

PENIS ONLY FOR GODS? SEXUAL IMAGERY IN THE EARLIEST CENTRAL SAHARAN ROCK ART

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Abstract

Sexual imagery in the earliest Central Saharan rock art is extremely rare. Except for a few scenes of a probable sexual intercourse, the art focused on rituals, masked figures, body decoration and representation of wild animals. Only in the oldest phase of the art, the engraved and painted male figures are abundantly depicted with penis. This feature disappeared completely in the later stages of the art, where the penis became a prerogative of privileged individuals.

Keywords: Epipalaeolithic, Mesolithic, scrotal elephantiasis, Round Heads, Kel Essuf.

The earliest rock art in the Central Sahara originated during a humid period started at 10,000 BP. It was produced by Epipalaeolithic and Mesolithic dark-skinned hunter-gatherers who inhabited the Tassili and the Tadrart mountains in Algeria, the Acacus in Libya and the Djado mountains in Niger. Their art can be divided into two groups, namely the Round Head paintings and the Kel Essuf engravings. Although these two groups seem to be quite different at the first sight, the comparative study suggests that they have the same origin (Hallier & Hallier 1999, Striedter et al. 2002-3, Soukopova 2012).

1. Kel Essuf engravings, Algerian Tadrart.



Engravings versus paintings

The Kel Essuf are stylized anthropomorphic figures between 12 – 60 cm high, executed by carving or by very fine pecking (Fig 1). They consist of an oval body with four very short appendages, two lateral and two at the bottom, representing arms and legs. Sometimes their limbs present three or four fingers.

The Round Head paintings are also dominated by anthropomorphic figures which is the first similarity with the Kel Essuf. Furthermore, they are present in the same sites and often in the same rock shelters. In several cases the engravings are covered by the paintings, indicating the older age of the Kel Essuf (Striedter et al. 2002-3, Soukopova 2012).

The majority of the Round Head paintings are



2. Presumably early Round Head style: two figures with a huge penis, Algerian Tadrart (photo by B. Fouilleux). Photo elaborated with DStretch.

elaborated human figures up to 3 m tall, with rich body decoration, wearing masks, enigmatic objects and represented in movement such as dancing (Sansoni 1994). This evolved phase of the paintings seems to be so different from the Kel Essuf engravings, however, if we consider the presumed early forms of the Round Heads, they are surprisingly similar to the engravings.

Men without phallus

The main characteristic of the Kel Essuf figures is their extreme simplicity. Prehistoric hunters did not care about the details and all the figures were executed following apparently the same fixed convention: no face, hair or attributes, except, in some cases, the bow, horns and half moon-like objects. Unexpectedly, in such an austere shape the male genitalia were given an excessive attention. The majority of figures, indeed, present an exaggeratedly long or large penis between the short legs.

The presumed early forms of the Round Head paintings also present a big phallus (Fig 2).

Surprisingly, this principal feature of male figures disappears completely with the evolving of the paintings. The fact that the later Round Head males never present the penis suggests that its representation became a kind of taboo (Fig 3). Yet, this taboo applied only to the ordinary hunters. There is a special category of men called Great Gods, which are figures with raised hands and sometimes horns, depicted in a dominant position on the rock wall. Only these enigmatic beings are equipped with a huge penis hanging between their legs to the knees (Fig 4; 5).

In the evolved phase of the Round Head art, therefore, there are two distinct groups of male figures: simple men with no genitalia at all, in contrast with evidently outstanding beings whose genitalia are exaggeratedly big.



3. Evolved Round Head style: male figures with body decoration and masks but without genitalia, Tassili mountains. Photo elaborated with DStretch.

What may be the reason of this discrimination? If the penis in the later painted art was a prerogative of exceptional individuals, we can suppose that in the early rock art mainly outstanding males were represented.

In comparison with thousands of the Round Head painted images, the Kel Essuf engravings are not numerous. The ancient carvers rather than waste their effort on insignificant images, concentrated their work on specific



4. A male figure with raised hands and a huge penis, Tassili mountains (photo by B. Fouilleux). Photo elaborated with DStretch.

figures, such as men with huge phalluses. Only later, with the spread of the painted technique, much easier and faster, a great number of other subjects appeared (Fig 6).

