

## Man, animal or both?

### Problems in the interpretation of early symbolic behaviour

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**ABSTRACT** – *The interpretation of the first symbolic behaviour is difficult, because our Western mind restricts us. It is hard, if not impossible, to understand the way ancient people perceived the world. The Palaeolithic was the period when the modern human mind had just emerged, and people understood time and the surrounding environment differently. With the appearance of the modern mind and the evolution of new perceptions of time, rituals and funerals emerged. Early therianthropes might be a reflection of this evolution of the human mind.*

**IZVLEČEK** – *Razlage prvega simboličnega vedenja so težavne, ker nas pri tem omejuje naš zahodni um. Težko, oziroma skoraj nemogoče je razumeti, kako so zgodnji ljudje dojemali svet. Paleolitik je obdobje, v katerem se je moderno človeško razmišljanje šele pojavilo in ljudje so takrat dojemali čas in okolje, ki jih je obdajalo, drugače kot ga mi. Z vzpostavitvijo modernega razmišljanja in razvojem novega pogleda na čas so se pojavili rituali in pokopi. Zgodnja sestavljena bitja (žival/človek) so morda odraz te evolucije človekovega uma.*

**KEY WORDS** – *self-awareness; identity; perception of time; therianthropes; Palaeolithic*

Depictions and figurines of therianthropes or composite beings emerged at the beginning of the Upper Palaeolithic. Interpretations of these hybrid beings vary. Some believe that they represent hunters in animal disguise (Demouche et al. 1996; Guthrie 2005.279; Hodgson, Helvenston 2006.6), others that they are shamans (Lewis-Williams, Dowson 1988.212; Clottes, Lewis-Williams 1998; Lewis-Williams 2002.205, 206) or some type of spiritual being (Clottes, Lewis-Williams 1998; Morris 2000.22).

In contemporary western society, people and animals are two different and totally separate entities. But was it always so? Was the boundary between humans and animals less well-defined, as it still is today in some of indigenous societies? And do composite beings in the early 'art' reflect this lack of distinction?

Humans and animals have close relationships. Animals are frequently the object of dreams in children

and adults, regardless of culture (Mundkur 1994. 160–162). Even in modern societies, estranged from nature and wild animals, contact with animal life is maintained through pets, which are abundant in the homes of Europeans and Americans. The degree of contact with pets in modern society is so great that in the United States more than 75% of pet owners consider their pets akin to children (American Animal Hospital Association 1996; Serpell 2005).

But for contemporary Western people, people are people and animals are animals. The idea that a human being can metamorphose into various animals is simply inconceivable within canonical Western thought (Willerslev 2007.79, 80). Two species are completely separated. But for some indigenous people, this is not the case. For the U'wa people, no rigid distinction is made between people and animals, because they are all products of the same creative process, contain the same properties and consume similar food. The U'wa shaman sees himself as a ja-

guar, bear or bird in the lower or upper world, and animals in turn see themselves as people in their own area – in the lower world, the bear becomes human (*Osborn 1994.150, 151*). According to the Inuit, at the beginning of time, animals and human beings lived together in total promiscuity. It was easy to change from one kind to another. The polar bear was the closest to man of all the animals: when it metamorphosed, it was recognizable by the size of its canines and its pronounced liking for fat (*D'Anglure 1994.178–180, 184*). Animals are also thought to act like people in their spirit animal world. The Hopi believe that animals can even doff their fur or feathers (*Bahti 1994.135*). For Siberian Yukaghirs, animals are also a type of people who live analogous lives to those of humans. They live in households with fireplaces whose smoke 'humanises' them. But even in the transformed state, animals retain some characteristics – for example, 'reindeer' people grunt instead of speak (*Willerslev 2007.1274*). So therianthropes might also be animals or animal spirits who are partially transformed into human beings, not only vice versa.

In the early phases of human evolution, the perception of the self might have been different than today, when we are convinced of our uniqueness and superiority to animals. People were much more connected with the world around them and at certain opportunities, when altered states of consciousness were attained in different ways, people and animals could merge into beings which were neither one nor the other.

Humans evolved from animals, and the first depictions of therianthropes might be representations of the mixed identity. They could be a reflection of human individualism emerging from collective consciousness. The emergence of a new perspective of the universe could be depicted in *Les Trois Frères*, the cave in France where therianthropes (Fig. 1), small human faces (Fig. 2a) and figures (Fig. 2b) appear surrounded by animals.

