



SIBERIAN ROCK ART AND SHAMANISM: HISTORY VERSUS PHENOMENON

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Summary

Phenomenologically oriented 'archaeology of shamanism' has naturally focused on traces of shamanic experience identified in different periods and parts of the world. By accepting the trance as a crucial factor of shamanic practice, this research has particularly relied on rock art – visual expression of the 'mind'. The research on rock art has then actively influenced the universal picture of shamanism as a cross-cultural phenomenon. In Siberia, however, shamanism is perceived differently, being 'something' more than just an anthropological construct: here it is still living tradition. Importantly – tradition with its own history. The question then appears: can rock art be a part of this tradition? And if so, can rock art be the source for discussing the antiquity of this tradition? It is argued that to answer these questions the analysis of Siberian rock art requires more historical than phenomenological perspective.

RIASSUNTO

L' "archeologia dello sciamanismo, orientata dal punto di vista fenomenologico, si è naturalmente focalizzata sulle tracce dell'esperienza sciamanica identificata in diversi periodi e parti del mondo. Accettando la trance come fattore cruciale della pratica sciamanica, questa ricerca si è basata in particolar modo sull'arte rupestre – espressione visiva della "mente". La ricerca sull'arte rupestre ha poi influenzato attivamente l'immagine universale dello sciamanismo come fenomeno che attraversa tutte le culture. In Siberia tuttavia, lo sciamanismo è percepito in modo diverso, come qualcosa di più di una semplice costruzione antropologica: là è ancora una tradizione viva. Un elemento importante: è una tradizione dotata di una storia propria. Sorge quindi la domanda: l'arte rupestre può essere parte di questa tradizione? E se così fosse, può essa essere una fonte per discutere l'antichità di tale tradizione? Viene sostenuto che, per rispondere a tali domande, l'analisi dell'arte rupestre siberiana necessita di una prospettiva storica piuttosto che fenomenologica.

RESUME

D'un point de vue phénoménologique, « l'archéologie du chamanisme » est naturellement axée sur des vestiges d'expérience chamannique identifiés selon différentes périodes et parties du monde. En acceptant le fait que l'état de transe est un facteur crucial de la pratique chamane, cette recherche a particulièrement compté sur l'art rupestre – expression visuelle de « l'esprit ». Les recherches menées sur l'art rupestre ont ainsi activement influencé l'image universelle d'un chamanisme considéré comme un phénomène interculturel. En Sibérie cependant, le chamanisme est perçu différemment, comme « quelque chose » de plus qu'un simple concept anthropologique : il s'agit à nouveau, ici, d'une tradition des mœurs. Un point important : il s'agit de la tradition avec sa propre histoire. La question qui alors surgit : l'art rupestre peut-il faire parti de la tradition ? Et si c'est le cas, l'art rupestre peut-il être la source d'un débat sur l'ancienneté de cette tradition ? Il est maintenu que pour répondre à ces questions, l'analyse de l'art sibérien requiert plus une perspective historique que phénoménologique.

During the last two decades of rock art studies, the relationship between rock art and shamanism has been one of the most lively and most frequently discussed issues. Most of this discussion has taken place in the context of art originating in South African, North American, or West European Palaeolithic sites (e.g. Lewis-Williams 2002), and has treated shamanism as a universal phenomenon. Such understanding, being in line with the thinking started by Eliade (1972), is based on an assumption that humans have a natural predisposition to transcend the limits of consciousness, and shamanism may be one of the contexts, one which has resulted in placing such a capacity in the framework of an "institution". This understanding of shamanism, which I label phenomenological, appears a useful tool to describe and analyse ritual contexts centred on experiencing altered states of consciousness. In my research, however, I have been pointing to some contradictions between this understanding of shamanism and the context prevailing in Siberia or Central Asia. While in Africa, for example, shamanism is a typological notion, defining a ritual property of a given culture, in Siberia it is not merely an anthropological construct, but a living tradition.

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The word 'shaman' has a religious value in Siberia. Emphasizing the shamanistic nature of rock art in contexts varying as much as those of Africa, America or Palaeolithic Europe, even when justified by acknowledging its phenomenological character, may in the long run give the impression of simplifying the complexity of both non-Asian and Asian cultures. A popular application of this term may also provoke an ethical discussion, since it gives the impression that something very specific is taken away from the culture of Siberian peoples and transferred onto other cultural and historical contexts. This transfer is strongly related to the fact that shamanism in Siberia is regarded in some circles as a form of religion. Particularly today, along with the weakening of Moscow's central power, the regional cultures strive to revive their traditions, and some of them assume shamanism to be the credo of their tradition (Kharitonova 2006). Therefore, any discussion about shamanism has an ethical and emotional dimension and requires a great ethical sensitivity from archaeologists. In response to this circumstance I proposed (Rozwadowski 2009) to distinguish in rock art studies **phenomenological shamanism** from **historical shamanism**.

