



## UNDERSTANDING ROCK ART IN THE ENVIRONMENTAL CONTEXT AND IN RELATION TO TERRITORY

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### SUMMARY

Contemporary primitive societies living in harmony with their natural environment today are the closest examples of religious, cultural, and survival subsistence patterns of lifestyles of their ancestors who painted their region's pre-historic rock art. This paper presents examples of such societies with particular reference to the protoaustraloid nomadic Birhor tribe of the Author's home region of the Jharkhand plateau in eastern India.

### RIASSUNTO

Le società primitive contemporanee che ancora oggi praticano uno stile di vita tradizionale, in armonia con l'ambiente, sono gli esempi più tangibili dei modelli religiosi, culturali e di sopravvivenza o sussistenza dei loro antenati, gli stessi che hanno dipinto l'arte rupestre preistorica rupestre della loro regione. Questo articolo presenta esempi di tali società con particolare riferimento ai Bihor, tribù nomade che vive sull'altopiano di Jharkhand, nell'India orientale.

### PRE-HISTORIC ROCK PAINTINGS AND "WRITING"

The stage and age in which rock art first appears is not our own. When our minds have been changed by developing new consciousness and adapting to new environments which we shall call "territory" our thinking is different to the rock painters of pre historic times. Modern western society is conditioned today by the thinking of Aristotle, Plato and Descartes in which the mind is separate from matter. In the visual language of the rock painters we must look for forms of expression in which the mind and body are one. We have changed our concept of language from the gestural impulses into a new reductionist expression. This has more recently been effected by the change from a primarily agricultural and crafts oriented society dependant upon the environment to one dependant upon the industrial machine. The new mind of post Enlightenment society separates mind from matter and the essentialness of the natural world to our thinking. We conceive writing as a code comprised of signs according to a set of rules, and this is diametrically opposed to the language of nature in which expression is rooted in material-ness and its sensuousness, because we are ourselves material creatures. Early human language and its expression could not have been separate from the sensuousness implicit in its meaning. Speech must have been partly oral and partly the language of the body, and these in turn were the product of their environment. Writing as we today understand it is different. Seen from this perspective writing as we understand it cannot be applied to rock art whether it is realistic, anthropomorphic or zoomorphic. The rock painter had a consciousness dif-

ferent from our own in the twenty-first century. Animals could understand rock art (if they could!) better than we modern humans.

### REMNANTS OF THE PRE-HISTORIC LANGUAGE

In primitive human societies still surviving in remoter areas of our earth and whose autochthonous beliefs and traditions have not undergone missionary change, we may hope to find the gestural symbiosis with the spoken word and in these societies we will not find writing because they are of course pre-literate. We begin to understand then that the pre-historic rock painters were not writing but drawing forms which to their own societies had depth of meaning not derivative from abstract symbols held together by syntax or semantics. It is a general truism that wherever such societies exist in their original form the territories which they live in are undisturbed by the bane of modern industrialism or the preaching of missionaries who implant their ideological meanings in the primitive mind. When I learned that in Hawaii they call rain by forty different names according to which kind of rain it is I began to understand the closeness of expression with nature, and nature is territory.

### CHANGING THE SACRED LANDSCAPE INTO A WRITTEN LANDSCAPE

The first alphabet appeared in Canaan (Palestine) with twenty-two letter consonants and with it came a new development around 1250 BC and the Judaeo-Christian text changed the sacred landscape into a written form which could be transported anywhere in the reader's mind, especially in the wanderings of the Jewish na-

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tion far from its homeland. The meaning of territory changed from a natural phenomenon surrounding the person with its sacred sites and significances to an abstract one in which the sun rose and set, the moon waxed and waned, in an abstract mental dimension and not in the 3-dimensional reality of the living landscape. The alphabet had replaced the meaning of reality.

