ARTS & CULTURES

SHAMANISM & THE SACRED

ANCESTORS AND SPIRITS IN THE TRADITION OF GABON

SHAMANISM AND ROCK ART

THE SHAMAN WAS A WOMAN

THE NEW SACRED SINCE ANDRÉ BRETON AND ÉDOUARD GLISSANT

AN ODE TO THE ANCESTORS TWO CHU CULTURE ARTEFACTS

CORINE SOMBRUN THE TRANCE AND SCIENCE

> Shamanism and Rock Art

> Jean-Loïc Le Quellec

Rock carving from the Tomskaya Pisanitsa Museum (Kemerovo region of Siberia), which Mihály Hoppál interprets as a shaman with his drum (Hoppál 2013, fig. II-3-5-b). Photo Dikson.

> Shamanism and Rock Art

Fig. 1. The meaning of the "Shaft Scene" in Lascaux Cave at Montignac in the Dordogne, France often linked to a shamanic tradition, is in reality unknown. See Le Quellec 2018 (©N. Aujoulat/CNP/MC).

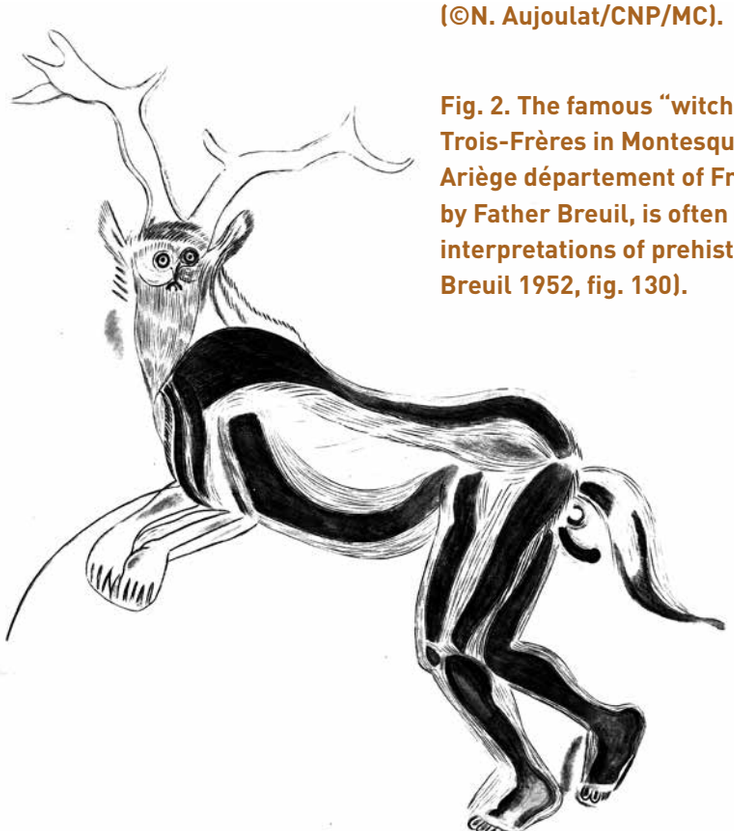

Fig. 2. The famous "witch" in the Cave of the Trois-Frères in Montesquieu-Avantès in the Ariège département of France, as reproduced by Father Breuil, is often invoked in shamanic interpretations of prehistoric art (CAD based on Breuil 1952, fig. 130).

Fig. 3. Carving published by Nicolaas Witsen in 1705 and reputed to represent a Tungusic shaman – which he himself never saw. It is often erroneously compared to rock images.

Even before we consider the shamanic interpretation of rock art, it must be pointed out that if we confine ourselves to an examination of images – even those done by shamans – we can assume only that some of them *might* allude to *practices of the shamanic type*. And then, what shamanism are we talking about? The overvaluation of "altered states of consciousness" in the Western discourse on shamanism continues a trend initiated in the 1950s by Mircea Eliade, who considered shamanism a "technique of ecstasy", even though countless observations contradict that way of seeing, observers in the field having often emphasized the lucidity of shamans. When Eliade, according to the ethnologist M. N. Xangalov, reported a Buryat ritual in which the shaman has to climb a birch tree with a group of young men, he added on his own initiative that, "while climbing, they all fall in ecstasy" (Eliade 1968, p. 109), whereas in reality they had to be careful above all not to fall, because it is an ordeal, and falling would be a bad omen.