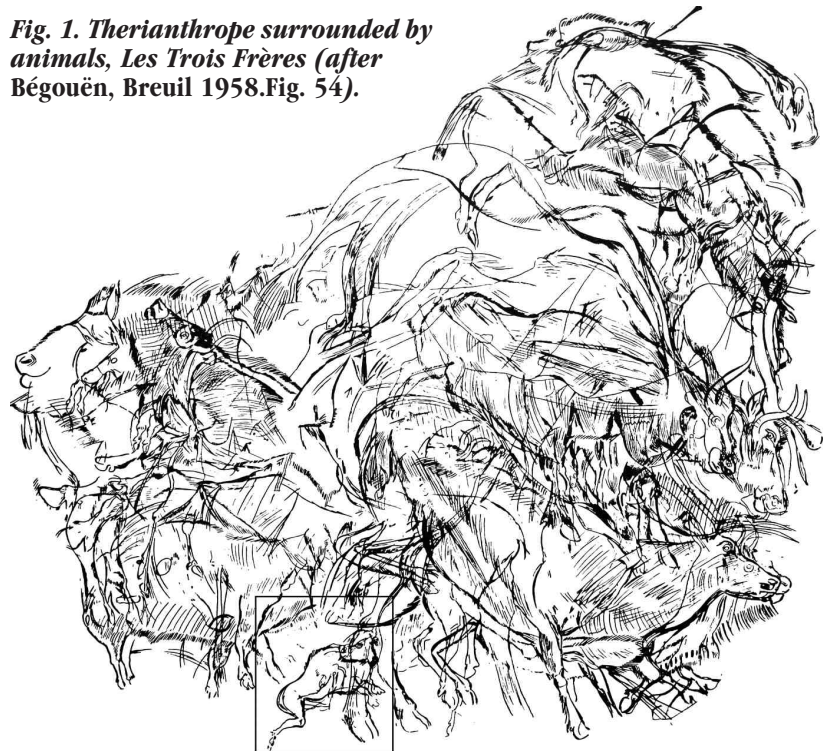
Human faces and figures appear as if they do not know what to do with their new place in the world. Most of the surrounding

animals are perfectly elaborated, while the human faces are clumsy and schematic – it seems that they lack identity. Bégouën and Breuil (1958.87) interpret the faces as animal souls, Eskimo Inuas or elementary spirits, but they seem more like something new that is starting to appear from the surrounding chaos.

When the new consciousness was formed, the collective one moved to the realm of the spiritual, where animals and people became spiritual beings which could on this level metamorphose into each other and easily communicate. People's sense of power over animals started to develop and they began to raise themselves above them. This is reflected in the image of the 'Sorcerer' from *Les Trois Frères*, in his elevated position above the animals (Fig. 3). It seems as if the images in this cave were executed when people were still searching for their identity and had just started to establish their position in the world. The images might be a record of the evolution of human identity from the first timid attempts to a fully developed symbolic mind.

Despite their new identity, it is very likely that early people perceived themselves as descendants of certain animals. Even today, in some cultures it is believed that people have mythological animal ancestors. In many cultures, moral lessons are taught via myths about animals, as in Aesop's fables, Sanskrit literature or in many other folklore tales in which animals represent human types: the lion is king, monkeys

