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**INTERDISCIPLINARY INTERPRETATIONS OF ANTHROPOMORPHIC COMPOSITE BEINGS IN EUROPEAN UPPER PALAEOLITHIC CAVE ART: AN APPROACH**

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**Introduction**

European Upper Palaeolithic cave art is especially known for the numerous and different depictions of animals dominated by the herbivores group. There are also a great number of different signs, indeterminable motifs and less frequent representations of human beings. Furthermore, there are anthropomorphic composite beings and composite beings of different animals, which both are rather rare.

The anthropomorphic composite beings are often attributed to the human beings group. In my opinion

they should be regarded as an independent motif. Anthropomorphic composite beings are figures which have human and animal attributes. They are human representations with elements of one or more animals. Therefore they are neither human beings nor animals. Surely the most famous anthropomorphic composite beings in cave art are the Dieu cornu of Les Trois-Frères cave (fig. 1a) and two other representations in the same cave (fig. 1b and c), the Sorcerer of Le Gabillou cave (fig. 1d) and the Bird-man of Lascaux cave (fig. 1e).

But what is the meaning of cave art and especially of these anthropomorphic composite beings?

This article tries to give interdisciplinary interpretations of the meaning of these figures.

**General remarks concerning the interpretations of cave art**

Although we will surely never know the meaning of European cave art it is, however, interesting and tempting to make interpretations and hypotheses. In



1a



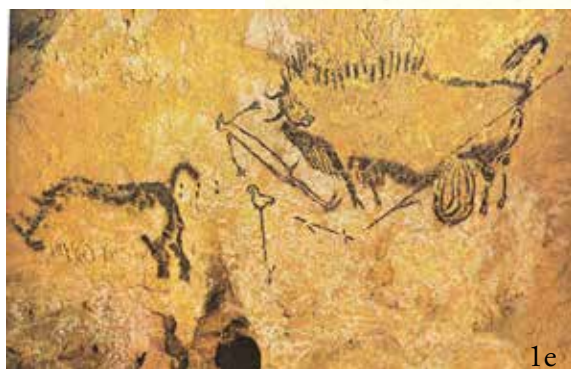
1b



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1d



1e

Fig. 1a. The 'Dieu cornu' in Les Trois-Frères cave (Dép. Ariège, France) (Bégouën, Breuil, 1958).

Fig. 1b. The 'Le Petit sorcier à l'arc musical', an anthropomorphic composite being between human being and bison in Les Trois-Frères cave (Dép. Ariège, France) (Bégouën, Breuil, 1958).

Fig. 1c. Anthropomorphic composite being between human being and bison in Les Trois-Frères cave (Dép. Ariège, France) (Bégouën, Breuil, 1958).

Fig. 1d. The Sorcerer of Le Gabillou cave (Dép. Dordogne, France) (Gaussen, 1964).

Fig. 1e. The shaft scene of Lascaux cave (Dép. Dordogne, France) (Bataille, 1955).

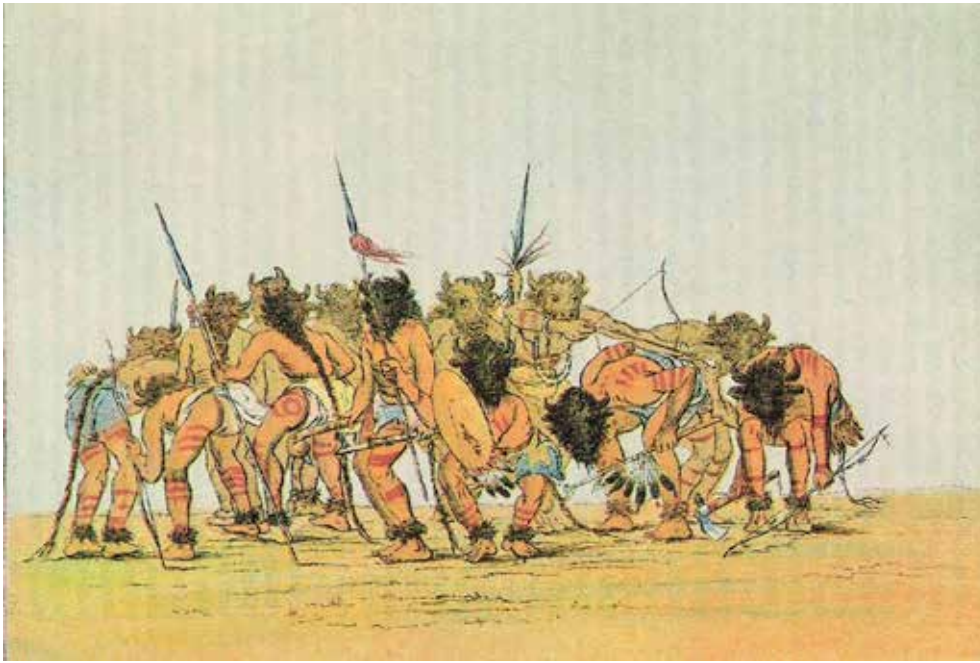


Fig. 2 The bison dance of the Mandan (Catlin 1882).