Eliade introduced a kind of circular reasoning that has continued to our own time, when he asserted not only the universality of shamanism but also its "archaic" character without a shred of proof, simply by virtue of the primitivist ontology underlying his oeuvre as a whole. Before long, his book was being cited by advocates of a "shamanic" reading of prehistoric art, particularly by Horst Kirchner the year after its publication, then by Karl Narr and a whole string of authors. In later editions of his book, Eliade would then mention these same essayists in support of his theses, thus transforming into external arguments his own groundless assertions, now reified, from the first edition.

It is widely claimed that shamanism dates back to prehistory. Karl Narr thought it first arose during the Upper Palaeolithic Period and that its most ancient form was found in Lascaux, where, supposedly, a tutelary spirit in the form of a bird is perched next to a man "in ecstasy" (**fig. 1**). Peter Furst, Ken Hedges, Siegfried Giedion, Ernst Brügstaller and Ludwig Lauth, along with many others, also believed they could identify shamanic traits in the cave paintings, repeating the comparisons of their predecessors, especially with respect to the stag-horned anthropomorphs (**figs 2–3**). Margaret Stutley was still practising the same type of ethnographic comparison in 2004, writing that "the rock paintings of Lascaux and those of Siberia were part of the magico-religious activities that took place on the sites, being an important aspect of the social life of the people.

Fig. 4. Rock carving in Nine Mile Canyon, Utah, Fremont style (c. 950–1200 CE). The large horned figure amidst the bighorn sheep has been interpreted as a shaman, but he could just as easily be a master of the animals. Photo by the author.

The figures depict ancestors, spirits, heroes, shamans and animals" (Stutley 2004, p. 4). Yet André Leroi-Gourhan already had doubts about the continuity of shamanism since prehistory, because, though the same images certainly persisted over a very long duration, they could have different meanings (Leroi-Gourhan 1977, p. 25), as is the case for the therianthropes (**figs 5, 6 and 9**). It is already very difficult to agree about present-day shamanism in its many forms, so a single prehistoric shamanism quickly comes to seem a dubious proposition.

Eliade's hypothesis of a shamanic "Palaeolithic substratum", which Peter Furst extended to "the survival in the New World" of a supposedly "Paleo-Mesolithic Eurasiatic shamanism", has led to unacceptable generalizations. For example, Kwang-chih Chang maintained that the bird from the "Shaft Scene" in Lascaux (**fig. 1**) is a shamanic symbol also found in China and in Mayan art, which would justify the idea of a "Maya-China continuum".[1] Many commentators continue to claim that shamanism as such is rooted in the biological, particularly in "neurognostic structures" and levels of altered consciousness. Michael Winkelman sees them as proof of the universality of shamanism, even though that universality is precisely what would have had to be demonstrated in the first place. In addition, it is easy to verify that many cultures of the world are familiar with "trances", but without practising "shamanism" – whatever meaning is given to these terms.

Fig. 5. Icon from the 17th century depicting St Christopher Cynocephalus, at the Byzantine and Christian Museum in Athens. This example shows how risky it would be to interpret all images of therianthropes as shamans in a state of trance. Photo Tilemahos Efthimiadis.

Fig. 6. Therianthropes painted in a rock shelter in Schaaplaats, Clarens, South Africa, and commonly interpreted as a group of shamans, though other hypotheses are possible, for example, that they are mythical beings, spirits of the dead, and so on. Photo by the author.