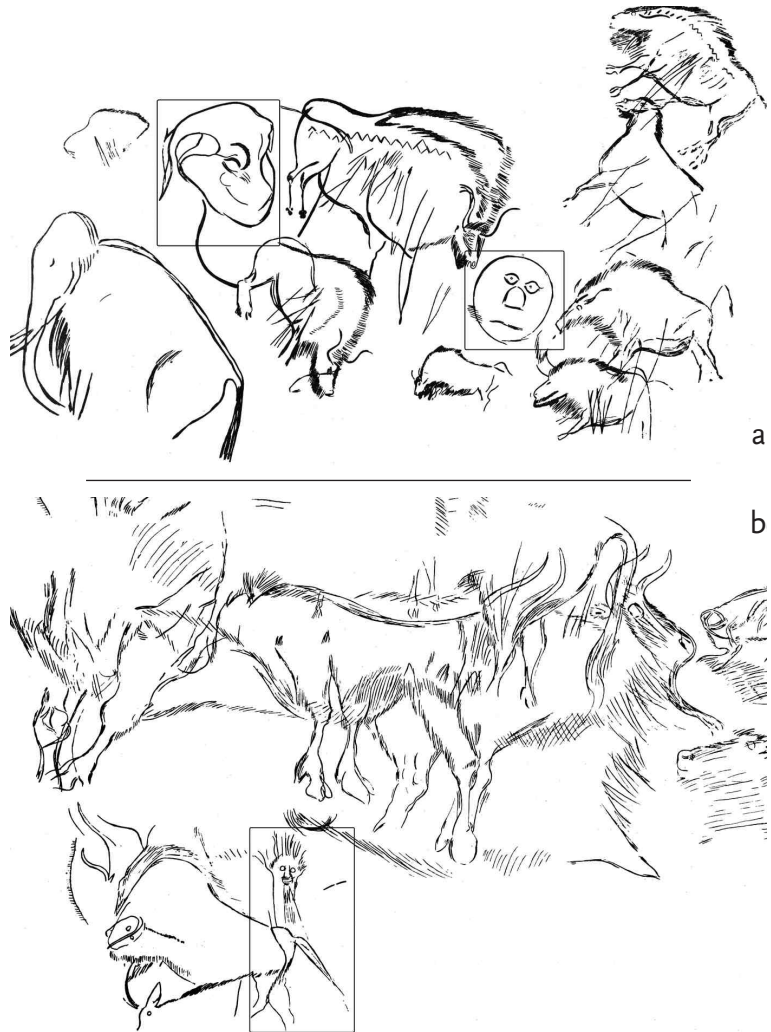
**Fig. 1. Therianthrope surrounded by animals, *Les Trois Frères* (after Bégouën, Breuil 1958.Fig. 54).**



are clever, donkeys are fools, *etc.* (Daston, Mitman 2005; Doniger 2005). Yukaghir hunters also see certain animals as very similar to themselves in terms of their moral values and rules of conduct (Willerslev 2007. 1136). It is possible that in the past people attributed human qualities to animals and conversely attributed qualities perceived in animals to people.

For the modern rational mind, it is hard to imagine that some so-called 'primitive people' believe that they have animal ancestors, but we are perfectly prepared to accept Darwin's evolutionary theory, which in our western scientific way also connects us with animals at a very basic level. For the modern scientist, it is the normal understanding that people and apes have common ancestors, but to perceive the bear as a parent, as some Inuit tribes do, is incomprehensible.

People have conflicting relationships with animals: while they enjoy a certain respect, familiarity and sometimes even veneration, they also constitute a valuable source of food. In modern society, we have largely lost the deep empathy which is so important to hunters and gatherers, whose survival depends on understanding animals and their behaviour. We can not understand the magical relation between hunter and prey in early societies, because the world is perceived dualistically – humans stand opposed to nature and environment. This dualism is most powerfully expressed in Cartesian thought. Descartes perceived human beings as comprised of two opposites: the body, which is a mortal machine and indivisible, immortal spirit. Animals lack spirit; they are merely machines, and therefore are inferior and not comparable to human beings. This is similar to the view of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, in which humans are masters of animals. Animals are inferior beings; some tolerance is acceptable just for those species which are edible or assist people in various tasks. In contrast, the border between humans and animals in Buddhism and Hinduism is much less well defined; humans can be reincarnated as animals, while animals often have human attributes.



**Fig. 2a. Small human faces among animals, *Les Trois Frères* (after Bégouën, Breuil 1958.Fig. 39); 2b. strange human figure surrounded by animals, *Les Trois Frères* (after Bégouën, Breuil 1958.Fig. 75–77).**

Before the domestication of animals, the primary connection between animals and people was through the hunter-prey relationship. Even today, the ability of expert indigenous hunters to predict animal behaviour is sometimes astonishing; it is as if the hunter became the hunted animal and the two merged into some liminal being. All the senses of the hunter are alert and often interact to acquire more perfect information about the prey (Willerslev 2007.1218–1221). Relic of this ability to mix senses – to see music, for example – is still present in some people today and is called synaesthesia.

