

N. Layne Miller

ROCK ART AS A RELIGIOUS TOOL

In the study of rock art, and especially in the study of the often maligned and misused Barrier Canyon Style rock art, the observer is often impressed with the futility and the primitiveness in the religious efforts of man a millennium ago. The Barrier Canyon Style rock art panels are examples of a primitive struggle to petition divine intervention in their lives.

When we view primitive art we do it subjectively, forcing our way of thinking. This is frustrating to us because the primitive reasoning becomes confusing and totally senseless to us, and we assume there must be something wrong with their thinking, rather than something wrong with our approach. The solution to the problem is not to consciously force from our mind all we know, for in forgetting we drive our culture biases to the subconscious, where they may affect our reasoning even stronger. We should do the opposite to forget, that is, become more aware of why we look at the world the way we do.

Only in a conscious effort can we keep our cultural biases from getting in the way and preventing us from understanding the aborigine and his art.

To understand the uses of rock art in the religion of a culture we need to first understand his innate fears and concerns. When man first became aware of his surroundings, and all the unknowns present in it, he had to devise a way to deal with these unknowns mentally—to turn them into something known. Gradually man developed religion and the office of a shaman. Shamanism is a widely used religious office that has its

origin somewhere near the dawn of man and can be traced to all parts of the globe. An accurate study of the shaman, his functions and feats of magic, is made possible by the continuation of the belief in societies of today.

The fears felt by these ancient societies were taught and thus perpetuated to succeeding generations along with the rules, customs and ceremonies to deal with them. Even though their knowledge of their world increased, unknowns and uncertainties remained, so they continued the customs and continued to observe the taboos of the preceding generations.

The role of shaman in dealing with the unknown is well documented but not well understood. He is a spiritual leader that is looked to in times of crisis. He is capable of magic and healing. He is a doctor, a priest, mystic and poet. In an attempt to answer questions about events and the lives of primitive societies a shaman is often turned to for help. He is attributed with the ability to accomplish such things as: communication with spirits, descending to the under world, leaving his body and changing form, so he can accompany a soul to the spirit world.

His mastery over fire, his ability to communicate with animals, and to learn from them, gave the shaman power to solve almost any problem. The shaman has existed since prehistoric times and has existed in cultures that cover the globe. Therefore, for us to find his influence in Utah rock art is not surprising.

For us to understand the elements in the Barrier Canyon Style that have shamanistic connections, we must first know more about the shaman and his power. The shaman is an office that is not aspired to but one that he called to, usually in one of two ways. The first way is he has a dream, where he is called to the position or has an experience in life that tells him of his selection.

Among Aravcanians the choice is usually manifested by a sudden illness, the young woman falls "as if dead" and on recovering declares her intention to become a machi—a shaman. A fisherman's daughter who was so called has said:

I was gathering shells from the reefs, when I felt something like a blow on the breast and a very clear voice inside me said, become a machi! It is my will! At the same time violent pains in my entrails made me lose consciousness. It was certainly the Ngenechen, the master of men, coming to me (Eliade 1964).

The second way to be called is to be chosen by an old shaman and trained by him as his replacement. Whichever way the student is selected, the next step is the most important and the most rigorous—the ecstatic experience. A shaman is not officially recognized as such until he has gone through an experience laced with physical danger and spiritual suffering. A traditional ecstatic experience almost always included one or more of the following things: dismemberment of the body, followed by a renewal of the organ; ascent to the sky; dialogue with the spirits and souls of dead shaman, and various revelations dealing with shamanistic secrets and spiritual knowledge.

In South America the initiatory journey to the sky or upon very high mountains play an essential role among the Aravcanians, for example, the illness that determines the

career of the machi is followed by an ecstatic crisis during which the future of this celestial visit supernatural beings show her remedies necessary for cures (Eliade 1964).

An example of a North American initiatory ascent is the medicine man who felt that he was killed and after many adventures was carried into the sky, where he conversed with the supreme being. The Celestial spirits put him to the test. He succeeded in killing a supposedly invulnerable bear and then restored it to life by breathing on it. Finally, he returned to earth and was born a second time (Eliade 1964). In this case the initiate goes through a complete initiation: death, ascent, ordeals, and resurrection. All are present in the traditional experience of a shaman candidate.

