

Article

Amerindian Cosmologies and European Prehistoric Cave Art: Reasons for and Usefulness of a Comparison

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Received: 28 October 2013; in revised form: 2 December 2013 / Accepted: 17 December 2013 / Published: 27 December 2013

Abstract: Several anthropological studies conducted in recent years among different Native American cultures have revealed a series of common features in ontological premises and cosmological frameworks. These features seem to be shared by most of the Native peoples in both North and South America. They include: a system of relationships between humans and non-human beings based on an ontology “of persons” as contrasted to the ontology “of things” typical of the Western attitude towards Nature; a structure of the cosmos made by superposed layers, which express the idea of a reality represented as comprising hidden dimensions and invisible domains; and the key role played by ecstatic practitioners in establishing relationships with and acquiring knowledge from these multiple dimensions of the universe. Here, the idea is suggested that these elements could be profitably utilized to interpret the meaning of Paleolithic cave art, not simply implying a series of typological likenesses, but suggesting the possibility of historic (pre-historic) links. It should be remembered that the main settlement of the Americas occurred in a period (from 30,000–20,000 years B.P.) which is contemporaneous with the creation of the masterworks in the caves of France and Spain.

Keywords: palaeolithic rock art; cultural anthropology and prehistory; North American native cultures; indigenous peoples; comparative analysis; cosmology; animism; perspectivism; nature and culture; anthropology of religions

1. Methodological Premise

Among archaeologists and pre-historians, a persistent diffidence is still diffused regarding what is called, sometimes with contempt, “ethnographic analogies”: parallels between the data from prehistoric research and some exotic and unknown people studied by some bizarre ethnographer in a faraway, obscure corner of the earth. Lewis Binford’s renowned works notwithstanding (for ex. Binford 1978) [1], that these analogies are seen by many scholars in the field as futile, unproductive and useless, focusing only on superficial and trivial details which cannot be demonstrated to have been present in prehistoric times. They often remain faithful to Leroi-Gourhan’s argument that the interpretation has to be grounded only in what the pre-historic man himself has left us with as his heritage (“ce qu’il a bien voulu nous léguer de lui-même”, Leroi-Gourhan) [2]. The problem is that this heritage is for the most part very scant and opaque, and has to be interpreted in the light of some general cultural framework that cannot be inferred from the material data themselves.

In fact, Leroi-Gourhan himself used analogies derived from the research of Lévi-Strauss, on the symbolism and mythology of various cultures, or from the African ethnography of Marcel Griaule, in formulating his idea of a cosmological dualism, based on male and female symbols, that permeated all Paleolithic cave art. Only, he never admitted these evident intellectual borrowings, affirming to have found his conclusions based solely on the data collected by prehistoric analyses. In any case, it is to be admitted that every scholar cannot but utilize some kind of “ethnographic analogy” when he/she approaches prehistoric remains and tries to understand or interpret their meanings. He/she has to put these objects into a framework that is more or less familiar to him/her, imagining their possible use and trying to inscribe them into a wider context. The simple descriptions of “scraper” or “arrow point” induce a series of inferences and images that the scholars draw from their cultural background; much more so when terms like “family”, “ancestors”, “art” are evoked and utilized in describing prehistoric remains, which is done very often. What inevitably occurs is that these terms produce an immediate connection between what the remains of the past can represent and what, in our own cultural experience and practice, these elements represent. We cannot speak of what a “family” could be like for Paleolithic men and women without emphasizing what it is that we, men and women of Western civilization of the 21st century represent as a “family”: that is, utilizing an implicit “ethnographic analogy”. More to the point, when the term “art” is employed to describe the paintings and engravings of prehistoric man, a whole series of implications are evoked, more or less consciously, regarding what art is in modern industrialized societies: for example, that works of art are made for others to see, that they are things to contemplate but not to use, and so forth. All these implicit analogies, for the most part misleading when applied to Paleolithic cave art, are often uncritically interiorized, influencing the way in which scholars interpret the data from prehistory (Moro Abadía *et al.* 2012; Palacio-Pérez 2013) [3,4]. The suggestion that the Cantabrian caves could be envisaged as “cathedrals” of prehistory, as is still advanced in recent works (Aczel 2009) [5], is emblematic evidence of the persistence of the problem.

