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SAHARAN ROCK ART SITES AS PLACES FOR CELEBRATING WATER

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Abstract

The Central Sahara contains hundreds of rock shelters with paintings and engravings from various periods, stretching from prehistory until the recent historical era. Although the earliest rock art originated during a humid period, an intentional connection of numerous sites to water sources is evident. We do not possess a direct ethnographic record related to the ancient Saharan populations, yet thanks to the comparative studies of other African regions as well as to the extraordinary conservatism of African religion we can identify the core of ancient belief systems, being thus able to understand why water was one of the crucial elements in prehistoric rock art.

Keywords: water, religion, Round Head paintings, ethnography, Tassili mountains

Artistic production is extremely old in Africa, starting with simple objects such as engraved ochre pieces from c. 75,000 years old levels at Blombos Cave, Western Cape, South Africa (Henshilwood et al., 2009). In North Africa an Iberomaurusian site, Tamar Hat, revealed one of the oldest datable art objects found in the Sahara, namely an engraved stone in the form of mouflon horns, dated to the 20th millennium BP (Aumassip, 1986). In the Nile valley in Egypt the oldest rock engravings at Qurta representing wild animals date to 16,000–15,000 BP (Huyge, 2009).

The oral tradition belongs to a very ancient cultural heritage of the African continent. Indeed, the first computational methods derived from evolutionary biology have been used to reconstruct phylogenetic

protoforms for some of the African myths, showing that they have probably Palaeolithic roots (Le Quellec, 2015). Myths, stories, songs and ritual formulae have been an inseparable part of life of most African populations no matter their economy. Although African culture shows flexibility in its ability to adapt to newly introduced cultural and material responses, the essence of the belief system remains intact.

Interdisciplinary studies among Darwinian anthropologists, evolutionary psychologists, archaeologists, linguists and geneticists suggest that there was a primary tradition represented in the 'anatomically modern' Homo sapiens that gave rise to the migration probably about 80,000 years ago (Barnard, 2004). This migration would spread early symbolic culture within Africa and out of Africa.

Contrary to the widespread general conviction that all things must inevitably change in time and space, I argue that certain ideas or traditions were deliberately preserved through millennia. What if something was so important or even fundamental for the life/death issue that it had to be protected in its original form, fearing that otherwise events would go wrong? The preservation in time and space may be especially true for those notions regarding the very basic elements of life which water undoubtedly is, so that the mythology, rituals or any religious behaviour involving water might have been transmitted from generation to generation in their possibly unaltered form. To understand the rock art it is necessary to begin from its religious origin. This is much easier for regions in which the ethnographic record is available, such as South Africa. But can we find religious origins of the Central Saharan rock art, the region which is today almost completely empty and with almost no local ethnographic record? The answer is: yes, we can approach the reconstruction of the original tradition using comparative studies of the neighbouring regions. There is no domain in which man is so conservative as in that of religion (Janh, 1961). Thanks to the extraordinary conservatism of African culture we can identify the core of the ancient belief

system, which is still perceptible in the art.

Divine water

Water has always been of fundamental importance for African populations. Long before the onset of agriculture with the constant need of water for cultivation, prehistoric hunters were fully dependent on the availability of water. Dry seasons represented forced movements away from their base-camps and these long journeys often signified death for the weakest members of the group.

The essential role of water left a deep trace in the belief system of prehistoric societies and to water was assigned the first place in many myths concerning the creation of the world. In ancient Egypt, for example, all creation myths held that the world arose out of the lifeless waters of chaos, called Nu. The god Nu and his female counterpart Naunet represented the inert primordial water itself and they were symbolically depicted as aquatic creatures because they dwelt within water (Hart, 2004).