Among the Iglulik Eskimo the young man or woman who wishes to become a shaman approaches the shaman with a gift and declares that he wishes to "see". After a purification ceremony of questions and confessions the shaman ceremonially obtains the disciples of lighting or enlightenment, which allows him to see in the dark—both figuratively and literally. He can now see through darkness, look into the future and into the secrets of others.

The light comes after waiting and praying. When it comes it is as if the house in which he is in suddenly rises. He sees far ahead of him through mountains, exactly as if the earth were on a great plain and his eyes could reach to the end of the earth. Nothing is hidden from him any longer. Not only can he see things far away, but he can also discover souls—stolen souls, which are either kept concealed in far, strange lands or have been taken up to the spirit world or down to the land of the dead.

A shaman is familiar with a host of spirits—some are evil, but many are kind and helping. The most powerful of these is the

tutelary spirits. Some spirits he has control of, and they appear at his command and obey his wishes, but the tutelary spirits are divine or semi-divine and are not classified with this group. The majority of these spirits can appear in animal form, some of which are: bears, wolves, stags, hares, birds (especially goose, eagle, owl, and crow), worms, wood spirits, and earth spirits. Through the training given by, and the association with, these spirits the shaman is taught to converse with the animals, and a close bond is established between them to the extent that the shaman can transform himself into an animal form to aid him on his duties. One example is the transformation into an eagle to ascend to the spirit world. Upon reaching there the shaman can assume a form necessary to enter and leave again without being noticed. "This relationship between shaman and the animals is a condition that existed temporarily, in mystical times, when the divorce between man and the animal world had not yet occurred" (Eliade 1964). This is saying that the animal spirits play the same role as the ancestral spirits; these, too, carry the shaman to beyond (sky and underworld), reveal the mysteries to him, teach him and so on (Eliade 1964).

Let us now examine the elements in the Barrier Canyon Style rock art and note the shamanistic symbols. The most common element in the style, and one of the most distinctive features, is the stark look of the bug-eyed creatures always present (Figure 1). Their general appearance and their often heroic size give the viewer a sensation of a god-like or spirit sense. The feeling emanating from the panels hints of religious implications.

The presence of small animals in close association to the anthropomorphs hints of tutelary spirit relationship. The ascending row of goats at Barrier Canyon as well as at a San Rafael Swell site indicates a friendly