In fact, shamanic interpretations of prehistoric art rest for the most part on three assumptions: that shamanism is universal, that it is a sort of first religion, and that one need only look at the images to recognize its influence. Yet the kinship, genealogical or not, between the various forms of "shamanism" (for example, Siberian and Amazonian) remains an open question, and its supposed universality has been demolished by the surveys of African ontologies, which all conclude that no African shamanism exists. Authors who have argued the contrary could do so only at the cost of a regrettable confusion between trances and shamanism, combined with a very loose definition, which has resulted

Fig. 7. Painting in the style of the "Round Heads" of Sefar, in Tasīli-n-Ăjjer , Algeria, which was considered to be a depiction of a shaman with a drum-shaped head. A detailed study proved that it is in reality a superimposition, and that the figure's head is still behind the supposed drum. Photo by the author; see Le Quellec et al. 2015, figs 21–24.

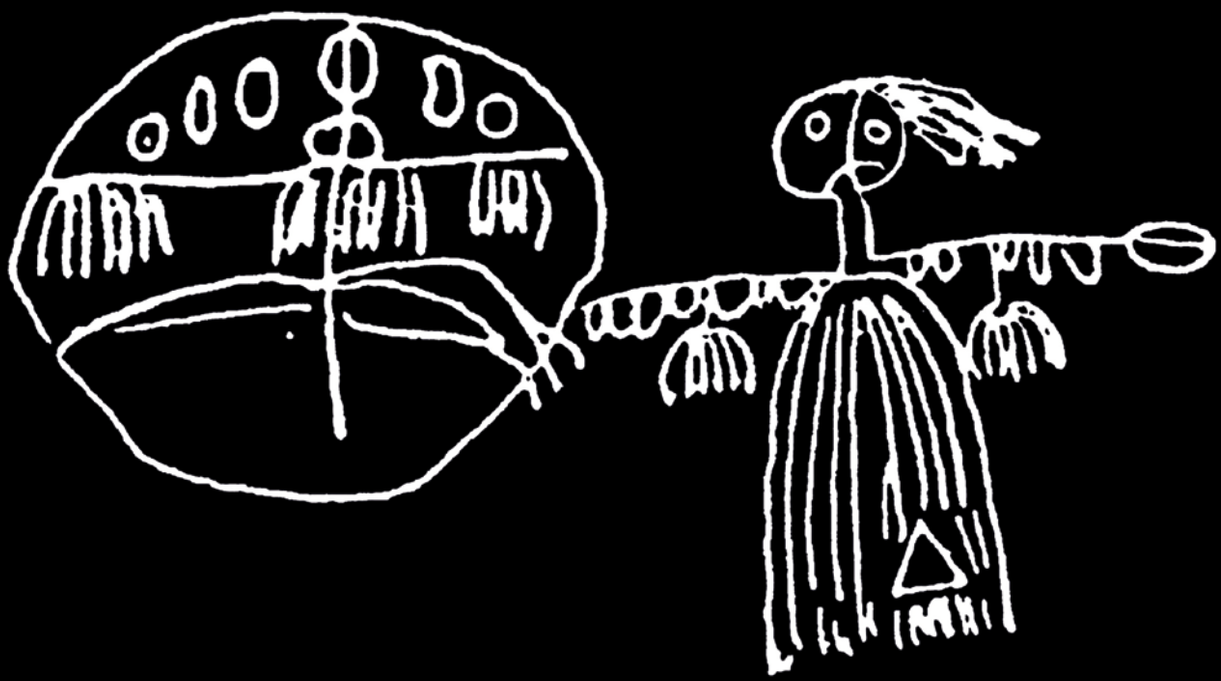

Fig. 8. Drawing of a rock carving from the Bronze Age showing a shaman, identifiable by his costume and drum, in Shalkoby, Altai (based on Devlet 2001, fig. 3.2.4). No comparable figure exists in Palaeolithic art.

in the identification of supposed shamans from southern Africa (**fig. 6**) to the Sahara (**figs 7, 9**) (Le Quellec 2005, 2006a, 2006b).