The painting technique allowed to represent body details and human activities, hardly possible in carving. For example, the depiction of sophisticated masks and ritual behaviours. But whereas the paintings proliferate with males without genitalia, the rare figures with huge phalluses may be the remainders of the original ideology in the rock art production, reserved to the outstanding, possibly supernatural, creatures. Penis was a fundamental item to represent in the Kel Essuf engravings and it was evidently a fundamental item also for a special group of individuals in the Round Head paintings.

Penis in initiation rites

The representation of phallus may have had different purposes. From a simple indicator of a male / female, through the obvious symbol of the reproduction and fertility, to a more sophisticated interpretation indicating the initiated individuals of the group. In Ancient Egypt, god of fertility and reproduction Min is always represented with its long penis (Hart 2004). Ancient Malians, particularly the royals of Djenne, decorated their palaces with phallus like piers and columns at the entrance of their palaces and decorated the walls with phallus motifs. Similar features can be seen on the pillars of many temples across Africa (Bloom & Blair eds. 2009). In many societies, male genitalia play a crucial role in initiation rituals. In Africa, throughout recorded history, a boy and a man are different entities. A boy becomes a man only through some form of stringent initiation ritual which usually involves painful circumcision as a rite-of passage to manhood. This physical transfor-

mation is a visible proof of manhood (Wong 2006).

This kind of transformative ritual occurs almost universally among African cultures that have historically had no contact with each other or with the greater outside world. Native tribesmen usually explain that these rituals are spiritual and involve the imputation of special power to men. They describe the need to test and produce men that can stand up to the rigours of this difficult life and defend the tribe against adversaries (Wong 2006).

Circumcision is usually seen as a rebirth of the boy into a man and is often accompanied with the giving of a new name. Without successful



5. The shape and size of the phallus evokes elephantiasis of the scrotum, Tassili mountains (photo by B. Fouilleux). Photo elaborated with DStretch.

completion of the initiation rites the boy remains a boy and does not have the rights and responsibilities of men. He may often not be allowed to marry and produce children and can not take part in village affairs. Indeed, in some cases a man who has not endured the ordeal of such an initiation is not even considered to be a person (Tucker, 1949).

The specific act of circumcision is said to bring the boy closer to his ancestors and to the supernatural world. The practice is attributed to the Gods and is done with their approval and with invocation for them to look kindly on the rites and on the young men (Tucker, 1949). This fundamental role of penis for the African society is possibly represented in the Central Saharan rock art.

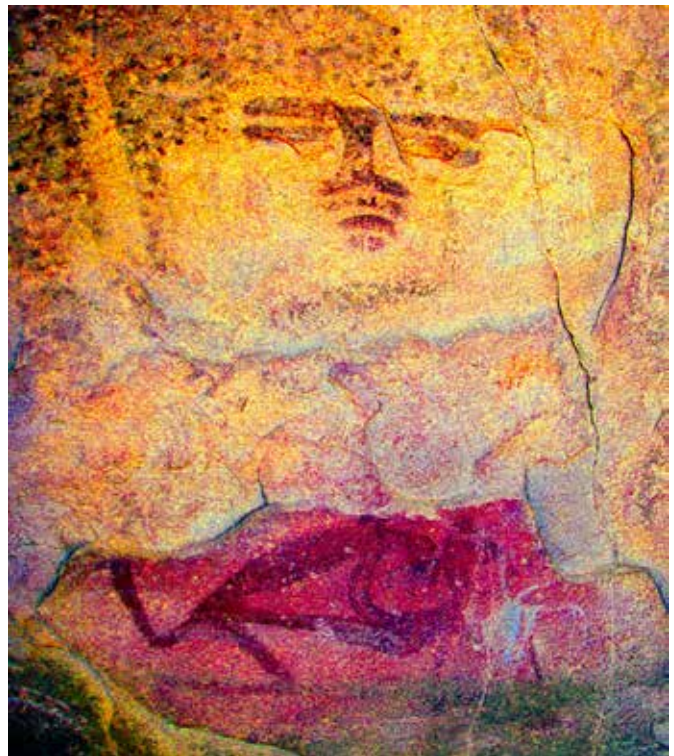
Besides the circumcision, there is a more substantial form of body modification, namely the penile subincision, in which the underside of the penis is incised and the urethra slit open lengthwise, from the urethral opening toward the base. Although less frequent, subincision is traditionally performed around the world as a coming of age ritual. It is known for example from Samburu herdboys of Kenya, who perform subincision at age seven to ten (Margetts 1960).

