

LIGHT AND DARKNESS: EARLIEST ROCK ART EVIDENCE FOR AN ARCHETYPAL METAPHOR

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ABSTRACT

The human nervous system generates a range of altered states of consciousness. Some of these states give rise to conceptions of a tiered cosmos that are peculiarly characteristic of shamanic societies. This paper accepts arguments for Upper Palaeolithic shamanism that have been put forward elsewhere. It goes on from this position to identify in Franco-Cantabrian Upper Palaeolithic shamanic cosmology and in specific features of Upper Palaeolithic parietal art the earliest evidence for an archetypal binary metaphor, light:darkness.

In 1934 T.S. Eliot was asked to write the text for a religious pageant entitled The Rock. It is not one of his most successful pieces, but there are many fine lines in the choruses. In one of these he writes, with a touch of irony, that men

Invented the Higher Religions; and the Higher Religions
were good
And led men from light to light, to knowledge of Good
and Evil,
But their light was ever surrounded and shot with
darkness
As the air of temperate seas is pierced by the still
dead breath of the Arctic Current.

In another chorus, he writes of morning light and evening light, and then of lesser lights:

The twilight over stagnant pools at batflight,
Moon light and star light, owl and moth light,
Glow-worm glowlight on a grassblade.

...

Light
The visible reminder of Invisible Light.

In these richly evocative twentieth-century lines, Eliot is drawing on a metaphoric tradition that stretches back not decades, nor even centuries, but millennia. He is developing and exploring the great archetypal metaphor light:darkness. A search for the earliest evidence for this binary metaphor entails a dual enquiry. In time, we go back to the Upper Palaeolithic; in pursuit of thought patterns, we examine a fundamental experience of human life. Despite its universality, this experience is often ignored by archaeologists who study ancient thought and behaviour. Yet it is generated by the undisputed existence of various types of consciousness.

Higher-order consciousness, as the neurologist Gerald Edelman (1994) calls it, is the hallmark of being human. Animals do not have it. It allows us to contemplate the past and the future and to be conscious of consciousness itself. Without it, human life as we know it would be impossible. But higher-order consciousness is not a static condition; it is more like a sliding scale. Alert consciousness, for want of a better term, is at one end of a wide range of different states that make up higher-order consciousness. The range extends from alert consciousness to 'light' altered states, such as day-dreaming, through to 'deep' hallucinatory states that may, though not necessarily, be induced by the ingestion of psychotropic drugs. Dreaming is, perhaps, the most widely acknowledged of these altered states of consciousness. Throughout the world, people hold many different beliefs about the nature of dreams: some people believe that dreams afford glimpses of another reality; others accept that dreams are nothing more than the product of the human nervous system and therefore not significant in any spiritual way. Some states, like dreaming, are natural; others, such as some of the experiences of schizophrenia or temporal lobe epilepsy, are pathological. Every society has ways of defining and dealing with all the different kinds of consciousness. Movement, intentional or unintentional, between alert consciousness and various kinds of natural and pathological altered consciousness is a key neurologically generated but culturally understood and defined universal human experience. All people have to accommodate it in one way or another, for it is wired into the nervous system of Homo sapiens sapiens.

The most widespread and, I argue, ancient way of defining altered states of consciousness and dealing with movement between states is shamanism. I shall not attempt a definition of shamanism, for that would introduce a protracted, and probably inconclusive logomachy. Instead, I confine this discussion to elements of hunter-gatherer shamanism that are central and, I believe, not generally contested. First, I list those elements. I then argue that, in the shamanic experience as it was manifest in west European Upper Palaeolithic parietal art, we can discern the earliest evidence for the great archetypal binary metaphor: light and darkness. This metaphor structures the ways in which people think about a great many things; it is a vehicle for the

richness and allusiveness of a type of thought that is peculiarly human.

Shamanism: central features

For the purpose of this discussion I list ten features of shamanism that I consider to be central to its expression in hunting and gathering societies. Within these ten features lies the generative complex that led to the formation of the binary metaphor, light and darkness.