What we would suggest in this paper is that it is more useful to apply a critically oriented and informed use of analogies from contemporary cultures that manifest significant points of contact with the prehistoric way of life—for example hunting and gathering cultures—than to employ uncritically ideas and representations of reality taken from the cultural perspectives of contemporary industrialized

and globalized cultures, in which the scholars of prehistory are embedded, willingly or not. Of course, the analogies should be taken from a wider context, avoiding the particularistic details that annoy so much the opponents of ethnographic comparisons and permitting to put the prehistoric data into a more inclusive perspective.

In the following pages, some parallels shall be traced between European prehistoric cave art and the cosmologies of some North American Native cultures. The reasons for this choice are that: (1) most of these cultures were still conducting an hunting-gathering way of life well into the 19th century, permitting thus to infer some analogies from a socio-economic system supposedly very similar to that of European Paleolithic; (2) the ecological and geographical environment of North America is very similar to that prevailing in Europe during the Paleolithic age, the animal population being strikingly similar (bison, bears, deer, reindeer, *etc.*); (3) Amerindian hunters came to the New World sometime around 20,000 years ago, crossing the sea from the Siberia coast, and they were presumably coming from the Eurasian steppes, so it is plausible that these peoples, though they have not left evidence of cave art, shared cultural elements with the prehistoric inhabitants of the Old World and that they brought some of these elements with them when they departed for their long journey.

However, these cultural features, that can be evidenced by this or that ethnographic example, have to be included in a more broadening perspective that describes the main elements of a cosmological structure which is common to most cultures of the Americas—both North and South—and beyond. This wider perspective permits to take into consideration the whole system of representations that provides man the apprehension of reality and his actions on the world, in one term: the ontological system of Amerindian societies. In recent years, manifold researches have revealed how many societies in the New Continent share some basic ontological premises that differ significantly from the usual categories utilized in Western thought. Since the reality in which we live is circumscribed by the cultural categories with which we describe it, we can argue that societies developing different ontological systems experience reality in different ways and interpret these experiences according to their different cultural frameworks. These considerations can have important consequences for our understanding of prehistoric life ways and world views.

2. Animistic Ontologies

In the second half of 19th century, Edward B. Tylor utilized the concept of “animism” to describe the practice of attributing souls to non-human entities. According to Tylor (1871: pp. 384–385) [6], such an attitude, widespread among “primitive” peoples, denoted the oldest and most fundamental of all religious forms, the “common religion of mankind” (Strenski 2006: pp. 92) [7]. This notion was revived, letting aside all evolutionistic implications, in the late 20th century to emphasize the way in which humans and non-humans are inter-connected in many indigenous cultures, particularly those of the few remaining hunter-gatherers and simple horticulturalists (Bird-David 1999; Descola 1996; Descola 2005; Ingold 2000) [8–11]. These reflections tended to put into question the nature/culture opposition as an implicit common background on which every culture developed its own interpretation of reality. This opposition seems rather to be the legacy of European modern thought, and it finds no correspondence in many cultural perspectives, according to which the relationship between humans

and the non-human world is not reducible to the opposition subject/object but is better understood in terms of communication between “persons”.

One of the first anthropologists who developed these reflections was Irving Hallowell. In his research among the Ojibwa of the Great Lakes region of North America, he observed that the category of the person provided the major key to understanding their own world view, but it was “by no means limited to humans beings”, and that for the Native thought, the concept of the person was not synonymous with human beings but it transcended it (Hallowell 1960 [1976: pp. 359]) [12]. He also observed that many non-human beings (such as animals, plants, objects and natural phenomena) are regarded by many peoples, in different regions of the world, as having characteristics that in Western scientific and philosophical thought are associated exclusively with the human person. Cultures of the Northern hemisphere, both in the Old and in the New World, concur in attributing personhood to non-human beings: “Animals are believed to have essentially the same sort of animating agency which man possesses. They have a language of their own, can understand what human beings say and do, have forms of social or tribal organization, and live a life which is parallel in other respect to that of human societies” (Hallowell 1926: pp. 7) [13].

