

SHAMANISM AND THE INDIAN ROCK PAINTINGS

Asok DATTA, Barisha, India

Eversince the emergence of modern man (*Homo sapiens sapiens*) around 35,000 B.P. the concern of human being about the universe, its creation and preservation finally led to the development of religious form. Since man is a part of nature, it all started with the nature worship. The genesis of this religion was deeply rooted in a complex belief that explained the origin of life, the world, the spirit or the supernatural powers etc. (Lorblanchet, 1991). Initially, it was confined to a rudimentary form of nature worship only, but gradually the system became complex over the time. Under this system, spirit, the supernatural power that controls the universe can be evoked through different acts and sacrifices to ward off the evils and their destructions and to ensure the fertility of all living creatures including human beings. These spirits or the supernatural powers are often personified with different totems, and each totems is said to have been responsible for the creation of the land, people, animals and plants.

The existence and the activities of these supernatural heroes are often highlighted and exaggerated by the respective communities to which the specific totem belongs. These totemic heroes and their supernatural activities can be traced in the mythology. The reflections of these activities are found in the artistic expressions including rock art paintings.

The system continued to evolve through time and space until the system was largely put an end with the development of higher forms of religious practices like Buddhism, Jainaim, Islam, Christianity and Hinduism but despite this overall situation, there are isolated areas inhabited by the aboriginal people where these religious practices still exist in different forms. Shamanism is the name given to the religion of Ural-Altaic peoples from the Bearing straits to the borders of Scandinavia. The term "Shamanism" seems to have been derived from the Tungus word Shaman meaning "priest or medicine man" (Mikhailovskii, 1895).

Its relation with the Indian word "Samana-Sraman" (a Buddhist monk or Mendicant), has been suggested by many, but cannot be proved. Shamanism is a part of the religious concepts and practices that existed among the so called primitive races in many parts of the world. It is a kind of synthesis between animism and supernaturalism having deep roots in nature worship. In other words, it is a polytheism and polydemonism with strong belief of a supreme god.

Shamanism finds its most complete expression among the hunting tribes of Siberia, American Indians and Eskimos. It is a religion or magico-religion system controlled by the shamans whose devotees believe in the existence of spirits in nature and gods and demons. Their wrath can be avoided through the acts of shamans and their blessings can be received through the ritualistic side of the religion by performing priestly functions and acts of healings and divination. Both are achieved either by spirit possession or departure of the Shaman's soul to heaven



Fig. 37. Khardi. A shapeless man with bow and arrow. (rilievo CCSP da foto A. Datta; Archivio WARA W02282).

or to the underworld. (Dickey, 1876) He is believed to have access to the secrets of gods and spirits who are malevolent.

The Shaman by various acts, rites and sacrifices profitiate them for the benefits of his clients (Macculloch, 1976). The post of Shaman, among some tribes, is hereditary while among some others, he is selected on the basis of certain qualities such as: he should be dreamy, irritable, given to hallucination or trancer or even epileptic. Some Shamans are honoured for their benevolent power while some others feared for malevolent acts.

Among the Buriats, the former is called Shaman while the later is called Black Shaman. A Shaman wears a coat hung with iron, rattle ring and representings of mythical animal figures at the time of performing ceremonies.

He also keeps with him a mask, a breast plate, a hat, emboidered stockings, a twisted handkerchief (representing a snake), a Tamborine and a drum stick. The priestly function of the Shaman is connected with magical rites. He is a performer of magical rites, sacrificer and a communicator with god. The costume or mask serves as a symbol of animal having great speed. In Siberia the speeding animals associated with shamanism are stag, reindeer and birds etc. The concept and practices of shamanism in the religion among the primitive races in India is a highly disputable question. Shamanism is a distinct form of religious practice having certain norms which are possibly absent in the Indian context. But since Shamanism had its root in the contemporary magico-religious beliefs, there are certain similarities between the two. In fact, the religion of the primitive tribal communities in India was based on magico-religious concepts in which spirits or supernatural power form a dominant element. Shaman, the perceptor of Shamanism, in a classical sense, is a priest or medicine man who acts as a communicator with the god. In India, the concept of priest came after the Sanskritization of the Indian society.