In the first place, hunter-gatherer shamanism is fundamentally posited on a range of institutionalised altered states of consciousness. Secondly, the visual, aural and somatic experiences of altered states of consciousness give rise to conceptions of an alternative reality that is usually tiered. Thirdly, people with special powers and skills, the shamans, are believed to have access to this alternative reality. Fourthly, the behaviour of the human nervous system in certain altered states creates the illusion of dissociation from one's body (less commonly understood in hunting and gathering shamanic societies as possession). Shamans use dissociation and other experiences of altered consciousness to achieve at least four ends; these ends constitute the next four features of hunter-gatherer shamanism. Shamans are believed to contact spirits and supernatural entities; they heal the sick; they attempt to control the movements and lives of animals; they are believed to have the ability to change the weather. Ninthly, these four functions of shamans, as well as their entrance into an altered state of consciousness, are believed to be facilitated by a variously conceived supernatural potency, or power. Lastly, this potency is commonly associated with animal-helpers that assist shamans in the performance of their tasks.

In compiling these ten characteristics of hunter-gatherer shamanism I have excluded features that some writers consider important, if not essential, for the classification of a religion as shamanic. I do not, for instance, link shamanism to mental illness of any sort, though some shamans may well suffer from epilepsy, schizophrenia, migraine and a range of other pathological conditions. Nor do I stipulate the number of religious practitioners that a shamanic society may have; some societies have many, others only a few, often politically powerful, shamans. Nor do I stipulate any particular method or methods for the induction of altered states of consciousness. Altered states may be induced by ingestion of psychotropic drugs, rhythmic and audio driving, meditation, sensory deprivation, pain, hyperventilation, and so forth.

If we allow only the ten distinguishing features I have given, the word 'shaman' can be freed from its central Asian Tungus origin and be more widely applied (cf. Eliade 1972; Lewis-Williams 1992), including, I argue, to the Upper Palaeolithic of western Europe.

Shamanic cosmology

It is important to note that shamanism is not simply a set of beliefs about spirits and animals; it is also a cosmology. The universality among shamanic societies of a tiered cosmology - realms above and below the level on which human beings conduct their daily affairs - is, I argue, a function of some of the ways in which the human nervous system behaves in certain altered states.

On the one hand, some altered states, especially those at the hallucinatory end of the sliding scale, generate sensations of physical attenuation, rising up, extra-corporeal journeys that sometimes involve changes in perspective (e.g. looking down on one's surroundings) and, very commonly, flight. It is these universal, neurologically created experiences that give rise to beliefs about a realm above. Located somewhere in the sky, so it comes to be believed, are supernatural beings and existences that are accessible to human beings under certain circumstances. Some of these circumstances are accidental, some induced, some pathological, but, in toto, they create a reality above earth's diurnal course.

On the other hand, certain altered states of consciousness generate a sensation of entering a tunnel, or vortex, that leads down into the earth. This subterranean journey is accompanied by feelings of constriction, obscurity and, often, terror. In shamanic societies, the realm to which the tunnel leads is inhabited by its own beings whose spheres of influence differ from those of the beings who live in the realms above.

Neuropsychological research has shown that this vortex often leads into the deepest and most hallucinatory level, or stage, of altered consciousness. It is in this deep stage that subjects report experiencing bizarre physical transformations (such as changing into animals), seeing strange multi-species monsters, feeling that the parameters of normal time, space and causality have dissolved, and believing that all these experiences add up to valuable insights into an alternative reality that stands in contradistinction to the reality that they experience in alert consciousness.

The protean, changing experiences of deep altered states sometimes lead to a blurring of the distinction between the realm above and the realm below. San shamans, for instance, speak of travelling underground and then, without giving much detail, of ascending celestial threads to god's house in the realm above.

Essentially, shamans have the power to transcend, to mediate, the tiered cosmos and this ability is one of the characteristics that set them apart from other people. Their spiritual and political power is thus derived from and posited on the existence of a tiered cosmos. Power is inextricably bound up with notions of a particular kind of cosmos.

Upper Palaeolithic shamanism and art

I now consider the relevance of these remarks about shamanism worldwide to the west European Upper Palaeolithic. The thought that Upper Palaeolithic religion was essentially shamanic and, further that Franco-Cantabrian parietal art was implicated in shamanic beliefs has long been entertained,¹ though never fully argued, developed and generally accepted.