#### REALITY IN THE PRE-HISTORIC WORLD OF THE ROCK-PAINTERS

I have used this analogy to draw attention to the vast difference in perspective between our comprehension of rock art and that of those who painted it, especially in the context of a living territory which they inhabited. The sun and moon rise over familiar horizons, animals and birds, insects and the limitless variety of flora and fauna move over a timeless sensuousness rooted within the world of the material landscape which is the territory of the rock art. If this territory is altered or even defaced, or if it is packed up in words in a book and taken to the other end of the world, how can it relate with the territory in which it was given birth, created in forms which walked out of the landscape onto the sandstone of the rock caves and established themselves here for millennia? These are the rock paintings located *in situ* in the midst of the very territory in which the rock painters painted it. I will give an example. In my country (Hazaribagh, Jharkhand state, East India) there are fourteen rock shelters with their meso-chalcolithic art which I brought to light since 1991 and have visited and studied regularly ever since. Take one site, Nautangwa Pahar (*pahar* means a hill). It has drawings of deer and square forms representing temples with doors, and the waxing crescent moon with human figures. This moon is painted several times over this beautiful rock shelter. The deer have babies in their stomachs. The site faces the west. During the festival of spring which we call Basanth the pregnant crescent moon faces the moon in the sky across the forest and the river and the ranges of hills as the moon of Basant hangs in the purple of the evening sky at twilight. The people fold their hands and worship this moon. The rock paintings in the sandstone of the Nautangwa Pahar shelter worship this moon. The communication over untold millennia is complete. Because this is unchanging India.

But sadly the forest is to be soon mined for coal and the river dammed for a thermal power plant and trees cut by the thousands for power transmission lines, and the deer and their young will have to find new forests to hide in. We cannot save this sacred landscape by writing it into text as I have here done, we may only save its memory. But to the rock-painters their work was not memory but reality, the reality of making forms which they could hear crying in the forest, of moons rising month after month over their painted shelters, of men and women like themselves coming and going and understanding the permanence of their work.

#### MIND OF THE STONE

Once now many years ago when I was studying the ethnobotany of a nomadic tribe in Hazaribagh (now

a book, *The Nomadic Birhor*, published by LAP publishing, Germany) the Birhor medicine woman named Kamli who was teaching me to identify forest plants used in their pharmacopia suddenly stopped, folded her hands and looked up the side of a hill where a fifty-foot monolithic "face of Shiva" is venerated by our people as Mahadeva. She said to me wistfully as she prayed "In those days the animal could enter the mind of the stone? Could stone have a mind? Later I found this belief common among other tribes elsewhere in the world, and people becoming animals was also possible. An Inuit Eskimo woman named Natungxac once said:

In the very earliest time a person could become an animal, and an animal could become a human being.

There was no difference in language between men and animals, and the language spoken could come alive in Form; what people wanted could happen if they spoke it. It was simply the way things were.

In my lengthy discussions with our primitive tribes who painted the rock art of our region, in particular the Birhor hunter-gatherer nomads, their understanding of the rock paintings is very simple, because they themselves draw similar forms on the dust of the ground even today around their leaf dwellings. They are strangely animal-like in their movements and expressions, although surrounded by the deforestation and industrialization of a rapidly industrializing modern nation which considers them shameful examples of backwardness. They talk with their animals as if they were humans, talking to fowls and parrots, goats and dogs, both seeming to understand one another well. Their language is agglutinative with a "click" common to the San. I have heard of such peoples in the jungles of Venezuela, Yucatan, and Tanzania. I am not surprised, because the paintings which they have made for me on cardboard are as intimate as the thousands of years old rock art looking down on the valleys of my home land. Qualified anthropologist friends tell me that secret specific languages have been found among the Lappo, Ostyx, Chukchen, Yakut, Tungus, and I know that Amerindian tribes in Venezuela imitate animal and bird cries; the Pomo and Menomini shamans of North America I am told are experts; Australian Aboriginals have dances emulating the local birds and animals like Emu, Kangaroo, Wallaby, etc.

#### THE CONTINUING TRADITION

After I found the first few painted rock shelters of Hazaribagh I became interested in the art I saw painted on the houses of tribal villages near the rock art sites. In every instance I noted a continuing tradition, not copies, but an evolving tradition. I have studied it these past nearly thirty years and the deeper I go the more on the surface does it seem, for the forms are very elemental and nothing complex about them. A rectangle represents a pond, crossed diagonals means a secret meeting point, generally attributed to the mother goddess, and its representation may take many forms; the triangle is universally considered the female genera-

tive organ, the circle Mother; and so on. I have done a detailed study of meanings attributed to several hundred forms. I have not published it because it is sacred material of our people.