Nevertheless, the concepts of spirits or supernatural power were very much in existence in the religion of the tribal communities. The spirit or the supernatural power could be evoked through the sacrifices and various acts for the benefits of the

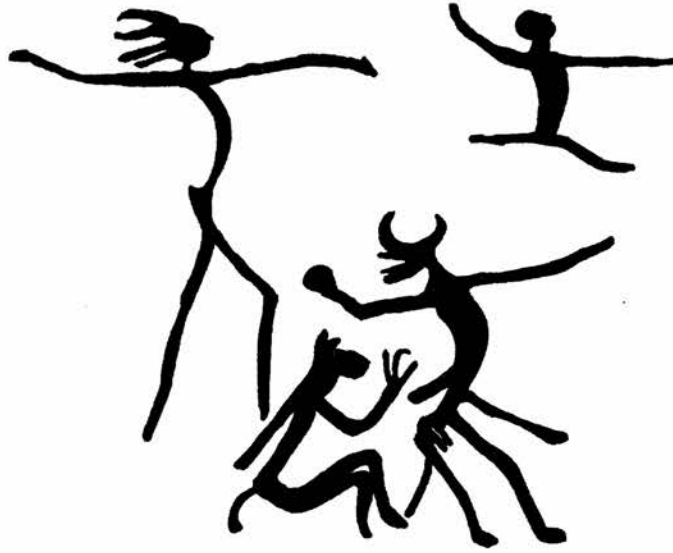


Fig. 38. Bhimbhetka . Wizard or Shamans' dance (rilievo CCSP da foto A. Datta; Archivio WARA W02275).

people. These acts of sacrifices were mainly conducted by "Ojhas" before the Aryanization and by the priest after the Aryanization. So the concept of priest in the tribal religion is a recent addition. Now the priests are called Shaman.

Since there is a close relationship between the supernaturalism in the tribal religion in India and the supernaturalism found in Shamanism, the contents and forms of both the religions are almost similar and identical. But the Indian system based on spirits or supernaturalism never evolved into Shamanism in the truest sense of the term.

Some of the Indian rock paintings may represent Shaman or Shamanistic activities in different form. In the present paper, the author will discuss some of the Indian rock paintings which are controversial from the point of view of Shamanism in India. The controversy developed with the attempts by few scholars (Wakankar and Brook, 1976; Neumayer, 1983) to associate some of the paintings with Shaman or Shamanistic activities.

The Indian rock paintings are found to be concentrated in Hosangabed-Panchmari-Bhopal-Mirzapur-Banda regions with marginal extension in Raigarh-Chakradharpur-Nawada-Girido-Ghatsila regions in eastern India. The regions are inhabited by a number of tribal communities including Gond, Korku, Muria, Saora, Juang, Kharia, Birhors, Santhals, Lodha, Bhumij, Ghatwars etc.

Except Birhors and Juang, all the other tribal communities of this region are settled agriculturist-cum-labourers. They still practice paintings to decorate their mud houses applying almost similar and identical prehistoric techniques. In this sense the present day tribal painting of India is basically an extension of Indian rock art painting in terms of technique, style and form. Although the exact relationship between the two has not been properly worked out (Ghosh and Chakraborty, 1995), but considering certain amount of similarities, it may be assumed that the present day tribal art is a continuum of prehistoric art. The Indian rock art paintings reflect the contemporary beliefs of the people on mythology. The study of the Indian rock paintings would reveal its close association with myths or mythological stories.



Fig. 39. Bhimbhetka. A sacrificial dance along with a Shaman. (rilievo CCSP da foto A. Datta; Archivio WARA W02276).



Fig. 40. Bhimbhetka. A shaman wearing the skull cap of an animal on his head and holding forked staff and magic stick is shown in a painting. (rilievo CCSP da foto A. Datta; Archivio WARA W02279).