This cosmological system, in which intentionality and reflexive consciousness are regarded as non exclusive of humankind but potentially available to all beings of the cosmos, has been called by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998) [14] “perspectivism”, according to which humans, animals, spirits, and other non-human beings share the same characteristic of viewing themselves and their kind as “persons”, possessing, in their own eyes, human bodily form and human culture (Fausto 2007) [15].

Thus, the concept of the person, as Hallowell had observed, is antecedent and logically superior to that of “human” and is interpreted as a center of intentionality applicable to a variety of non-human beings (Viveiros de Castro 2009: pp. 23,24) [16]. For the Amerindian societies, human culture is the common element of both humans and non-humans, whereas they are distinguished by their different natures, which are their bodies. Both Viveiros de Castro (1998) [14] and Philippe Descola (2005) [10], though with differing emphasis, have contrasted this “animistic ontology” in which all beings are similar in terms of their spiritual constituents, then are regarded as “persons” but differ radically by the bodies that envelope them, with the “naturalistic ontology” developed by Western thought, which distinguishes beings on the basis of mental and cultural characteristics drawing similarities on the basis of physical and biological terms. These perspectives are not simple curiosities coming from an exotic and marginal ethnographic field, but are potentially disruptive for the conventional perspective adopted by Western scholars, according to which the opposition nature/culture is the solid ground constituting the baseline for the interpretation and the valuation of the different cultural representations of reality.

“Rather than covering the globe with a single mode of relations between humans and non-humans which then served as a background for detecting ‘cultural’ variations among many peoples, this background itself had become the object of careful enquiry. People differ not only in their culture but also in their nature, or rather, in the way they construct relations between humans and non-humans” (Latour 2009: pp. 2) [17].

According to Viveiros de Castro (1998: pp. 472) [14] Amerindian perspectivism has essential relations with shamanism and with the valorization of the hunt. This hunting ideology, in which the animal is the extra-human prototype of the Other, is above all an ideology of shamans, because

they alone are capable of assuming the point of view of other beings. Shamanism is the capacity of certain human persons to cross corporeal borders and to adopt the perspective of animals or spirits (Praet 2009: 739) [18]. So, shamans are experts in metamorphosis, they are master-transformers, they are able not only to communicate with other-than-human beings, but to turn into one of them (Praet 2009: pp. 744) [18]. The distinction between an interiority common to all beings, identified as personhood or subjectivity, and an exteriority, the body, regarded as a sort of “clothing”, permits to envisage the possibility of metamorphosis of one being into another as a simple question of changing envelope. To put on a mask is not to conceal a human essence but to activate the powers of a different body: the metamorphosis manifests the objective permutability of bodies which is based in the subjective equivalence of interiorities, of souls (Viveiros de Castro 1998: pp. 482) [14].

Already Hallowell observed that not only humans but individuals of every species “may metamorphosize themselves into other creatures” or, in certain occasions, take a human form: some of them may utilize their powers to aid man in his pursuits, while others may be hostile. Dreams and visions are specialized means of communication between man and animals, widely employed in the Native cultures of North America (Hallowell 1926: pp. 8) [13].

The visionary experience testifies of the metamorphic aspect of Amerindian cosmology, because in visions animals manifest themselves in human form: transformative potency or potential reveals a process of continuing metamorphosis and fluidity of the real, in which any object is capable of manifesting its potential to be something “other” (Irwin 1994: pp. 72) [19].

These aspects of the animistic ontology described for the Amerindian cultures, particularly in the Amazonian rainforests, has been extended in recent years to the Native cultures of North America and Siberia (Brightman *et al.* 2012) [20]. Apart from the detailed ethnographic peculiarities that differentiate this culture from that, a series of broad schemes are emerged that seem to delineate a general common background that unites the cosmological and ontological perspectives of the Native cultures of these areas, at the same time differentiating them from the conventional “naturalistic” orientation of modern Western thought.