Despite some differences between these two ways of applying shamanism to an interpretation of rock art, and the postulate of situating Siberian rock art more in an historical than a purely phenomenological context (Rozwadowski 2008a, 2009), I am convinced that our understanding of Siberian rock art, particularly when shamanism is discussed, can be considerably enriched by models developed in other cultural contexts. The primary focus of my current work is therefore exploring which aspects of a phenomenologically based modelling of shamanism, as well as their possible limits, would be most constructive in understanding the rock art in Siberia and Central Asia. It is clearly impossible to answer these questions in one short paper. Thus I will only refer to one aspect, one which has been central to my investigations for the past few years, but which unexpectedly focused my attention again in summer 2008 while I was visiting some rock art sites in South Siberia.

In the recent past, I have often made references to imagery patterns derived from studies of universal human reactions to altered states of consciousness, which appeared productive to identifying examples from Central Asian rock art (e.g. Rozwadowski 2001a, 2001b, 2002, 2004). One category of such references has addressed entoptic imagery. Although this phenomenon is not readily observed in the rock art of Siberia and Central Asia, one expression appeared particularly promising. It concerns human figures with strange shapes proximate to their heads. The shapes are typically variations of circular forms. These "heads" appear to present close, sometimes even surprisingly close similarities, to phosphene patterns perceived in ASC (Rozwadowski 2001b, 2004). Analysing petroglyphs associated with these puzzling humans, I discovered that some of the images are specifically related to cracks, which I perceived as an additional argument to suggest "shamanic" overtones for this rock art. This interpretation has been described elsewhere (Rozwadowski 2001b, 2003) and I will not describe it in detail here. What is crucial for our present discussion is that this prehistoric rock art is probably four thousand years old. Therefore, although in this interpretation I pointed to several features which echo the tradition of Siberian shamanism in an historical context (Rozwadowski 2008b), this art is obviously devoid of direct ethnographical context. This is why instead of saying that this art is shamanistic, I prefer to speak about a configuration of symbols which later, in historic times, became important also for ethnographically documented shamanism (Rozwadowski 2009). In my recent field work in Siberia during the summer of 2008, however, I discovered petroglyphs of unquestionable shamanic iconography which surprisingly duplicate the significant association of rock images with cracks, or the rock in general. What is even more intriguing is that this rock art reminds me of other critical themes originally recognized in South Africa and North America and I will come back to this question at the end of the paper.

The rock art site in question is located in the Minusinsk Basin of Krasnoyarsk County, about 30 miles from Minusink, and on the border with Khakasia. The closest village is Ilinskaya. The main motif of this Siberian panel is the image of a shaman holding a drum (Fig. 1). As is commonly known, the drum plays a central role in Siberian shamanic ritual behaviour. It should be noted, however, that contrary to its significance in contemporary cultures, its representations in rock art are rather rare, particularly when we start analyzing the art of strictly prehistoric times, i.e. older than one thousand years (the archaeological context of Siberian rock art suggests to some researchers [Bokovenko 2006] that the art originated with the Tagar culture, which flourished in South Siberia during the first millennium BC). While the image is relatively unique, it is very important to understand regional shamanistic rock art.

The image is known in both the Russian archaeological literature and local folklore. It has been reproduced, for example, on magnets offered for sale to tourists. In both cases, it has been shown as an isolated figure without any reference to other petroglyphs at the site or to the rock formation on which it appears. I suppose that there were very few people who actually visited the site and that the image was abstracted on the basis of a naive documentation which focused exclusively on the "most important" element, that

being the shaman with a drum. But it is well known in the sphere of rock art research that the rock can be as pregnant in meaning as silence is in music, an idea expressed many years ago by David Lewis-Williams and Thomas Dowson (Lewis-Williams, Dowson 1990: 15). If one actually examines the image it is impossible, I would suggest, to overlook its very specific position on the rock. It is placed in a large cleft, or weathering feature, which interrupts an otherwise very smooth lithic surface. Thus, not only is the image unique (it is the only such image of a shaman at this site), but also its relation to the rock is unique (it is the only such cleft with petroglyphs). I would like to suggest that such a location of the shaman in the cleft is intentional and to support this hypothesis I wish to describe this symbolic context from regional shamanic practice.

