon like objects attached to shoulders, bracelets, short sticks and bows. These elements were not simple decoration, but were functional objects/symbols with their specific meaning and message.

The most significant information for the analysis of the male-female role in this hunting society is the fact that all the characteristic elements, except for

a few rare examples, are associated exclusively with men. As this rule is followed among thousands of figures, they must have been objects not allowed to be associated with women. The only characteristic element of the round head art which belongs to both sexes and is indeed frequently associated with women is the body painting. There is no distinction between the painted motifs used by males and females, the most common being the decorations made of dotted lines, simple lines and V-shaped lines.

## **Men as ritual leaders**

From the analysis of the round head complex it is evident that although females are numerous and often mixed with male figures on the same panel, their role in spiritual life must have been rather secondary. There are numerous scenes in which males adorned with horns, masks or other ritual attributes are side by side with women with no object or decoration other than body painting.

Each of the characteristic elements communicated an information understandable to the members of the hunting society. We cannot know exactly what information it was but we can hypothesize a possible meaning comparing the rock art with the ethnographic record of sub-Saharan populations. Studies of African religious beliefs and practices show that there are more similarities than differences (Mbiti 1969). Fundamental concepts like god, spirits and magic seem to have been retained when groups of people split in the course of the centuries, the new groups forming tribes recognized today as ethnic and linguistic groupings of African peoples. Similar beliefs found all over Africa are comparable among many peoples and they may be rooted in the same prehistoric tradition.

For example, one of the main characteristic elements, the bow, is not only a functional object of the hunt but it is also a fundamental symbol of initiated males in most hunting societies, such as the San

in South Africa (Lee 1979). Also sticks play a role in boys' initiation rituals as they signify wisdom and peace and in numerous African societies the clubs are a phallic symbol representing the sexual maturity of initiated men (Goodman 1988). The current African religions are all concerned with fertility and growth, often represented by the symbol of horns so frequent in the round head art.

Considering the importance of attributes in round head art and their exclusive association with men, we can postulate that many paintings were produced by initiated males and, especially when without females, they may have been created during or after the initiation rituals undertaken in the selected shelters. Nothing excludes the supposition that groups of females in certain shelters also represent female initiation rituals; however, this could only be presumed from eventual body paintings.

Although it seems to be secondary, the presence of women must have been fundamental in the ancient rituals documented in round head art. Women are not discriminated in the paintings, on the contrary, they are numerous, of the same size as men and frequently depicted next to male figures in apparently ritual behaviour. For example, at Techakelaouen on the Tassili Plateau (Fig. 1), a scene shows a richly decorated man with almost all characteristic attributes such as horns, objects attached to his shoulders, rounded stick and objects attached to his waist and calves, who is followed by a woman with no attributes but a short stick.

Next to the woman there is a much smaller figure also holding a stick, which may be interpreted as a child. The woman is followed by another man with some characteristic attributes and another possible child. Although single figures may have been painted at different moments, the location of a female next to the males with ritual attributes is significant.



1 A male hunter adorned with the characteristic round head elements followed by an undecorated female (Techakelaouen, Tassili).

## Ethnographic record

If we compare ritual behaviour of recent sub-Saharan populations with round head art we find surprising similarities in the role of women. In many groups documented ethnographically men are the main leaders of rituals, whereas women are secondary but still fundamental members of special occasions. In many traditional African societies the most important rituals (such as rain-making, healing and fire rituals) are actively performed by men, while women have the essential task of playing music, singing and/or clapping the hands (Marshall 1969, Palau Marti 1957).

A great number of rituals result in dancing men entering into the state of trance and the important role of women is to take care of individuals in the altered state of consciousness. In this sense women are a kind of assistant without which the rituals could not start and could not be successfully carried out. Perhaps the best example are the San peoples in South Africa (Van der Post 1958). This egalitarian hunting society performs various rituals which follow generally the same pattern, namely women sitting in a circle and making music and men dancing in the middle of the circle around the fire until they join the state of trance. Children, if present in

the group, assist the rituals near to women.