Since the American continent was first settled by hunting peoples coming from Siberia and crossing the Bering land-bridge or sailing along the coasts, it seems at least reasonable to suppose that these ancient hunters brought with them a cosmological and ontological system that had developed during the long period of Eurasian Paleolithic and that some traces of this system could be detected by the cultural remains of that epoch. Using as an interpretative tool what we know of the representation of the world among contemporary Native peoples, we can plausibly try to detect a similar cosmological system adumbrated in the artifacts created by Paleolithic men, mostly disseminated in the caves of Western Europe. This trajectory is what shall be suggested in the following pages.

3. Parallel Themes in Prehistoric Rock Art and in Amerindian Cosmologies

The rock art of Paleolithic Europe is essentially an art of caves: paintings and engravings made on the walls of caves, mostly in their deepest and most difficult to reach recesses. This art is constituted for the most part by animal representations: there are very few human figures, and most of them are hybrids showing both animal and human features. However, what could be the general signification of all this? What relationship could be envisaged between the caves and the animals? We can start from

an observation made by Leroi-Gourhan, according to which it is suggested that the entire cave had a female symbolic meaning for the prehistoric peoples; he thinks that they have left some evidence of this, marking or thoroughly anointing with red paint narrow and oval passages, fissures, holes and cavities (Leroi-Gourhan 1971: pp. 120) [21]. In this way, the cave became a mysterious place peopled by feminine shapes (“un mystérieux rassemblement de formes féminines”, Leroi-Gourhan 1981: pp. 304) [22]. This is interpreted as a kind of “fertility cult” of Paleolithic hunters, based on an opposition between male and female symbols: the animals themselves could be regarded as forming groups of “males” and “females”, not according to the explicit sex of the individual, which is rarely evidenced, but by associating the entire species with either male or female symbols.

The French prehistorian’s interpretation is rather abstruse and far-fetched, but it takes into consideration the problem of the relationship between the interior of the earth, seen as a womb, and the origin of the animals. Such relationship is clearly illustrated in the cosmologies of a wide range of Native societies in North America, and could be taken as a good starting point. I choose examples from North American cultures for the reason that I am most acquainted with them and with the literature concerned, but the same ontological premises could be detected in almost all hunter-gatherer societies.

The most general structure of the cosmos among Amerindians can be described as a three-layered model: uppermost the sky, the earth in the middle and the underworld below. The earth was considered as mother of all things and patron of everything which grows out of the ground, of food and drink (Comba 1987: pp. 10,11) [23]. According to the Cheyenne world description, to the realm of the deep earth belong the sacred caves (*maheonoxsz*), where human seekers of knowledge may be received and instructed by powerful spirits, such as it is described in many mythological narratives. “To the realm of the deep earth belong also the *heszevoxsz*, the animal caverns, where the spirits, *hematasoomao* (or *matasoomao*), of animals of all species are gathered. From there they may be released to join physical form, that is, become available as animals once again, or they may be kept there, that is, refused rebirth” (Schlesier 1987: pp. 4) [24]. This conception was absolutely not peculiar to the Cheyenne, but rather it was widespread in all the Plains area. To give only another example, the Pawnee, a hunting and horticultural people, regarded the animals as possessors of powers that could be used by humans. Each animal could potentially bless a man and endow him with power. According to the Pawnee, there were underground or underwater animal lodges in which different varieties of animals met, organized in the same manner as the native doctors in the Pawnee Doctors Lodge. During visions, the Pawnee were frequently taken into these lodges and given the powers of the animals there. Some of these sites are still recognized today in Nebraska and Kansas (Parks; Wedel 1985: pp. 144) [25].