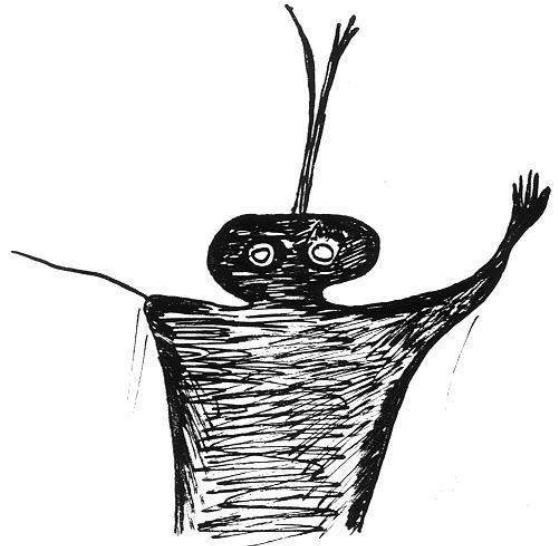


Figure 1 San Rafael Swell



Figure 2A San Rafael Swell



Figure 2B San Rafael Swell

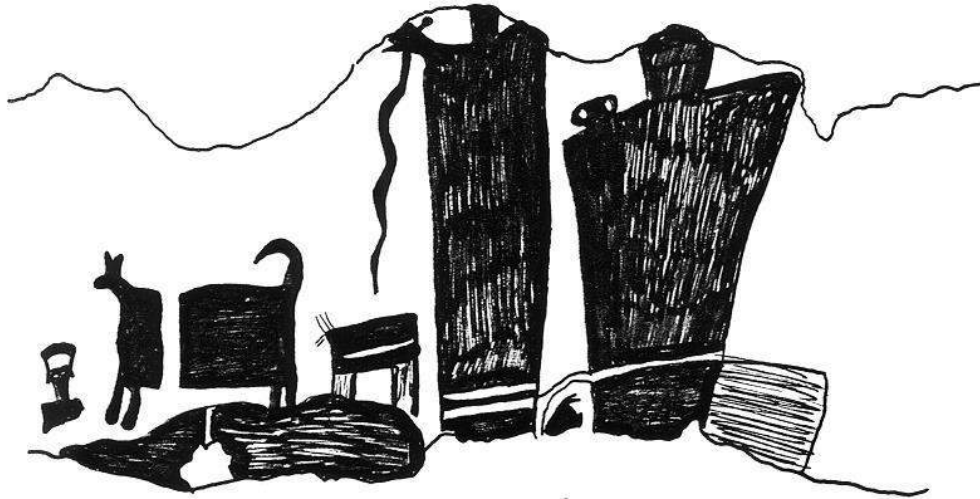


Figure 3 Temple Mountain

animal reaching to the spirit world (Figure 2A and 2B). The ever-present snake in many panels hints at the belief that the serpent was important to this culture. Dog-like figures are present and could represent the funerary dog the shaman encounters in his descent to the underworld, as it is encountered by the deceased or by the heroes undergoing an initiatory ordeal (Eliade 1964)(Figure 3) .

The ability of the shaman to change into animal form, which allows him to use the characteristics of that particular animal, may be depicted in one panel where a bird taking flight is shown with a long tail that splits and still retains the feet and legs of the shaman. Siberian, Eskimo and North American shamans can fly. The snake in the same panel has the same feet and leg motif. These two figures could depict the shaman transforming himself into a form convenient for him to aid the primitive that has come to him for help.

Dancing and singing are basic elements in most ceremonies and the shamanistic rite is no exception. Indicators of these are present in Barrier Canyon art. There are many paired anthropomorphs in a seeming procession, possibly during a religious rite. Evenly spaced rows or figures, as in a line

or procession, are present at various sites in the San Rafael Swell and Book Cliffs.

In Malekula the sorcerers are able to change into animals, but they usually chose to change into hens and falcons, for the faculty of flight makes them like spirits (Eliade 1964). The importance of the shaman to a primitive soul cannot be under estimated. Eliade has said,

It is hard for us to imagine what such shamanism can represent for an archaic society. In the first place, it is the assurance that human beings are not alone in a foreign world, surrounded by demons and the "forces of evil". In addition to the gods and supernatural beings to whom prayers and sacrifices are addressed, there are "specialists in the sacred" men able to "see" the spirits, to go up into the sky and meet the gods, to descend to the underworld and fight the demons, sickness and death (Eliade 1964).

The culture that created the Barrier Canyon Style art viewed the world of the unknown through the eyes of the shaman and portrayed the ceremonies and rites on the sandstone cliffs of the southwest.

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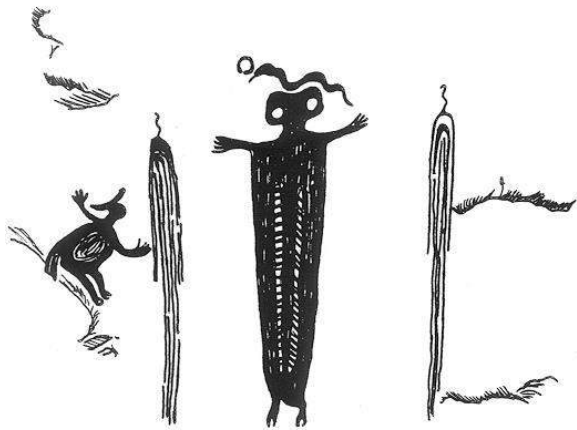


Figure 4A Head of Sinbad

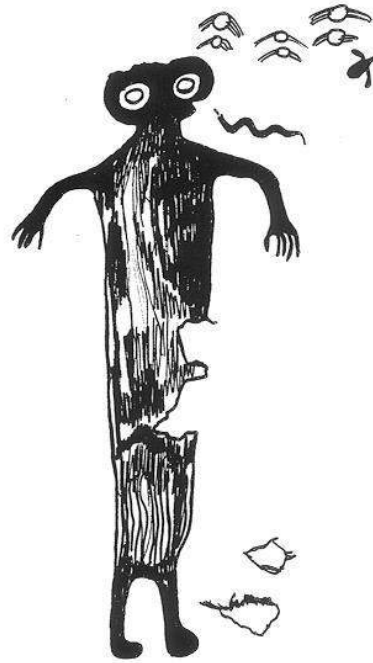


Figure 4B Head of Sinbad



Figure 5 Horseshoe Canyon



Figure 6 San Rafael Swell

Mircea

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