Rituals involving exclusively women also exist, the most important being the first-menstruation initiation ritual during which a girl becomes an adult woman. In this case females are the obvious protagonists of rituals and where the rock art follows the initiation, it is made by the same initiated girls (Zubieta 2006).

It is possible that some round head images also represent exclusively female rituals such as, for example, panels representing rows of women with rich body painting. A famous scene at Tan Zoumaitak represents a group of five women with not only body paintings but also some attributes, namely a stick and oval objects attached to arms (Fig. 2).



2 A group of five women with body decoration (Tan Zoumaitak, Tassili).

Considering that the majority of round head anthropomorphic figures are apparently adult males it is likely that most rock art was produced by male already initiated hunters during special occasions or rituals. Very probably, the paintings themselves were ritual actions or parts of ritual actions conducted by these men. These figures in a dominant position on

## God is male

To support the leading role of males in the spiritual life of the central Saharan hunters is the fact that also the highest supernatural being was a male. There are several figures in round head art which are generally called 'great gods' for their outstanding size up to 4 m high (Fig. 3).

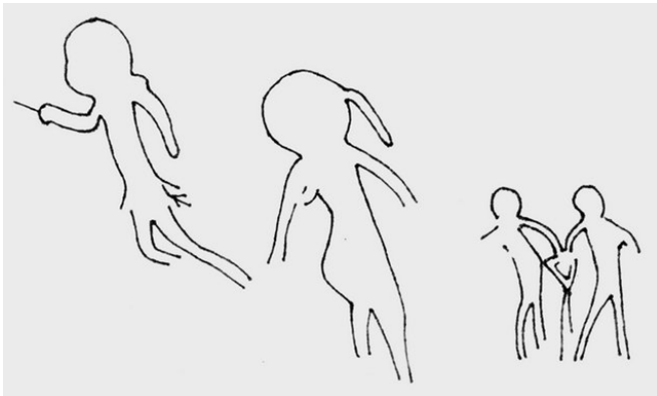


3 A figure of a so-called great god with horns and raised hands (Sefar, Tassili).

the rock wall, with their heads adorned with horns and their hands raised as if they were blessing ancient spectators, must have been an important subject of the prehistoric mythological or spiritual world.

The role of children in the art of the ancient central Saharan hunters seems to be marginal. Only a few scenes depict what can be identified as possible children, mainly for their reduced size among other figures. At Tin Aboteka (Fig. 4) two bigger individuals, a man and a woman, are followed by smaller figures holding an enigmatic triangular object.

The scene was evidently depicted at the same time since all the figures are the same colour and also show the same level of natural erosion; it is therefore possible that the intention of the prehistoric painter was to depict two adults and two children. Women in round head art are not represented with children, which is understandable considering that the main goal of this art was not to depict everyday life.



4 A possible family scene: a man, a woman and two children. Tracing by the author (Tin Aboteka, Tassili).

The predominant position of males and the less marked role of females in round head art must have reflected the social organization of this hunting society. The main role of women in all prehistoric societies was the most important one, namely motherhood. Women had the crucial task of giving birth and assuring thus the continuation of the tribe, they had to take care of the children and give them their early education. Moreover, women had to gather vegetable food and hunt small game (while still looking after children, of course), they had to run the family home and they had to take care of their husbands. A full-time job during which, no wonder, there was no time to waste.

Being charged mostly with the hunt, men could dedicate their remaining time to spiritual activities, including the fabrication of elaborated masks. Indeed, it is perceptible from round head art that the spiritual side of this hunting society was managed

by males who were probably charged with the organization and the performance of the rituals. Except for the secret rituals such as boys' initiations where the presence of women was forbidden, in the public rituals men were helped and assisted by women. This situation emerges from the earliest central Saharan paintings: an extremely elaborate spiritual life in which the leading role of males was supported and integrated by females as their equal partners.

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