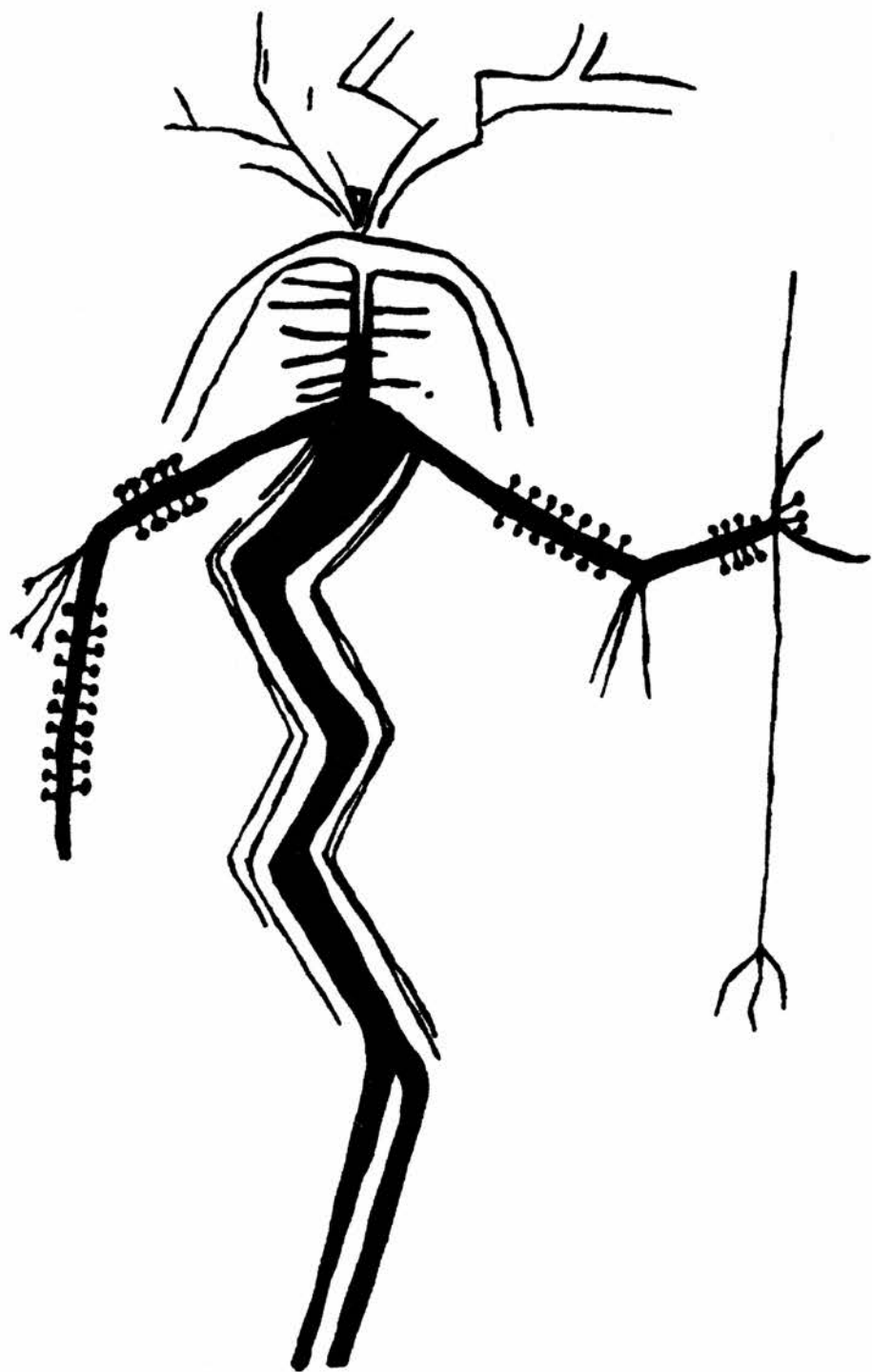


Fig. 41. Man wearing a long trouser and holding a trident in a Nataraj pose at Bhimbhetka. (rilievo CCSP da foto A. Datta; Archivio WARA W02280).

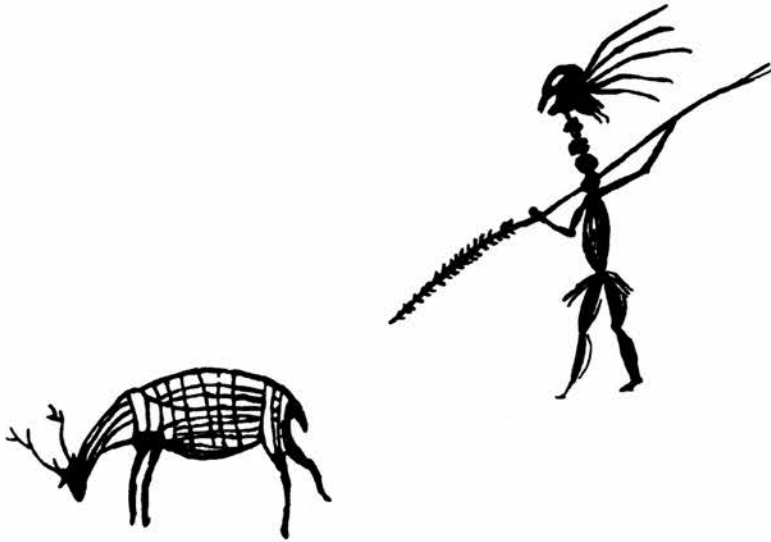


Fig. 42. Bhimbhetka. A four headed Shaman. (rilievo CCSP da foto A. Datta; Archivio WARA W02278).

Some of the so called paintings associated with Shamanistic activities are described here. The so called wizard or Shaman identified by Wakankar (Wakankar and Brook, 1976) is the painting of a man wearing a mask and holding inverted Arrow tips at Bhimbhetka. At Khardi, a shapeless man with bow and arrow has similarly been identified with a Shaman.