In addition to sharp senses, hunters often use some sort of disguise to improve their odds. Probably, some of the earliest disguises included mimicking animal calls, disguising scent and wearing animal hides and antlers. These strategies probably played a vital role in attempts to fool prey in order to ap-





**Fig. 3. The Sorcerer, Les Trois Frères (after Breuil 1952.Fig. 116, Fig. 130).**

proach closer for a kill. Numerous examples of hunting disguises were used by Native Americans, *i.e.*, wearing buffalo skins and scenting with dung (Hodgson, Helvenston 2006.6). The idea of a hunting disguise similar to the one used by the North American Lakota people was suggested for the one of the therianthrope figures at Les Trois Frères (Demouche *et al.* 1996). The 'Petit Sorcier à l'Arc Musical' is described by Bégouën and Breuil as a male person with a bison head and human legs playing a flute or musical bow (Bégouën, Breuil 1958.58). The name itself suggests that the figure had some special status and commanded the animals surrounding it. On the other hand, Frédéric Demouche *et al.* (1996) interpret the figure from a utilitarian perspective and compare it with disguised American Lakota hunters approaching their prey. They suggest that the figure should be rotated through 90° to obtain the stalking pose. The feature in its mouth is a weapon, not an instrument (Fig. 4).

Some authors, such as Niko Kuret (1984.10, 11), adopted Breuil's idea (Bégouën, Breuil 1958.54) that the hunting disguise was a sort of first mask and that masking evolved from such disguises. In Kuret's opinion, the therianthropes in Les Trois Frères are masked human beings. Morris (2000.22) broadens this concept and perceives the sorcerer in

this cave (Fig. 3) on a higher level – as a masked, dancing medium, who embodies spiritual beings in the form of the animal. On the other hand, Henry Pernet (2006.28, 42), disagrees with the idea of composite figures as ritually masked humans and believes it is doubtful that masks were used in rituals in the Palaeolithic.

Rane Willerslev describes a hunting event in which an old Yukaghir hunter partially disguised as an elk successfully killed a female elk with her calf. The disguised man was perceived as being simultaneously like the man and the elk. He had a liminal quality and occupied a strange place between human and non-human identities. The disguise and the act of hiding the human scent leads to some type of 'dehumanisation' (Willerslev 2007.79, 80, 126). Man must transform into an animal not only physically, but also psychologically. But this deception must not overwhelm them; they must be aware of their identity and that they differ from the animal they represent; otherwise, they would not be able to exercise power over the animal. In disguised Yukaghir hunters, the imitation is not perfect, and the differences between elk and man disguised as elk are obvious. It is in this difference and partial disguise that a man can have power over an animal. Without the difference, the imitator and the imitated would col-

lapse one into the other, they would become one, making any exercise of power impossible (Willerslev 2007: 79, 214, 215).

Hunters disguised in the parts of a dead animal and acting like that animal were seen by other people as being like the animal come back to life. They acquired power over death and also over the animals deceived by their disguise. When men or women put on animal hides or antlers and started to tell stories about the characteristics of the animals and the best ways of hunting them, they revived them. Because of this magical ability, they might have experienced a feeling of power and started to see themselves as superior beings. With the mimetic performance and the aide of speech, people were able to conquer death for a few moments. In the dramatic environment created by a skilled story teller, children were probably the most affected, so this was the best way to teach them about animals and hunting techniques. With impressive presentations of animals and their behaviour, especially gifted persons gained the power to influence the minds and emotions of listeners. The spectators might have seen them as half-human, half-animal, whereby they transcended the reality of the ordinary human. To be genuine, the actor probably entered a sort of trance or altered states of consciousness and 'became' the animal he or she represented. In this way, they also acquired power over animals – as in African healing dances, where the individuals involved actually 'become' a lion, perhaps as a compensatory strategy to gain some 'control' over their most feared predator by means of ritual dancing and singing that deliberately induces a trance (Hodgson, Helvenston 2006.8).