In addition, the great antiquity of the forms of shamanism stipulated in the second assumption remains to be demonstrated. Several archaeologists have sought to identify the first appearance of representations of shamans on the rock carvings in central Eurasia. For Henri-Paul Francfort, the response is clear: "It was not before the second half of the first millennium CE that, in petroglyphs, we can recognize . . . true shamanism and shamans similar to those of ethnology: dancing human figures holding drums in Tamgaly (Kazakhstan), Sukhanikha (Minusinsk Basin), and later in petroglyphs from Altai (Elangash) and Tuva" (Francfort 2001, p. 260). The carvings of Tamgaly and Sukhanikha, the works of Turkish-speaking herders, are thus the oldest graphic evidence of an indisputable shamanism. Ekaterina Devlet has established that the paintings and carvings of Siberia and Central Asia, unquestionably depicting shamans – recognizable by their costumes and drums – date back to the regional Bronze Age and are therefore no more than about three thousand years old (**fig. 8**). Andrzej Rozwadowski published a carving showing a shaman and his drum, found in Ilinskaya (Krasnoyarsk, Siberia), which he believes cannot date to before the first millennium BCE. That is generally the case for most of the representations of figures holding drums, though those of the Karakol Valley in Altai are dated to the second millennium BCE (**title pages**). The funerary equipment in tomb 4 of Ust'-Uda (Усть-Уда), which Alexei Okladnikov considers the remains of shamanic attributes, is also attributable to the Bronze Age (Окладников 1955, pp. 352–353). All the archaeological documentation available, rock art in particular, thus does not demonstrate the existence of a shamanism prior to the Bronze Age.

It is clear that caution is in order if we do not want to reproduce the circular arguments denounced above or repeat generalizing deductions based on lax definitions. Fiona Bowie, an anthropologist specializing in the study

Fig. 9. Therianthrope of the Wadi Taleshut in the Mesak Settafet, Libya. Beings of this type have often been considered shamans in a state of trance. Here the Saharan context contradicts such an interpretation. Photo by the author.

of religion, has noted that "'shamanism' is one of those terms (like 'witchcraft' or 'totemism') that is often used very broadly, referring to many different phenomena, some of which bear little relationship to one another" (Bowie 2000, p. 174). Only a loose notion of shamanism came apply to every continent, in accordance with a position often adopted by historians of religion or prehistorians lacking in rigour in their terminology and who thereby construct a very speculative primitivist history and prehistory.

Siberian shamanism, which serves as an implicit referent for any discussion of these questions, has been the object of a large number of studies, the most recent of which consider it a set of techniques of the imaginary, placed in the service of a "journey" to the invisible world (Stépanoff 2019), and a particular ontology based on the principle *mors tua, vita mea* (your death, my life), involving a system of alliances and negotiations with the spirits and masters of the animals (Hamayon 1990, Descola 2005). Yet none of these essential characteristics can be identified merely by looking at images, particularly when they are Palaeolithic, hence forever mute.

NOTES

1. Chang 1992, p. 219. See the analysis of the Chinese sources in Qu 2017.

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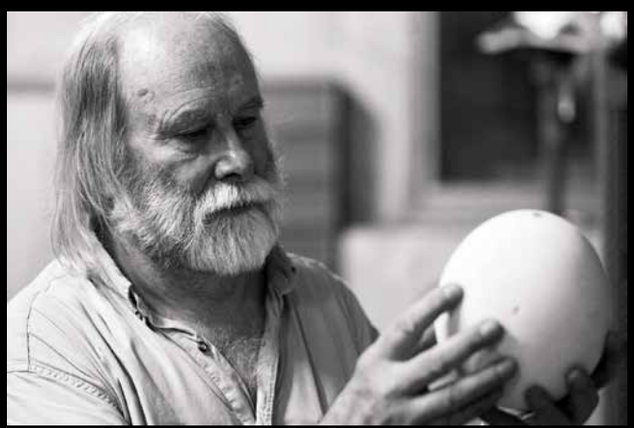

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BIOGRAPHY

Jean-Loïc Le Quellec is honorary director of research at the CNRS. As a prehistorian, he specializes in the study of rock images from the Sahara, particularly Libya, but he has also worked in other regions (southern Africa, Ethiopia, North America) and has published many articles on these areas that have become standard reference works. As a mythologist, he co-authored, with Bernard Sergent, the *Dictionnaire critique de mythologie,* published by Éditions du CNRS in 2017. He was awarded the first Prix Burkhart de l'Archéologie in 2008 by the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres.

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