We find analogous representations in Central and South America. For examples, among the Tolupans, inhabitants of the mountainous forests of central Honduras, the masters or guardians of animals are said to be “like people”, either dwarfs or giants as tall as pine trees. Most of them inhabit caves in the first level underground where it is light during the night and dark during the day. They live in houses, sleep in hammocks, and keep their animals fenced in fields. Some of the masters are in charge of just one species, while others have many more. Each master [*jamayón*] has an assistant called a *maritomo* [majordomo], a real animal, usually a feline or a bird of prey, who in reality hunts the species of which it is in charge. The majordomo guards the entrance to the cave to prevent the animals from escaping. He accompanies them when their master lets them out into the world. Not only does the master eat his own animals, he sometimes kills them, but when they die, he receives their

spirit. The master allows the Indians to kill his animals for their family's nourishment, in exchange for the right to feed them with their crops. However, if an Indian hunts in excess, or wounds an animal, the master takes vengeance and the hunter will die from what appears to be an accident (Chapman 1992: pp. 168–169) [26]. Among the Campa (or Asháninka), living in the rainforests of Peru, the world is described as a series of strata one above the other, each inhabited by its own class of beings. The sky (*inkite*) is inhabited by good spirits, like the intermediate stratum of the clouds (*menkoki*). The earth (*kamaveni*) is the home of mankind. Beneath the earth are *kivinti*, inhabited by good spirits, and the lowest stratum, *sharinkaveni*, the stronghold of demons. The good spirits, *amatsenka* (“our spirit fellows”), reside on mountain ridges along the rim of the known world and on the strata of the universe: the *henokisati* (“sky dwellers”), in the celestial stratum, are visible as stars; the *menkokisati* on the clouds, and the *kivintisati* in the first subterranean stratum, in caverns. Good spirits can assume the guise of certain species of sacred birds and animals (Weiss 1972) [27].

To add one other example, the Buid of the Philippine highlands believe that wild pigs and monkeys belong to a category of spirits called *andagaw*. “The Buid say that the *andagaw* are *taw yadi*, ‘also men’, except that they happen to be invisible. The *andagaw* belong to a parallel society which normally avoids contact with human society. Their *balay*, ‘houses’, are under mountain peaks and their doorways are springs, caves, or other *sakbawan*, ‘openings’, into the earth. Humans must be careful to respect these thresholds” (Gibson 1986: pp. 160) [28].

This set of data reflects a common system of description of the cosmos, which is stratified in at least three layers, of which humans inhabit the middle one. What pertains to the other two cosmic levels can be perceived only indistinctly and confusedly. These are the realms of the spirits who preside to the various domains of the world. The animals are regarded as “persons”, only enveloped in different clothing, constituted by their body, and are invariably connected with the underground level. The earth is the source of everything that grows, the ultimate origin of the energy that produces life and is insufflated in any living being. The animals, that are the main resource of food and livelihood for hunter-gatherers, are seen as the product of the generative energy of the earth, and are regarded as having sprang forth from the womb of the earth through caves, openings or springs, to populate the land (for ex. Bowers 1965: pp. 438) [29]. When they are killed by hunters, their spirits return after death into these caves to regenerate. It is interesting that in many Native cultures the animals have a female symbolic connection: for example, in the Plains of North America, the buffalo takes on a clear-cut association with the earth and with the woman. Among the Lakota, *tatanka* is the spirit of the Buffalo Bull, which presides over fecundity, virtue, industry and the family. It is the guardian of young women and of women during their menstrual periods or during pregnancy (Walker 1980: pp. 121) [30]. According to the Lakota Short Bull, “the Spirit of the Earth and the Spirit of the Buffalo are the same” [30] (pp. 144).

The relationship of the woman to the buffalo is still more explicit in the White Buffalo Cow Society of the Hidatsa, which was the highest of the women's societies known to this people. In case of famine, particularly in winter, the White Buffalo Cow women were expected to perform a dance to make the buffalo herds come nearer to the village (Lowie 1913: pp. 346–347) [31]. The figure of the White Buffalo Calf Woman is the central focus of Lakota mythology: a mysterious woman who came in an undetermined time in the past, bringing to the Lakota as a gift from the spirits the Sacred Pipe, which became the sacred object par excellence of the nation and still remains so at the present time.