my opinion an interdisciplinary approach is important to understand Ice Age art better (Braun in press, Braun in press). I also think that no interpretation of cave art in general can be generalized. Furthermore, I think that the motivation of creating cave art was not always the same. We have to keep in mind that the period of cave art is at least 25,000 years ago. In my opinion there were surely several motivations and backgrounds which can be interpreted differently. This can be expressed with the word *Mehrschichtigkeit* (complexity) of the possible meaning of the representations. Since the recognition of Ice Age art (cave and portable art) in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century researchers have made various interpretations of their meaning. While Palaeolithic art was interpreted in a profane way at the beginning (Cartailhac in Roussot, 2002), it was later interpreted in different religious contexts. The anthropomorphic composite beings especially attracted the researchers' curiosity.

### **Ethnology as an auxiliary science**

With the acknowledgment of ethnology as a scientific discipline and the foundation of colonies in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, ethnological comparisons were used to understand European prehistory (Reinach, 1903). Certain ethnic groups, for example, the San and the Australian aborigines who lived as hunter-gatherers, were regarded

as living Stone Age people and their habits and religious beliefs were transferred to the human beings of the Upper Palaeolithic: 'Le présent nous instruira sur le passé' (The present is the key to the past) (Breuil in Laming-Empeire, 1962, p. 79). Ethnology shows very well how the anthropomorphic composite beings of the Upper Palaeolithic cave art can be interpreted differently.

### **Disguise for hunting**

In different hunter-gatherer societies the hunters disguised themselves in animal hides so that they were not smelt or recognized as human beings. Breuil and Cartailhac (1906) and De Saint-Périer (1934) interpreted some of the anthropomorphic composite beings in the Ice Age art as disguised hunters.

### **Animal dances**

Catlin visited numerous different North American Indian tribes in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He described a bison dance of the Mandan, a tribe of the Sioux in the Great Plains (fig. 2). In this dance the dancers are disguised as bisons and imitate the movements of the animal. According to Catlin (1882), the dancers were asking the Great Spirit for a successful bison hunt, because bison was very important game for them. The wearing of animal masks is known from numerous other indigenous people for different reasons. They are described below in other contexts.

### **Master of animals or ghosts of nature**

The idea of a master of animals is known to numerous hunter-gatherer societies of the world. These were responsible for the availability of a certain animal species. They were often regarded as beings with a mixture of features of human beings and of the specific animal species. Blanc (1960) described how people of the Solomon Islands, living especially on fishing, believe in a master of fish (fig. 3), which shows

attributes of humans as well as fish.

In this context the representation of the Dieu cornu of Les Trois-Frères cave is interesting, because he shows human characteristics as well as those of different animals. This famous figure is located in an elevated position over other depictions of different animals. Because of this special location in the cave and the fact that he combines features of several animal species he could, in my opinion, be regarded as a master of animals.

### **Totemism**

Totemism is known among numerous traditional peoples. They believe that they descend from a certain animal species, the animal totem, and each person has his/her own protecting spirit. People who descend from the same animal totem form a clan. The relationship between the human being and the animal spirit is in general very strong, so that the person is in a certain sense one part of this species (Durkheim, 1984). Durkheim (1984) speaks of the double nature of a being which is human and animal. It is supposed in certain cases that the specific human being can accept the habits of the specific animal or change into its shape in danger.

In dances, for example, among the Australian aborigines or the Tlingit of the northwestern coast of North America, the dancers wear masks which

show their totem animal and imitate its movements (Durkheim, 1984; Hernández-Pacheco, 1919).

According to Tylor (Durkheim, 1984) totemism was a form of ancestral cult. It is the doctrine of the transmigration of souls after death into another living body. As there is no difference between a human and an animal soul the human soul could live on in an animal.

Seuntjens (1955; 1956) interpreted the anthropomorphic composite beings in the caves as depictions which represent a specific animal clan.

### **Shamanism**

Shamanism was and is still known among a lot of hunter-gatherer societies. The central figure is the shaman who is the mediator between this world and other worlds. Caves are often regarded as entrances to another world in shamanistic societies. The shaman's costume is an essential element of shamanism and in general represents an animal. In Siberia, for example, it is a deer or a bird. Wearing this costume the shaman changes into this animal in a state of trance and ecstasy, and behaves like it before becoming a human being again (fig. 4a). The helping and protecting spirits are also very important for the shaman. In general they are animals. According to Stolz (1988), these spirits were able to switch their form without problem from animal to human being and vice versa.