Minusinsk Basin is inhabited by the Khakass people. One of the tribes of the Khakass is the Sagay. Valentina Kharitonova has recently published her notes on Sagay shamanism (Kharitonova 2005). They are the product of her interviews with elderly Sagay shamans. Particularly interesting is information obtained from an old woman known as Grandmother Tadi. The Sagay are popularly known as "mountainous people", but this epithet does not refer to the fact that their territory is rich in mountains, as one would expect, but it has rather a symbolic meaning. It refers to their belief that after death the soul travels to a mountainous place where it continues its "existence" as "ancestor". Some narratives suggest that this phenomenon applies particularly to the souls of shamans. Importantly, only living shamans have the power and capacity for contacting the "Mountainous People" and the technique involves "going into the rock". The oral tradition, however, has further details of particular significance for the interpretation of rock art. When a shaman dies his drum is often destroyed or ritually killed. Because the drum is believed to be a living entity, and because the shaman and his drum cannot be separated and the shaman still retain his power, the death of a shaman must be accompanied by the death of his drum. But Tadi says that some drums were so big and so strong that people were not able to break them. These, and others, were left on the tops of mountains, places perceived as sacred spaces where other shamans' souls already lived, and "after some time" the drum finally "entered the rock". Thus it is believed, that shamanic drums live inside the mountains. An important corollary to this belief is found in the shaman's initiation ritual. To become a shaman, a candidate must obtain a drum because it is the most socially significant indicator of his possessing true shamanic power. While the drum can be built as a new real object, on a symbolic level it is believed to have been obtained from an ancestral shaman. Thus, even if the neophyte gets a real new drum, this drum is symbolically interpreted as a gift from a shaman who had passed away. The initiation requires the neophyte to journey to the realm of the ancestors to find a superior shaman who can offer him the gift of the drum. It is believed that the candidate enters the rock where the drum will be found waiting for him.

As I noted before, the rock image of the shaman in question has been recorded as an isolated element. It appears, however, that other images which are present in close proximity to this shaman are of equal significance for an understanding of the semantics of the art. Positioned a few inches above the shaman are two goats. One of them appears to be shot with a spear. This motif is really astonishing. As I said earlier, the topic of entering the rock was recognized or suggested in rock art studies from contexts as varied as South Africa, California, Canada, and Western European Palaeolithic caves. It was argued that this widespread finding is rooted in a universally defined shamanic imagination, to some extent resulting from interpreting trance sensations. But equally strong arguments have been put forward to suggest that one of the common metaphors of trance experience is death, which in rock art has often been expressed by the motif of killing an animal, or just by an animal being in the state of dying. This was originally recognized by David Lewis-Williams in the Drakensberg Mountains, explicitly in the Game Pass Shelter, where a dying eland is assumed to graphically express a metaphor for possessing supernatural potency *n/om* or *n/um* (e.g. Lewis-Williams 1981). This metaphor was also recognized in Californian rock art by David Whitley, in this case in the form of dying or killing bighorn sheep (e.g. Whitley 1994).

The association of the goat pierced by a spear with the shaman holding the drum (and placed in the crack) cannot be accidental. In the light of the symbolic context of the beliefs about shamans who enter the rock to find there their drums, we can assume that this moment required entering altered state of consciousness. The goat shot with an arrow/spear would thus be interpreted as a metaphor of this action. These images then are a logical component of the whole scene.

The whole composition can thus be interpreted as an expression of a shaman's initiation, one who needs to enter the rock to find his drum. All aspects of the composition support this hypothesis: (1) image of shaman who holds the drum; (2) separated representation of feet (just below the image of the shaman), as *pars pro toto*, directed to the interior of the cleft, i.e. as if an invisible person walked to enter the rock; (3) goat pierced by a spear is a possible metaphor of the trance required to enter the realm of ancestors; (4) all



images are placed in a large cleft; (5) the cleft looks like an entrance or “gate” into the rock.

What I offer is only a preliminary analysis of this rock art complex. But even this preliminary analysis raises important questions about culture specifics and universals in shamanistic rock art in Siberia. As far as I know, it is the first example of rock art in Siberia where we deal with unquestionable shamanic rock art, and where culture specifics noted in the context of South Siberian shamanism reveal significant correspondences with universals described in other cultures where trance experience provided context for interpreting rock art.

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Fig. 1. The rock and the petroglyphs situated in the cleft of the rock. Nearby Ilinskaya Village, Krasnoyarsk County, Siberia. Photo and tracing by Andrzej Rozwadowski.