When she went away from the village, she turned into a buffalo calf of different colors (Brown 1953; Powers 1977) [32,33]. A similar theme is found in the Cheyenne myth of *ehyoph'sta* (the “Yellow Haired Woman”): a couple of warriors are attacked by a water monster and saved by a man wearing a wolf skin. They are brought in a cavern into the mountain, where the old man and an old woman take care of the two men and at last give them their daughter, the woman with the yellow hair. When they come out of the mountain, the buffalo herds follow them and cover the plains. According to the interpretations of Cheyenne elders, the Wolf Man of the story is *nonoma*, the Thunder Spirit, while the Old Woman is *esceheman*, “our grandmother”, the Spirit of the Deep Earth: both are the keepers of the animal spirits in the Plains; *ehyoph'sta* is a buffalo spirit turned into a human female to assist the Cheyenne in procuring food from the animals (Schlesier 1987: pp. 78) [24].

Now, if we return to the Palaeolithic images on the cavern walls, keeping in mind the possibility to read them as artifacts expressing a similar conception of the world, we can see in the whole panorama of cave art the description of one aspect of the cosmology of prehistoric peoples: the level which corresponds to the underground, to the deep earth. The caves are seen as female orifices that communicate with the world below, a world populated not by animals, in the sense of living and corporeal beings, but by spirit-animals, their immaterial or soul-like counterparts, which regenerate themselves returning to the earth womb. Perhaps, that is why the animal figures are generally deprived of any element of landscape or context, and sometimes they seem to flow or whirl around in a void space, like the bison in the ceiling of Altamira, or are caught in deliberately unnatural postures. Perhaps, these caves were regarded as sacred places, where individuals seeking power from the animal spirits went to beg the protection or benevolence from some of the power beings who inhabited the caves. It is also possible that the gift of power was revealed in some visionary or dream-like experience, as in the North American Indian vision quest or other ecstatic procedures diffused throughout the continent. In this case, the painting could be the tangible record of the experience obtained, or a way to induce a communication with the spirits. It is less probable that the paintings and engravings were utilized for ritual callings of the animals, because the species more often hunted by the prehistoric men (reindeer and deer) are the less represented in the painted panels, though they are well represented in the archaeological remains (Leroi-Gourhan 1981: pp. 305) [22].

For their connection with the deep earth domain, the animal-spirits are seen as particularly connected with the female symbolism (growth, regeneration, reproduction, fertility, *etc.*) and it is especially astonishing that the relationship between the bison and the female symbols, which Leroi-Gourhan [22] had foreseen analyzing the statistical distribution of signs in the caves, finds a confirmation in the association which the Plains' Indians made between the buffalo and the woman. Female figures such as *ehyoph'sta* can be interpreted as representing the master spirit of animals in the realm of the grasslands of North America (Schlesier 1987: pp. 105) [24], or a personification of the fertility and abundance of the game, and can find their counterpart in Palaeolithic representations like the “woman with a bison horn” engraved on a boulder from the Laussel rock-shelter (Clottes 2008: pp. 74,75) [34]. In the same vein, the Thunder Spirit as a Wolf Man, keeper of the animals, who appeared in the guise of a man wearing a wolf-mask during the Massaum ceremony, a ritual which celebrates the original covenant bringing together man and animals and founding the hunting activities of the Cheyennes, finds its counterpart in figures like the statuette in ivory found in the Hohlenstein-Stadel cave, in south-western Germany, which represents a man with a lion head (Clottes 2008: 54,55) [34].

The image of the mountain lion can be interpreted in various ways, of course, but the combination of the animal's head with a human figure suggests, in the writer's opinion, the idea of transformation, of blurred boundaries between the animal and human spheres.

4. A World of Transformability

As we have already seen above, an animistic ontology is a world view in which all beings share a common subjectivity and have a different perspective of the world on the basis of their bodily envelopes. A consequence of this is that it is possible to adopt the point of view of another being (animal or spirit) transforming one's own body, changing one's body shape. "In the native cosmologies of Amazonia and Siberia, the ability to transform one's body and one's perspective in order to act beyond the human sphere has conventionally been associated with specialist practitioners: shamans" (Grotti, *et al*; 2012: pp. 162) [35]. Istvan Praet has shown how, in Amazonian societies, metamorphosis or shape-shifting is a central aspect of the practice of shamanism. Shamans are experts in crossing the corporeal borders that differentiate humans from non-humans, being able in this way to assume the perspective of other beings, along with their powers and knowledge: they are commuters of perspectives (Praet 2009: pp. 739) [18].