Rock paintings were the first manifestations of human recognition of their identity from haematite grass stripes and hand-stamps from mouth blowing to the later more cryptic - or naturalistic forms. It was also man's apportioning of his space over territory; the earliest forms may have been inspiration for the alphabet perhaps from the rock art of the eastern Sahara or Sinai. Forms later used as pictographs and later alphabets remained symbols among the pre-literate societies which first used them. In my India the many tribes that still exist in comparative isolation still have secret ritual forms which are important for their shamanistic purposes and it is not surprising that dozens of these forms are found in our rock art dated as far back as ten thousand years before present. For example during the great harvest festival in October still practiced in hundreds of villages in my region the houses have large mural paintings comparable to those of Catal Hoyuk (7000 B.C.) in Anatolia identical in form and content depicting huge bulls and dancers using the long "Mandar" drum. The cattle are spotted and welcomed to their stalls over strings of circles which represent the cattle hoofs and are called "Aripan". It is not surprising that wheeled spotted cows and strings of circles i.e. "Aripans" are found in the rock art of our region and dated by experts to 3500 BC.

#### DIFFERENCES IN THOUGHT PROCESS BETWEEN ANCIENT AND MODERN

I would believe that the differences in thought processes between ancient and modern is that in the modern we expect a rational explanation and understanding before a thing is scientifically credited with having meaning; while in the old primordial way the realization of a thing's meaning in the even primitive consciousness was enough to give it identity and credibility. This process of realization modern societies have lost with time and especially in the past several centuries of so called enlightenment, industrialization, and science, in which things only have meaning if they can be measured and arbitrarily defined in terms of a ruling paradigm, otherwise they do not exist. One could also say this arbitrary dictum is closely allied to the power and economy which controls territories and would not divest its authority to a bunch of pre-historic rock artists.

I would like to end with a few words written by a seer,

Tired of all who come with words but no language  
I went to the snow-covered island.

The wild does not have words.

The un-written pages spread themselves.

I came across the marks of the roe deer's hooves in the snow

Language, but no words !

(Tomas Transtromer)



Fig. 1 - Mesolithic rockart from Nautangwa Pahar, Hazaribagh showing the pregnant crescent moon of the spring festival of Basanth Panchmi



Fig. 2 - Nomadic Birhor children drawing on the walls of government housing



Fig. 3 - Nomadic Birhor leaf houses called Kumba

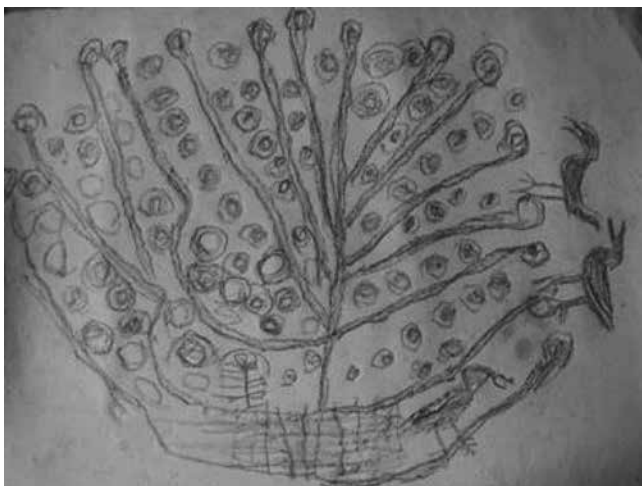


Fig. 4 - Birhor contemporary painting



Fig. 5 - Bulls painted during Sohrai harvest festival in Hazaribagh



Fig. 6 - Cattle entering a house courtyard over the welcome Aripan or string of circles in the form of hooves



Fig. 7 - Spotted cattle with strings of circles representing cattle hooves (Aripan)