A very similar ideology is documented in the ethnographic record of the Dogon people in Mali, proving that the core notion that God is water persisted in the Saharan region for several millennia. In the Dogon cosmology God had intercourse with his earth-wife and water, which is the divine seed, entered the womb of the earth, which resulted in the birth of twin spirits called Nummo. God created them like water; they were half human beings and half serpents. These spirits were of the essence of God, since they were made of his seed, which is the substance of the life-force of the world. This force is water, and the divine twins are present in all water: they are water (Griaule, 1965).

In virtually every region in Africa gods and water spirits are believed to inhabit lakes, rivers, waterfalls and water-fed caves. In southern Zambia it is believed that many people, especially chiefs and culture heroes, enter water after death and become water spirits, thus associating water with ancestors or the

spirits of the dead (Smith and Dale, 1920). For San people underwater is a metaphor for death and it was through a waterhole that the great God climbed when he first came on earth (Solomon, 1992).

Rock art and water

Most of the earliest Central Saharan rock paintings are concentrated in southern Algeria, namely in the Tassili n'Ajjer mountains. These paintings called the Round Heads were created by dark-skinned hunters during a humid period starting at 10,000 BP. Many of the painted rock shelters chosen by hunters were from 7,500 BP used also by newly arrived pastoral populations who added their images next to those produced by hunters. In several cases, these shelters were later utilized by painters of the Horse and Camel periods starting at about 2,800 BP, when the climate was already dry (Soukopova, 2012).

Similarly to South Africa in the Central Sahara, also there are many more shelters without painting than with it, which means that the rock art sites were selected. A great variety of depicted subjects suggests that multiple activities occurred in the same sites, and the function of sites is likely to have changed in time. However, there are numerous cases where the rock art is clearly related to water sources and in such places water could have been the main protagonist for many centuries.

Often painted figures are located under an ancient waterfall (Fig. 1). Although the rock wall is large enough and the paintings could have been distributed in protected spaces, prehistoric painters intentionally placed human or animal figures at those points where water fell during rain. The importance of the place with its connection to rain water seems to have been primary, the painting activity being the result of this importance.

In traditional African culture rain is always sent by God (Mbiti, 1969). Rain water is therefore divine water which must be treated with due respect; water as an embodiment of God or spirits may be invoked or

used for important social purposes. The water is also the water of birth (Griaule, 1965) and indeed, sacred lakes in South Africa are believed to be inhabited by the spirit of the lake who answers the prayers of barren women (Doke, 1975).

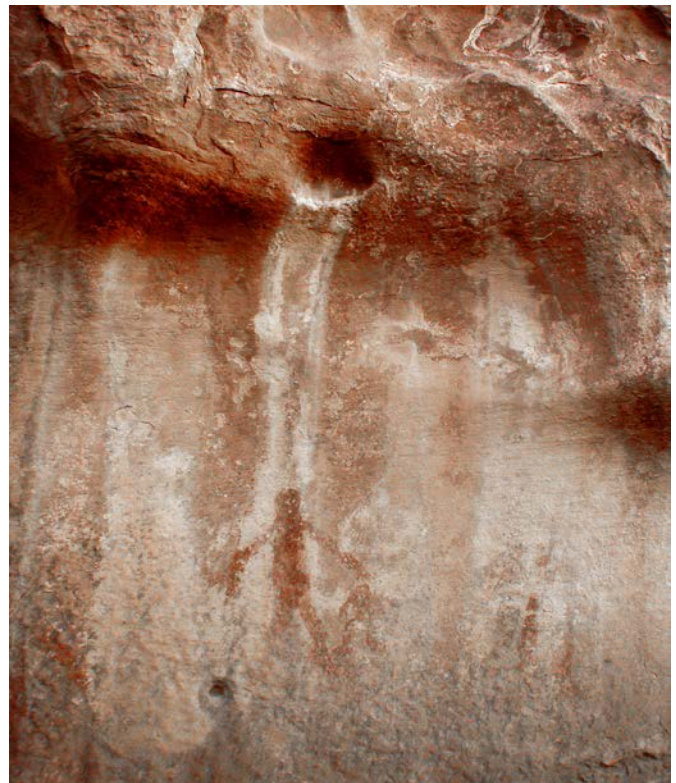


Fig. 1 A Round Head male and a probable child next to him were intentionally painted under an ancient waterfall passing over a natural kettle above the figures (Tahadaft, Tassili).