In North America, a realm beyond the ordinary perspective of our own human body is accessible to everyone, through the experience of vision and dreaming. Through the power of dreaming, it is possible to enter into communication with any of the beings who inhabit the different layers in which the cosmos is stratified: both the dwellers of the world above and of the world below the earth surface. The dreamer experientially transforms his/her own sense of the everyday world in an emotional encounter (Irwin 1994: pp. 20) [19]. The effect of shape-shifting is expressed by the fact that generally the powerful beings, the animal spirits and so forth, appear to the dreamer in human form, and are recognizable only for certain details of their ornaments or clothing, or they show themselves actually changing shape during the encounter.

The rituals themselves can be seen as a collective metamorphosis, in which the performers realize a general "reversal of the world" abandoning their human shape and, wearing costumes, body paintings, masks, transforming themselves into other beings. Rituals are not simply ways of impersonating or disguising, to stand for someone else, but are seen, for many Native peoples who perform them, as a radical and substantiated switch into another shape (Praet 2009: pp. 748–749) [19]. Analogously, the complex animal rituals of the Northern Plains societies of North America were instruments to identify with the power of the animal persons, spirits, or culture heroes who in the primordial times gave the original gifts to the people. "Through ritual transformation, these humans released the energies associated with the bundle or ritual into the present, infusing the everyday world of hunters with transcendent significance and assuring that the purpose of the ritual would be fulfilled" (Harrod 2000: pp. 78) [36].

If we apply this perspective to the world to the prehistoric remains of the Paleolithic, we can discover why in cave art there are few images of humans, and most of these are representations of hybrids with both human and animal characteristics (Comba 2012) [37]. If the caves represented the underworld, where the energies of life were generated in the womb of the earth and the animals regenerated themselves after being killed by the hunters, the humans who penetrated this realm could

do it only by transforming themselves, shifting into another body shape, and assuming the perspective of the animals themselves or of the spirits that presided over them. For convenience, we have focused our discussion on cave art, but analogous implications could be observed in other manifestations of prehistoric art, such as figurines and artifacts (what is called in French *art mobilier*).

Many representations of man-bison hybrids could confirm this interpretation, as are found in the Gabillou or in the Trois-Frères caves (Breuil *et al.*) [38,21,34]. Probably, the same interpretation could be applied to the well known scene in the “well” of Lascaux cave, where is represented a bird-headed human with a stiffened body, who seems to roll back on his heels in front of a wounded bison (Leroi-Gourhan 1971: Figure 74) [21]. This theoretical perspective supports the hypothesis that at least part of Paleolithic rock art was created by a group of specialized practitioners in communication with the other-than-human worlds, who enacted ritually a transformation of their bodily shape in order to enter in communication with other beings, persons that in Siberian and Amerindian societies are generally known by the term of “shamans” (Clottes; Lewis-Williams *et al.*) [39,40]. On the other hand, it is also possible that the experience of bodily transformation and encounter with other-than-human beings was not restricted to one class of individuals but was open to every visionary seeker, as we find in most Native cultures in North America, a fact that does not exclude the existence of specialists of a “shamanic” kind.

The difference in the interpretations given to the hybrid images, either as human-animal beings or as humans masked as animals, that sometimes have been advanced, becomes substantially irrelevant. If, from an animistic perspective, a ritual enacts a real transformation of the participants, if changing one’s own clothes is equivalent to shifting body shape and thus becoming another being, the actual transformation and the putting on of a costume or a mask becomes perfectly coincident and indistinguishable.

In Upper Paleolithic art one finds also assemblages of different animals in one single figure, both as a patchwork composite, with parts of two or more animals juxtaposed one to the other, and as a fusion of two animals into one (Welté, *et al.*) [41]. This could be interpreted as another example of an ontology characterized by continuous flux and transformation, in which the interior principle of a being (its “soul”) can shift from one corporeal shape to another, assuming different aspects according to the perspectives from which it is observed.