Kirchner (1952) interpreted the famous shaft scene of the Lascaux cave as a shamanistic necromancy with a helping spirit, shaman and victim. In the already mentioned Dieu cornu of Les Trois-Frères cave Lommel (1965) saw a shaman in his costume. In fact, the Dieu cornu is reminiscent of a drawing of a Tungouse shaman published by Witsen in 1705 (fig. 4b). This Tungouse shaman combines features of several animal species. But other authors like Duerr (1985), Smith (1992) and Clottes and Lewis-Williams (1996) see a relation between the anthropomorphic composite beings in cave art and shamanism. They could be regarded as shamans in their animal costume or as their transformation into the animal in the state of trance.

On the other hand, the theory of shamanism has been criticized by other researchers (see for example Lorblanchet *et al.*, 2006).

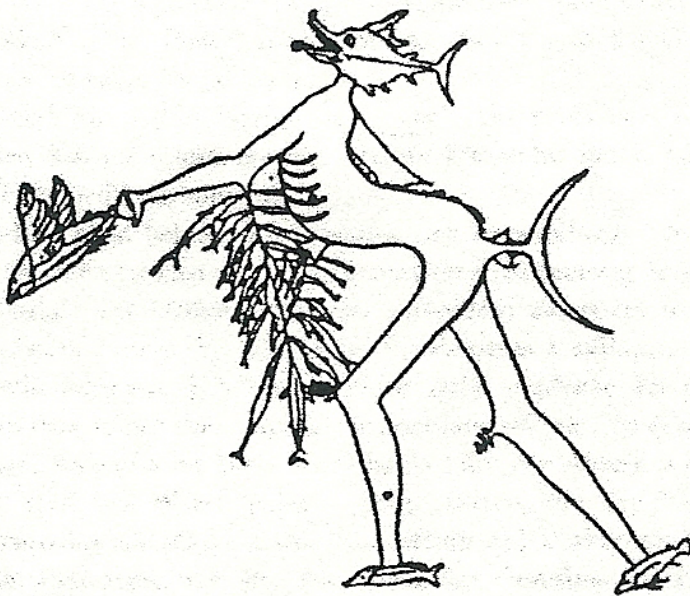


Fig. 3 The Master of Fish of the fishing people of the Solomon Islands (Blanc, 1960).



Fig. 4a. Transformation of a shaman from animal shape into a human shape. Lithography of caribou, Eskimo artist, 1971 (Stolz, 1988).

### Myths

There are a lot of myths which tell us of an era of our world when beings, the ancestors, lived who had human and animal characteristics at the same time. The beings of that time could switch their shape without problem from a human form into an animal form and vice versa (see for example Durkheim, 1984; Lévy-Bruhl, 1935). Myths served as an explanation of the world and its beings. Nowadays this transformation without problems from human into animal and vice versa is only possible by the shaman. According to Campbell (1991) these myths of humanity go back to the Palaeolithic period.

Different animal masks were/are worn in ceremonies among a lot of traditional people to revive the origin of the world and the myths were/are shown in dances. According to Hernández-Pacheco (1919) the anthropomorphic composite beings could represent depictions of spirits, figures of imagination or mythic figures, as they are known in the religious beliefs of numerous aborigine people.

### Neuropsychology

Neuropsychological investigations relating to cave art, especially those of altered states of consciousness, has had some interesting results.

Altered states of consciousness can be the result of different narcotic drugs (for example plants), music (for example rattles and drums), dance, long and constant fast breathing (hyperventilation), deprivation