Rock sites of the South African Sandawe people are places controlling a defined area in which boundaries are marked by ritual activity (Lim, 1996). These sites are attended to only to attract rain, which means that no sacrifice occurs during years of sufficient rainfall. Thus, sites are repeatedly visited when necessary. A similar pattern may have occurred in those Central Saharan rock art sites in which there are depicted possible rain animals, namely fantastic down-headed quadrupeds which look very like the rain animals of San rock art (Lewis-Williams, 2004; Soukopova, 2011). If so, in these sites the painting was a by-product of rain rituals.

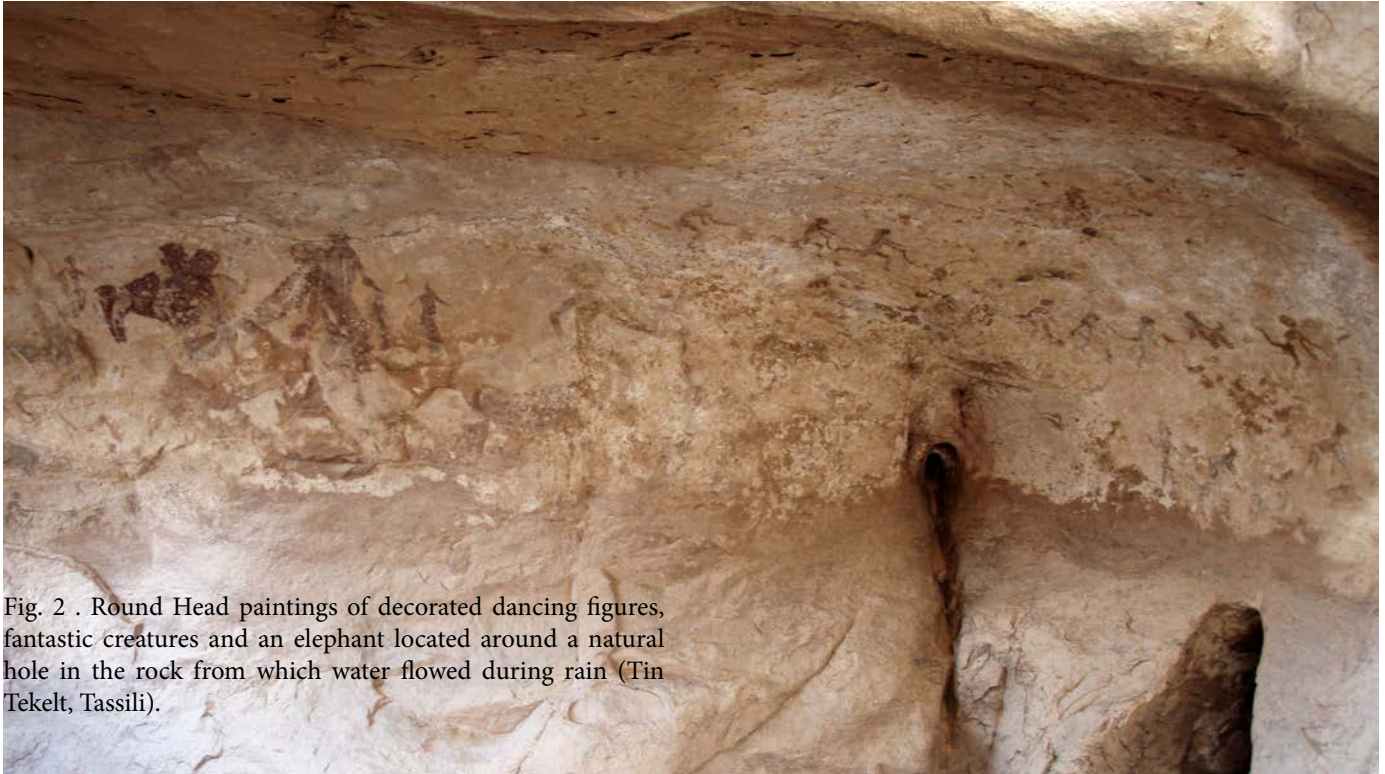


Fig. 2 . Round Head paintings of decorated dancing figures, fantastic creatures and an elephant located around a natural hole in the rock from which water flowed during rain (Tin Tekelt, Tassili).

According to the Dogon belief system breath as a vapour is a form of water, which is the principle of life. Breath is the clouds and the blood is the rain that falls on the world (Griaule, 1965). This notion is also perceptible in rock art. In many parts of Africa spraying water from the mouth on ritual objects or animals is an act of reconciliation between humans and supernatural entities, such as spirits, ancestors or witches (Mair, 1969). One of the oldest forms of rock art, namely hand stencils, may represent this belief. Spraying coloured water on the sacred rock surface and leaving in this way a personal handprint may, at least in some cases, have signified the act of a direct communication between a person and the spirits of the place. The Dogon belief that blood is the rain that falls on the world is surprisingly similar to the belief of San peoples in South Africa. According to them the blood of the rain animal, caught and killed by a rain man on a hill, falls down on the world as rain (Lewis-Williams, 2004). Since the same

belief is associated with different ethnic groups separated geographically by thousands of kilometres, I suggest that in this case also we are dealing with a very ancient notion which was possibly spread over the African continent in prehistoric times.

Continuity of ritual places