The painting of a dance composition at Bhimbhetka has been described by Wakankar as Shaman or Wizard dance. In this composition, the first one wears a Bison mask, the second one wears a feathered mask and the third one wears a wolf's head mask and claws while the fourth one is shown flying speedy. In another composition at Bhimbhetka, a sacrificial dance procession is led by a Shaman wearing a mask and holding inverted arrow tips. The Bull to be sacrificed is shown in the centre of the composition. A four headed Shaman wearing a mask and pointing at Bhimbhetka. In another painting, also at Bhimbhetka, a Shaman drawn in stick method and wearing a feathered mask and holding bow and arrow is shown accompanied with Bison and Deer.

The sacrificial rituals are shown in a painting at Sujapur. In this composition, the skulls of Bulls are arranged around an altar while a dance group is shown behind. At Ramchaja, a man wearing a mask and holding a pole with the plumage of the bird has been identified as Shaman (Neumayer, 1983). In another case, the painting of man holding the skull of an animal over his head with a forked staff and a magic Stick has been identified as Shaman. Man in a bird-like costume at Jaora has been indentified by Neumayer (1983) as Shaman. In another example, a man wearing a peculiar headgear and holding a trident in a Nataraj pose has been identified with a Shaman.

At Sahad Karad, a man wearing a long trouser and a hat and holding a sword, iron stick spears etc. can also be identified with a Shaman. Do the figures and their associated activities described above reflect Shamanism or Shamanistic activities in the contemporary religious beliefs of the community? It is very difficult to give the answer.

The religious beliefs of the contemporary hunter/gatherers were basically



Fig. 43. Bhimbhetka. A dance composition. (rilievo CCSP da foto A. Datta; Archivio WARA W02274).

based on myths or mythology, but the perception of a Shamanistic approach in the religious form is very much there.

Riassunto

Sono state scoperte recentemente alcune pitture in ripari sottoroccia nella zona della foresta di Hazaribagh, nel Bihar centrale. Esse gettano luce sulle pitture rupestri dell'India. Sulla base dello stile, della tecnica e del contenuto, queste pitture possono in generale essere classificate in tre gruppi: Mesolitico, storico antico e recente. Un'analisi sistematica ha mostrato che le pitture mesolitiche rappresentano tradizioni e stili diversi. Il rosso è l'unico colore usato dagli artisti durante questo periodo, mentre le figure femminili sono pressochè assenti. Le figure umane sono raffigurate sul dorso di animali selvatici. L'articolo tenta di dare un resoconto completo su questo stimolante argomento.

Summary

Recently, a number of rock-shelter paintings have been discovered in the Hazaribagh forest area of Central Bihar. They throw significant light on the rock-art paintings of India. On the basis of style, technique and contents, these paintings can broadly be classified into three groups, that is to say Mesolithic, early historic and recent. A systematic analysis has shown that the mesolithic paintings represent distinct traditions and styles. Red is the only colour used by painters during this period while the today absence of female figures remains conspicuous. Human figures are sometime shown mounted on wild animals. The present paper attempts to present a comprehensive account of this stimulating subject.

Resumé

On a decouvert récemment des peintures dans des abris rocheux dans la zone de la forêt Hazaribagh du Bihar central. Elles font la lumière sur les peintures rupestres de l'Inde. Sur la base du style, de la technique et du contenu, ces peintures peuvent être en général classifiées en trois groupes: Mésolithique, historique antique et recent. Une analyse systématique a montré que les peintures mésolithiques représentent des traditions et des styles différents. Le rouge est la seule couleur utilisée par les artistes pendant cette période. Les figures féminines sont totalement absentes et les figures humaines sont représentées sur le dos d'animaux sauvages. Cet article cherche à présenter un compte-rendu complet de ce stimulant sujet.

Selected bibliography

- GHOSH A.K. & CHAKRAVERTY S.
1995 Rock arts of Easter India and their bearing with local tribal arts. A cross sectional study on continuity. India at the Dawn of History. Edited by Datta, Ghosh and Margabandhu. Agamkala Prakashan. Delhi, pp. 133-125.
- LORBLANCHET M.
1991 From the cave art of the reindeer hunters to the rock art of the Kangaroo hunters. Man and Environment Vol. XVI, No. 2, pp1-38.
- MACCULLOCH J.A.
1876 Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics. Vol. XI, pp. 441-446.
- MIKHALLOVSKI I.V.M.
1895 Shamanism in Siberia and European Russia. Journal of the Anthropological Institute, London. Vol. XXIV, pp. 62-126.
- NEUMAYER E.
1983 Prehistoric Indian Rock Paintings. Oxford University Press. Bombay/Cal/Madras.
- WAKANKAR V.S. and BROOKS R.
1976 Stone Age Paintings in India. D.B. Taraporevala Sons and Co. Pvt.Ltd. Bombay.
- DICKEY N.H.
1876 New Encyclopedia. Shamanism. Vol. XXIII, pp 345-346.