My own arguments for the shamanic explanation have been set out elsewhere (Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1988, 1992, 1993; Lewis-Williams 1991a, 1991b) and need not be repeated here. Instead, I take up the importance of the shamanic tiered cosmology in the generation of the light:darkness binary metaphor.

It seems highly probable, some would say incontrovertible, that entrance into the deep caves of western Europe was, for Upper Palaeolithic people, entrance into the realm below, a supernaturally populated level of the shamanic cosmos. Movement through underground passages physically and mentally replicates the neurologically generated sensation of entering the vortex that leads to the hallucinations of deep trance. Those passages, moreover, lead to dark, silent, isolated chambers and diverticules. Here people would have experienced sensory deprivation, one of the numerous conditions that induce altered state of consciousness (La Barre 1975:14; Walker 1981:146; Pfeiffer 1982:2111; Siegel and Jarvik 1975). As the normal sensory input is reduced, the neurology of the brain begins to function differently from the ways in which it functions in alert consciousness, and the cross-firing of the neurons produces non-veridical percepts, or hallucinations.

In hunting and gathering societies, animals feature prominently among those non-veridical percepts. They are not taken to be real animals. Rather, they are believed to be spirit-animals that can become the spirit-helpers of those who seek them through altering their consciousness. This mental search is the widely reported vision quest of shamanic societies. One of the reasons for entering the caves of western Europe was, I argue, to search for these animal-helpers. Either as a result of sensory deprivation or as a consequence of having ingested psychotropic drugs, questers believed that they could encounter and engage these inhabitants of the chthonic realm.

Evidence for this subterranean shamanic search for animal-helpers is complex. Here I focus on two important features of parietal art; the second is a subtle variation of the first.

One of the best known and most consistent features of Upper Palaeolithic, especially Magdalenian, parietal art is the use that artists made of features of the rock surfaces on which they placed their images. Almost every Magdalenian cave contains examples; I cite but a few.

At Labastide, for instance, the natural contours of the rock have been used to provide the dorsal line of a bison; the rest of the animal has been suggested by the addition of a few features (Omnes 1982: fig. 154; see also fig. 147, Pl. XIX, no.1). Upper Palaeolithic depictions are also often placed so that a small, seemingly insignificant nodule or protuberance forms the eye of an animal. On a larger scale, a natural rock shape at Comarque seems to have suggested a remarkably realistic horse's head, complete with nostrils and mouth (Bahn and Vertut 1988: figs 65, 66). Human figures occasionally also make use of natural features of the rock. At Le Portel, for example, a red outline human figure is painted so that a protuberance becomes its penis (Bahn and Vertut 1988: fig. 52). The importance of natural features of the rock is particularly clear at Castillo where a depiction of a bison has been painted to fit undulations in the surface of a stalagmite: the back, tail and hindleg of the depiction fit the shape of the rock. But in order to use the rock in this way the artist had to position the bison vertically (Bahn and Vertut 1988: fig. 53). In doing so, he or she expressed a highly significant difference between painted animals and the animals of the real world that, in the nature of things, normally assume horizontality. What was important to the Castillo artist was fitting the bison into the natural features of the rock, not orienting the image so that it would call to mind a real, standing bison.

So far, I have described depictions that present, principally, lateral views of animals. By contrast, in the Salon Noir at Niaux an artist added antlers to a hole in the rock that looks something like the head of a deer as seen face on (Bahn and Vertut 1988: fig. 55; Clottes 1995: figs 142, 164). At Altamira, in one of the deepest sections of the cave, natural shapes in the rock have been transformed into so-called masks by the addition of painted eyes and, in one case, a black patch that may represent a beard (Leroi-Gourhan 1968: figs 402-404; Freeman *et al.* 1987:224-233). A similar technique has been employed at Gargas (Breuil 1952: fig. 271). At Montespan, a natural rock formation has been similarly transformed into what appears to be an animal head (Leroi-Gourhan 1968: pl. 36). The same effect has been achieved at Rouffignac where a remarkable horse's head has been painted on a flint nodule that juts out from the wall of the cave; the body of the horse seems to be behind the rock wall. For a final example I cite a depiction in the Chimney at Bernifal: eyes, nostril and mouth have been added to a natural edge to produce a human face. The effect created by these images is of human and animal faces looking out of the rock wall, the rest of the bodies being concealed behind the surface of the rock.