Since the earliest Saharan rock paintings originated during a humid period, virtually all rock art sites were near to a water source and many of them are located on riverbeds, facing directly ancient streams. However, there are many cases of rock sites in which a further and more close contact with water was established. One of the best examples is the site of Tin Tekelt on the Tassili plateau which has been used for ritual purposes from prehistory until modern days. In the main shelter of this site the Round Head paintings are located around a natural cavity in the rock wall from which water flowed during rain (Fig. 2). The scene represents decorated dancing people,



Fig. 3 A shallow kettle carved on an inclined surface of a boulder under an ancient waterfall (Tin Tekelt, Tassili).

Fig. 4 A double arrow indicates the 'child's foot', a place on the rock wall where the Touaregs pour milk and oil as a sacrifice in order to attract rain (Tin Tekelt, Tassili).

fantastic creatures and also an elephant, an animal which needs to drink around 100 litres of water every day and perhaps for this reason the elephant is one of the San's rain animals (Solomon, 1992). Not far from this scene another point celebrating water was created. Under an ancient waterfall a very shallow kettle was carved on an inclined surface of a boulder, so that during the rain water washed this small depression (Fig. 3).

A proof of an extraordinary continuity of the site as a place connected to rain water is the fact that it has been used for ritual purposes until recently. In a nearby shelter there is a small rectangular cavity in the rock surface which the modern Touaregs call the



'child's foot'. According to their belief, in very ancient immemorial times a child impressed his little foot into the rock and since then the shelter became a kind of sanctuary. For generations, in extremely dry years the Touaregs visit the shelter and they pour milk and oil on the 'foot' as a sacrifice in order to attract rain (Fig. 4).

This site, chosen as a place of ritual by the Early Holocene hunters, was later frequented by pastoral people, as attested by their paintings, and it was still known as a ritual place millennia later. Although the economy, culture and ethnic groups changed, some Central Saharan sites evidently conserved their special status for many generations. Considering all the notions that water implies (God, spirits, fertility, ancestors, etc), the function of rock art sites connected to water could have been multiple and much more complex.

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