Because of their ability to seemingly merge with the animal into a new being, performers gained special status and became privileged. From this sensation of union with other beings, religious feelings might emerge. Such people were thought to have power over animals and their spirits, which was the beginning of beliefs similar to shamanism. The Inuit tell an interesting story about the origins of shamanism. An Inuit wishing to help people during a severe famine sought a way to intervene with the spirits that ordered the world and animals. He invented shamanism and discovered techniques for exploring space and time (D'Anglure 1994.182). In this Inuit myth,



**Fig. 4.** 'Petit Sorcier a l'Arc Musical', Les Trois Frères. The figure is rotated to resemble more closely a man in disguise stalking prey (after Bégouën, Breuil 1958.Fig. 63).

it was for a very practical reason, famine, that shamanism appeared. All the beliefs that include altered states of consciousness might reflect a connection with a primordial universe from which humans emerged with a new identity – and lost the paradise as it is described in the Bible.

Early 'art' used to be interpreted as depiction of sympathetic magic. This idea is no longer popular, although hunting rituals and drawings of hunted animals might help hunters to prepare efficiently for a hunt. Rituals might have been a type of hunt rehearsal in which the participants symbolically killed the depiction of the animal and tried to influence the real animal; at the same time, they also learned the best hunting techniques from each other, corrected eventual errors and planned hunting strategy (Fig. 5).

Human self-awareness and perception of identity was probably different in the distant past than it is today. The capacity to become the object of one's own attention and focusing on internal milieu rather than the external environment, as Morin (2006. 2) defines self-awareness, might have increased during human evolution. The perception of time was also different (Suddendorf, Corballis 1997). Mental time travel is probably a uniquely human ability which evolved rather recently (Suddendorf, Busby 2003). Even today in some indigenous cultures, time is not viewed in the same way as in Western society. The most extreme case (if the reports are true) is the Pirahã tribe of the Amazon rainforest, whose language has no past tense, because everything exists in the present for them – when things can no longer be perceived, they cease to exist. Because of their culture's ingrained emphasis on referring only to immediate experience, the Pirahã have no words for



abstract concepts, from colour to memory and even numbers (Davies 2006).

Human perception of time, which is divided into past, present and future, was one of the conditions that enabled the formation of external memory storage in the form of rock art. For beings that have no knowledge of mental time travel and no concept of past and future, creating something that endures is beyond their understanding. For the creation of rock painting, there must be past experience and a self-conscious desire to repeat this experience if it is pleasant or avoid it if it is terrifying – in this case, the painting might also have been a warning to others. If there is just the experience of the present time, there is very little need for symbolic thought. Symbols represent something else; the most powerful are those connected with past experiences that provoked strong feelings.

The perception of the future and evolution of understanding of the connection between cause and effect were the basis for the emergence of rituals. Yukaghir people believe that the devil has no sense of past or future and lives only in the present; therefore, he is careless and incapable of taking responsibility for his actions (Willerslev 2007.1370–1374). In devil's existence, there is no need for ritual behaviour, but for humans, with a different perception of time, rituals are almost a necessity. Properly executed rituals in the present assure an abundance of prey and healthy descendants in the future. They ameliorate the future and drive away dangers. With a dance (Fig. 6) or by telling stories, people were able to share past events with others. They could mediate their experiences and feelings with the whole community and teach future generations.

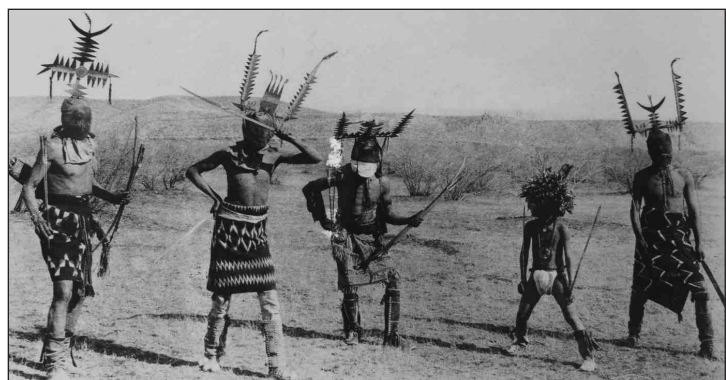
The human ability to mentally perceive the passage of time was also foundation of funeral rites and the concept of ancestors – beings who lived in the past and who should be praised in the present, to be satisfied and cause no trouble in the future (Fig. 7).