All the examples I have so far described point to an interaction between the maker of an image and natural features of the rock face. The second group of examples are especially important because they imply interaction between, not just makers of images and their handiwork, but also between viewers

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and images. Sometimes an undulation in the rock surface becomes the dorsal line of an animal if one's light is held in a specific position; an artist has simply added legs and some other features to the shadow. By moving one's lamp the image can be made to disappear and re-appear. At Niaux, for example, an undulation in the rock has been used as a bison's back; this is especially clear when the light source is held to the left of and slightly below the image. An artist has added legs and a belly line. But, like the bison at Castillo, this Niaux animal is positioned vertically in order to exploit the natural features of the rock (Clottes 1995: figs 177, 180). On a larger scale, the head of one of the well known 'spotted horses' at Pech Merle is suggested by a natural feature of the rock, especially when the source of light is in a certain position (fig. 5). But, in this case, the artist distorted the painted horse's head, making it grotesquely smaller; the rock shape is in fact more realistically proportioned than the painted head. It is as though the rock suggested 'horse', yet the artist painted not a 'real' horse but a distorted horse, perhaps a 'spirit-horse'. Freeman (Freeman *et al.* 1987:105) points out that the technique of using shadows to complete a depiction "is more common than is usually supposed", and he describes a number of examples.

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In these and many other instances, the sought-after animal is not simply discovered. It is created by human intervention and an interaction between two elements, light and darkness. Leaving the world of light and entering the dark, subterranean realm, shamans carried a lamp, sometimes itself empowered by engraved animals or signs. This puny, flicking flame, at least, was something the questers had mastered and that they could use for further revelations. Perhaps this light was seen as a fragment of a greater light, or, in T.S. Eliot's phrase, a lesser light that was a reminder of all the connotations of one of the great metaphors of their lives. In their close examinations of the walls people used this fragment of a greater light to throw moving shadows that came and went, insubstantial interplays across rock walls and stalactites that were, in a sense, a membrane between questers and the subterranean animal-filled tier of the cosmos. Then, for the prepared mind, a shadow suddenly showed itself to be, say, a dorsal line of a bison. Only a few painted lines were then needed to complete the animal. In adding these details, the shaman mastered the spirit-animal; simple movements of the light source could send the spirit-animal back through the membrane into its own world or bring it back into view.

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The making of these images entailed a series of bodily movements that inevitably involved symbolic associations. First, entrance into the lowest tier of the shamanic cosmos led to light and darkness becoming associated, respectively, with the daily world and with the realm of spiritual experience. Secondly, the interplay of light and darkness, bestowed power. Light afforded access to the lowest cosmological tier, and, in that realm, light became creative

in the hands of the shaman: light could be used to call up, to invoke spirit-animals.

It is, of course, quite possible that the genesis of the binary light-darkness metaphor took place before the Upper Palaeolithic, even before people ventured into the caves. Day and night may well have been a much earlier generating factor. Once created the metaphor was probably extended to embrace and inform beliefs about the caves. Indeed, it seems probable that during the Upper Palaeolithic the great binary metaphor became a vehicle for multiple meanings that may have included notions of life and death, good and bad, though, of course, in formulations different from those that have run through the Western tradition down to the present day. In any event, I argue that Upper Palaeolithic parietal art provides the earliest evidence for humankind's exploration of the possibilities and permutations of the light:darkness metaphor.