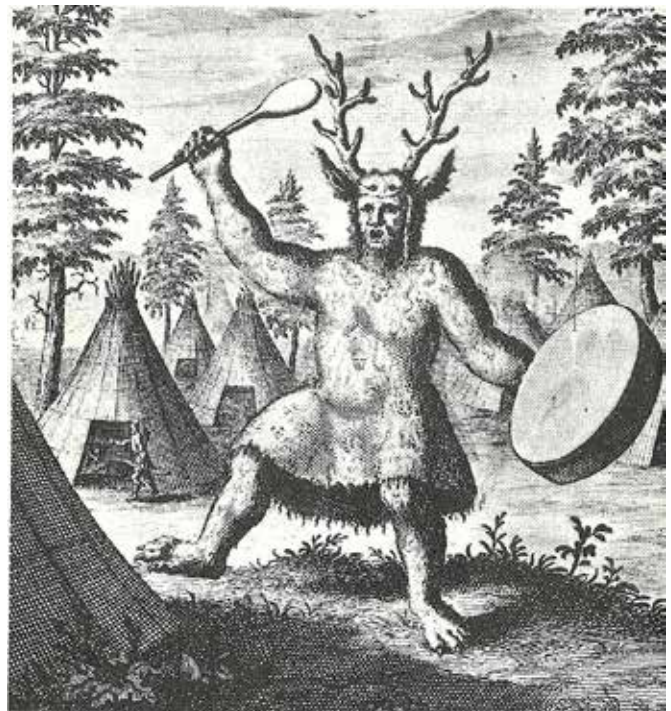


Fig. 4b. Representation of a Tungouse shaman published by Witsen in 1705 (Stolz, 1988).

of the sense organs (for example by darkness), isolation, etc. (Lewis-Williams, Dowson, 1988; Grof 2000). Clottes and Lewis-Williams (1996) applied the phenomena of altered states of consciousness to shamanism. The darkness and the isolation in the caves could have evoked or intensified these states. Moreover, flickering light – which the artists used – stimulates hallucinations. As already mentioned caves are seen as entrances to other worlds in shamanism. When shamans get into trance and ecstasy their state of consciousness is altered. Ecstasy is a deep altered state of consciousness. The shaman does not feel like a human being anymore, but he/she transforms into the animal which his/her costume represents. The animal spirits play an important role in shamanism. According to Clottes and Lewis-Williams (1996), at least three phases of altered states of consciousness can be distinguished. The specific persons feel like animals. According to the same authors, it is possible that the rocks became alive under the flickering lights and that the animal spirits came out of the cave walls. The anthropomorphic composite beings could be shamans who changed into an animal in their ecstasy or representations of the master of animals who appeared to the shaman in the third phase of hallucination.

Interestingly Grof (1988), a representative of transpersonal psychology, did research in the 1960s on altered states of consciousness under the influence of psychedelic substances, especially LSD. People had experiences in which they changed into an animal or identified with this animal.

Wilber (2001), a scientist of consciousness, interprets the anthropomorphic composite beings of the Upper Palaeolithic cave art as gods of nature (masters of animals) or as sorcerers (shamans).

## Conclusion

The explanations mentioned above show how complex the phenomena of Upper Palaeolithic cave art and especially the anthropomorphic composite beings are. Furthermore, they show clearly how an interdisciplinary attempt is necessary to approach this topic. But nevertheless, in my opinion, we will never know the exact motivation or background and what these mysterious figures signified for our ancestors of the Upper Palaeolithic period. The anthropomorphic composite beings do not reveal their secret. Isn't it exactly this mystery which fascinates the viewer of our rational times? For this reason I want to conclude with the following quotation by Albert Einstein (Grof, 2000, p. 19):

*Das Schönste, was wir erleben  
können, ist das Geheimnisvolle...  
Wer es nicht kennt und sich nicht  
mehr wundern, nicht mehr staunen  
kann, der ist sozusagen tot und  
sein Auge erloschen.*

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## ART IS STRUCTURAL MAGIC, NOT ILLUSTRATION

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Religion, magic, ritual, myth, emblematic systems and art all subconsciously express the same archetypal structure in different media. Identical visual 'episodes' and 'grammar' appear in apparently different cultures, and apparently different 'developmental' eras worldwide. This paper demonstrates cultural structure by revealing the standard visual typology, its sequence and the axial ocular grid between the eyes of typological characters, in six artworks that other authors used in different interpretations in a previous edition of *EXPRESSION*. The new method raises the core content of culture to conscious appreciation.

We habitually ascribe overtly visible correspondences between artefacts, to practical considerations such as experience; or to inter-media 'translations' such as recording, illustration, communication or memorial; or to diffused and acquired politico-religious programmes. However, conscious correspondences merely add to the camouflage that conceal the real wellspring of culture, which is fed by the eternal undercurrent of archetype, or structure itself. Ritual and myth in all their forms are known to be highly structured, as Levi-Strauss demonstrated (1964). Artworks differ only in some conscious meanings and in styling, as I demonstrated in a paper on Gobekli Tepe art for *EXPRESSION* 9. Even semantics and styling are largely products of cultural mutation, not only of conscious processes.

### Art or graffiti?

One of the frequent challenges to the new structural approach to rock art is that some panels appear to be cumulative, thus not artistic. The 'graffiti' approach relies mainly on apparent style, technique, layering (Thembi Russell, 2012), relative damage, patination, or carbon flake or oxalate dating (Li *et al.*, 2012). Yet Anne Solomon (2011) found no adequate theory of artistic features, or of how 'attributes, stylistic or iconographical, relate to society, history and culture'.