For beings living in the present, such concepts are unthinkable. The comple-



**Fig. 5. Australian tribe performing a ritual which includes an imaginary attack on an animal (after Buschan 1922.Vol. 1, Fig. 200).**

xity of burials increases in the late Palaeolithic, which might be a reflection of a greater awareness of the past and the future. Burials became richer for other reasons, but without the concept of the past, they would not exist at all. If an extinct human species experienced only the present, they had no need to bury their deceased, except perhaps for hygienic reasons. Paul Pettitt (2010) describes the evolution of funerary practices, which seem to evolve from very simple to more complex. It is possible that the mental concept of the passage of time was not omnipresent in the Palaeolithic and the memory of the dead was very short in earlier stages of human evolution. The first burials might also be a reflection of increasing human individuality. They emerged when people started to believe that their identity would be preserved after death. Before human beings established themselves as individual entities who have special role in nature and who are in some way able to be transformed and live on after death, they saw no need to preserve bodies.



**Fig. 6. Mountain spirit dancers, Mescalero Apache. They dance to drive away evil spirits. (Photography: San Carlos Agency, New Mexico 1899).**

Pleistocene 'art' might also have evolved from the practical development of the abilities needed for survival. Research in neurology indicates that mental reviewing of events activates the same parts of the human brain as the real situation. This is important, because we can mentally review dangerous events which happened to us and exercise our reactions without being injured in real situations (Franklin, Zyphur 2005: 64, 65). It is possible that the evolution of 'art' was a result of similar processes of mental imagery of the animals, which were transmitted to a material medium such as a cave wall.

During the Pleistocene, human evolution was a gradual process, in which human identity, consciousness and individuality developed. The process of separation from other beings and environment started. Today, we are estranged from natural environment and from beings that are part of it. That is why it is so difficult for our modern mind to perceive the reasoning behind the first symbolic behaviour and to explain its meaning. As for the first art itself, it is best described by Tim Ingold's statement (2002:131): "Hunters and gatherers of the past

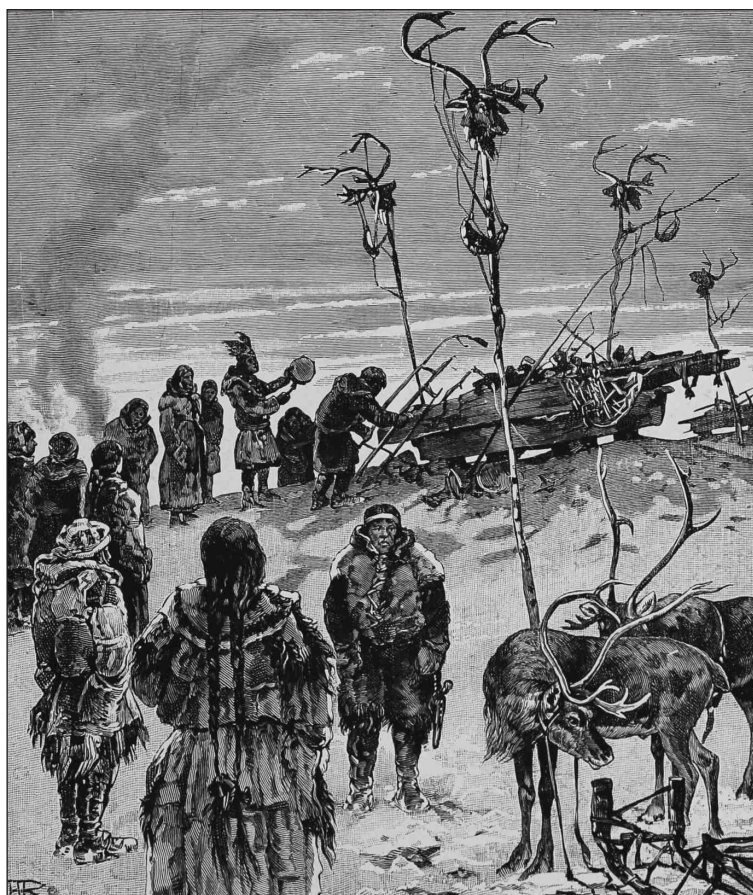


Fig. 7. Funeral rites in Siberia (after Buschan 1922.Vol. 2, Fig. 316).

were painting and carving, but they were not 'producing art'. The existence of 'capacity for art' is a figment of the Western imagination".

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