Lastly, another aspect of change and transformation that is dominant in animistic ontologies regards the flow of souls, or personal interiorities, from the world of the living to the spirit world and *vice-versa*. The animals killed during the hunt are transformed into animal-spirits and generally return to the abode from which the animals had their origin, which is ordinarily located in the underworld or in caverns opening in the womb of the earth. From these places, the animal-spirits can come back to life, taking a new bodily envelope and being born again as a newborn animal. All hunting peoples observe particular procedures in the treatment of the dead animals, particularly of their bones, to propitiate their transformation and their future regeneration (Hill 2011: pp.409) [42]. Some remains from prehistoric sites can be interpreted in the same vein. However, the paintings on the cave walls of France and Spain could be seen not simply as the description of living animals, but rather as the representation of animal-spirits coming and going from the sacred underground places in which their regeneration and rebirth are realized.

According to an old ethnographic account, when the Cheyenne were hungry and could not find anything to hunt, they brought ceremonially their most sacred object, the Sacred Arrows (*maahotse*), on the hunting ground. When a buffalo herd was detected, the keeper of the sacred object pointed the arrows toward the herd. The animals became confused and unconscious, like they were crazy, and started to run in a circle and could easily be killed by the hunters. However, every animal killed with the aid of the Sacred Arrows had to be treated in a special way. The flesh was all taken away, leaving only the head, with the horns on. The backbone was also left attached to the head and the tail (Dorsey 1905: pp. 2) [43]. It is implicit that this particular treatment was followed in order to promote the transformation of the spirit of the buffalo and to induce it to return on the earth as a renewed living animal. What is surprising is that the engraving on a bone fragment found in the cave of Raymond (Dordogne, France), and dating from the Upper Paleolithic, describes this same ritual in every detail. In the centre of the object is engraved a buffalo head, with the backbone attached, while the two forelegs of the animal lay in front. Two rows of human figures encircle the buffalo in what seems a ceremonial attitude (Marshack 1972: pp. 207) [44]. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that we are looking at examples of the same kind of world view, which was based on a similar ontological system and that gave rise to similar ritual practices in order to regulate and harmonize the relationships between humans and other-than-human beings.

In conclusion, in this paper it has been suggested how much the cosmological and ontological premises found among contemporary indigenous peoples, particularly from the Americas, can be useful in the interpretation of prehistoric rock art in Paleolithic Europe. This usefulness is not due to the fact that prehistoric peoples have to be viewed as some sort of exotic savages to be interpreted with exotic and strange customs and beliefs gathered in some obscure corner of the world. Rather, to have recourse to indigenous ontologies and cosmologies is a form of acknowledgement that we have to go beyond the limits of the shared assumptions of the common globalized system of thought into which archaeologist and scholars are embedded day after day. These ontological systems, that show widespread similarities in the entire American continent and in the Siberian and Arctic areas as well, demonstrate a very different attitude of humans towards the non-human world with respect to the common-sense apprehension of contemporary men living in industrialized and globalized societies. We can presume that this kind of world-interpretation, in which humankind is not surrounded by a world of “things” or “objects”, but by a multitude of “persons” or “subjects”, an ontological system shared by numerous (if not all) hunter-gatherer societies of the present, could be extended to the hunter-gatherer societies of prehistory. The plausibility of this approach is suggested by a number of iconographic and symbolic motifs (human-animal hybrids, relationships between the woman and animals, the importance of the caves as entrances to the underworld, *etc.*) that can be interpreted in light of this theoretical perspective.

A proposal such as that advanced in this paper cannot have the presumption to cover all aspects of prehistoric art and material remains, nor leading to the assumption that prehistoric societies were simply “like” contemporary hunting or cultivating-hunting societies, with no peculiarities of their own. More unpretentiously, it has been proposed that the change of perspective, from the “cathedrals of prehistory” to “vision-quest sites of prehistory”, could bring a flux of refreshing air for thinking and arguing about the images discovered in the prehistoric caves of Western Europe.

Acknowledgments

The Author wishes to express his appreciation for the referees' help in correcting and ameliorating the text.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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