Anomaly as a privilege

Considering the size and shape of the phalluses depicted in the earliest Central Saharan rock art, it is possible that they represent a particular health problem, namely the elephantiasis of the scrotum (Soleilhavoup 2007). This tropical disease, which is not rare in humid areas of Africa, causes a huge swelling of male genital organs. Since the earliest Saharan rock art originated during a humid period, it is likely that this illness was present in the Epipalaeolithic and Mesolithic periods. Indeed, the big oval between the Great Gods' legs looks exactly like

genitalia affected by the scrotal hernia.

Investigating further the role of this disease, it becomes evident that the elephantiasis of the scrotum has not been considered an ordinary illness, but it has a special position in the African culture and religion. The best example is probably found in the religion of the Masa, a population living today near Lake Chad. The Masa believe in a powerful god called Matna, a feared spirit responsible of death. He is also called "Matna The Initiator" because he plays an important role in initiation rituals. He usually affects a person in the form of a disease, and to assure his favour animal sacrifices must be done to him. Interestingly enough, the main characteristic of Matna is his enormous scrotum affected by elephantiasis (Melis 2002). Lega people in Congo include this disease into



6. A scene of sexual intercourse depicted under a mask, Tassili mountains. Photo elaborated with DStretch.

their initiation rite, which provides an initiated man with an initiated wife, and during which only initiated men and women of a certain grade may be present. Dramatic performances are particularly well developed in this initiation. In one scene the preceptor, carrying a huge bundle of leaves under his loincloth between his legs and dancing with great difficulty, incarnates a man suffering from scrotal elephantiasis (Biebuyck 1973).

Even when this illness does not play an active role in the rituals, it has nevertheless been considered exceptional by many African tribes. Masai people in Kenya are said never to ascribe disease to the action of spirits, and only rarely to human agency. Only one disease - elephantiasis of the scrotum - is regarded as a punishment for sin (Rivers & Elliot Smith 1924). The Igbo people of southern Nigeria believe that certain individuals must be put to death lest they shame the entire tribe. These include men with elephantiasis of the scrotum (Khoi 1999). In the traditional African culture, anomalies are either demonized or privileged. These include for examples twin mothers, twins, monstrous birth, children whose upper teeth came in first, boys with only one testicle and men affected by elephantiasis of the scrotum. On the one hand, anomalous events may be labelled dangerous, in that individuals sometimes feel anxiety confronted with anomaly. On the other hand, ambiguous symbols can be used in rituals. By using symbols of anomaly, the ritual can incorporate evil and death along with life and goodness, into a single unifying pattern (Douglas 1966).

Conclusion

In the earliest Central Saharan rock paintings and engravings, the scenes of a sexual intercourse or otherwise sexual scenes are nearly inexistent. Except for the Kel Essuf engravings

and the earliest stages of the Round Head paintings, where the representation of penis is frequent, in the later stage of the painted art males are depicted strictly without genitalia. The exception is represented by a special group of beings, which are depicted with an exaggeratedly huge penis. Its size and shape evokes the elephantiasis of the scrotum, a tropical disease, which was certainly present during the humid Epipalaeolithic and Mesolithic periods. Considering the ethnographic record compared with the rock images, it is likely that the anomaly of the scrotal hernia played a substantial role in the cultural /religious life of the Central Saharan prehistoric hunters.

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