The Western tradition

Played out in different ways, the archetypal light:darkness binary metaphor is probably a structuring theme in all cultures, but one that is open to constant change and development. Notwithstanding the potential for the binary vehicle to carry different meanings, it seems very probable that some of those meanings are universal simply because the neurological functions that give rise to the experiences of altered states of consciousness are universal. The way in which the binary metaphor gathers connotations through time can be discerned in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

God's first intervention was to create light. He then "divided the light from the darkness...And the evening and the morning were the first day" (Genesis 1:3-5). At this early stage, light and darkness are purely cosmological. Soon, they acquire rich connotations and significances. In the Book of Esther, light is associated with joy and comfort: "The Jews had light, and gladness, and joy, and honour" (Esther 8:16). Darkness, by contrast, comes to be associated with distress, perplexity and calamity. Isaiah, for instance, prophesies, "And they shall look unto the earth; and behold trouble and darkness, dimness and anguish, and they shall be driven to darkness" (Isaiah 8:22). Light is also associated with truth and knowledge: "If they speak not according to this work, it is because there is no light in them" (Isaiah 8:20). Darkness, on the other hand, is associated with ignorance and error: "The light," writes St John "shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not" (John 1:5). Then, by extension, light comes to be associated with Heaven and the new earth, the holy city: "And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it; for the glory of God did lighten it, and Lamb is the light thereof" (Revelation 21:23). In sombre contrast to the light of Heaven above, the grave below is a land of darkness: "Cease then, and let me alone, that I may take comfort a little, before I go whence I shall not return, even to the land of darkness and the shadow of death"

(Job 10:20-21). Not surprisingly, Christ proclaims himself to be the Light of the World (John 8:12), and Satan is characterised as the Prince of Darkness.

Thus does the archetypal metaphor structure Judeo-Christian religious thought. In poetry too, light and darkness are never far from the page. In Hamlet, the guilt-ridden, mouse-trapped King cries out, "Give me some light!" The darkness of his soul is more than he can bear. Three centuries later, after the horrors of a First World War battle, Wilfred Owen goes "down some profound dull tunnel" to Hell where he meets the German soldier he had bayoneted. Raising "distressful hands as if to bless" the dead soldier cries out, "I am the enemy you killed, my friend./I knew you in this dark" (Strange Meeting). On a happier and culturally wider note, we read in Edward FitzGerald's romanticised version of The Rubaiyat by the medieval Persian poet Omar Khayyam that "the Hunter of the East has caught/The Sultan's Turret in a Noose of Light". Later, Omar Khayyam (or FitzGerald) remarks in his comfortable melancholy, "The Stars are setting and the Caravan/Starts for the Dawn of Nothing."

Conclusion

From Genesis to Shakespeare to FitzGerald to Wilfred Owen to T.S. Eliot there runs a symbolic thread that links diverse experiences and draws more and more subtleties into the shifting patterns of Western thought. I have tried to show that this metaphoric thread joins our late twentieth century experience to the experiences of people who lived ten to thirty thousand years ago.

Numerous writers have discussed the metaphors by which we live, the ones that give meaning and orientation to our lives, that structure the ways in which we react to the world around us and to other people. Light and darkness is one of those metaphors. But, unlike many others of more recent origin, light:darkness can be traced back to Upper Palaeolithic shamanism. Indeed, this metaphor joins us to the whole family of humankind.

The persistence of the light:darkness metaphor through millennia is linked to fundamental human experience that renders the binary structure of the metaphor inevitable: one element is inconceivable without the other; light implies darkness, even as darkness implies light. T.S. Eliot, with whom I began this enquiry, remarks on both the continuity and the indivisibility of the metaphor. Also in The Rock, he writes,

And we must extinguish the candle, put out the light
and relight it;
Forever must quench, forever relight the flame.
Therefore we thank Thee for our little light,
that is dappled with shadow.

And we thank Thee that darkness reminds us of light.

Note

1. The hypothesis that Upper Palaeolithic art may, in some measure, have been associated in some way with shamanic beliefs and rituals has been frequently proposed. See, for example, Levy 1963; Lommel 1967; La Barre 1970; Eliade 1972; Marshack 1972:280, 1976:278-9; Eichmeier and Höfer 1974; Furst 1976; Halifax 1980:3, 17; Pfeiffer 1982; Hedges 1983; Bednarik 1984, 1986; Hayden 1987, 1990; Bahn and Vertut 1988:157-8; Goodman 1988; Dickson 1990; Smith 1992.

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