

Medical Anthropology and Evidences in Rock Art

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The presence of people who cure the ill represents a major part of any society for one simple reason: human beings are exposed to macro- and micro-organisms. These organisms represent serious challenges for the continuity of Homo sapiens.

My experience in the medical field in one way or another encouraged me to shed light on the medical aspect of Indian society. Through my part of this paper, I will give a little background about the medicine man, called a shaman in Indian society.

I would like to make it clear at the beginning that how Indians perceived and practiced medicine in the old world, and the way we dealt with disease before germ theory was established by Louis Pasteur are not that different. For Indians, medicine represented a sum of ideas and concepts. Medicine, according to Indians, was a mystery mastered by those people who were born with special talents and privileges, or those who gained it later in life if nature chose them.

Doctors in the old world society were different. The shaman's role expanded beyond the scope of healing, and included helping in cases of disaster, irregularity in the weather, and assuming a political role during military or civic crises.

The personality of a shaman is characterized by the following traits: 1) superior in relation to the society; 2) strong in body and dedicated in mind; 3) self-controlled; 4) capable of mental effort beyond that of most people in the society; 5) possessed a complex vocabulary of terms beyond that of lay people.

In spite of all we mentioned above, shamens were viewed by the society in a controversial way: shamens have been respected for their knowledge and power, but feared for their intimacy with the spirits. They were frequently hated for their avarice, but often rewarded lavishly for their success in prognostication and healing. Nevertheless, shamens were exposed to punishment for failures and in some cultures, even killed. Consequently, a shaman developed a keen sense for diagnosis which gave him the choice to refuse to treat a patient whose recovery was uncertain.

There were several ways to become a shaman. For example, the call to become a shaman might have come as an inner-voice from the spirit world; if the voice is unanswered, it can take a visible form. Another way it might have come is through an animal, plant, or natural object and this usually came in earlier life. For older people, the call came during a great misfortune, such as loss of family, property, or after a protracted illness. From this we see there was no specific age to become a shaman.

To finish the picture of the process of becoming a shaman, it is necessary to shed more light on this process. At the beginning of the call, the prospective shaman may feel ill, behave strangely, and refuse to eat. (Shamanism in different tribes begins and progresses differently.) Some shamens are called by supernatural power, but shamanism can also be taught and carried from one generation to another. For example, the Yakut shaman is taught by another shaman who takes his pupil to a mountain or forest. There, he dresses him in shaman's garments, gives him a rattle, and demands that the novice give up all that he likes and consecrate himself to the service of the spirits. Then the young man must kill a sacrificial animal and sprinkle himself with its blood. The flesh is eaten by those who are present at the ceremony.

Like any other medicine man in other societies, a shaman had special equipment. Shamens were equipped with paraphernalia which might have included special costumes made of animal skin. A medicine man's bundle contained charms, fetishes, the medicine stick which was used for offerings, warnings, or invitations, and some bags of herbs. The medicine man might also have a drum, rattle, and sacrificial instrument which was often made of flint, obsidian, or snake fangs, and a hollow bone for sucking, a mortar and pestle for mixing medicine, and in many places a syringe for injecting medicine into wounds or administering an enema.

Treatment

Before we talk about treatment, let us first take a look at how Indians perceived the causes of diseases. According to Indians, there are three causes of disease: 1) human agency; 2) supernatural agency; 3) natural causes. Supernatural agency comprises five divisions: 1) sorcery, 2) taboo violation, 3) disease-object intrusion where a material being such as a worm, snake, insect, or small animal enters the body. (These objects can be eliminated from the

body by drumming and singing, sucking, and by putting the patient in a place where the invader is uncomfortable.) 4) spirit intrusion, and 5) soul loss. These five causes are not equally important. Another cause is unfulfilled dreams or desire. Also, among the supernatural causes of disease were mistreatment of animals, disrespect of fire, and hunting animals without asking for permission, or offering tobacco for their spirits.

Medicine men used two types of therapeutic methods: treatment with medication and treatment without medication. Medications involved so many drugs that I will mention only a few. In anesthetics, while white people did not discover the properties of cocaine until 1884, the Indians used coca leaves as a stimulant. It is highly probable that coca was used as an anesthetic in trephination, skull surgery. Many other drugs were used such as narcotics, stimulants, birth controls, astringents, cathartics, and emetics to name a few.

Among drugless therapies was bleeding which has just returned to modern medicine as a way of draining blood from severe wounds to accelerate the healing time, cautery, moxa, cupping, sucking, enemata, fumigation, massage, psychic treatment, and surgery.

Considering Indian medical life, a question emerges: Why did Indians record the shamanistic part of their life on the rock? Was it a method of training a shaman? Was it part of the healing ritual, or did they want to preserve it for the benefit of the future generations?

On The Rocks

Ethnographies, ancient artifacts, and the traditions carried down to the modern Native American societies give anthropologists and archaeologists many clues to medicinal practices and social roles of shamen and medicine men in early societies. While this is vital to a basic understanding of any shamanistic society, information can be utilized in other ways. An analysis of data furnished by scientific processes then can be juxtaposed to visual information provided by pictographs and petroglyphs which have survived many centuries. What follows in this paper is not a scientific presentation of fact produced from countless hours of research and precise methodology; rather, it is a comparison of fact with imagery, a comparison through publication. I hope it will offer insights into the question, "What is rock art?" A question I believe cannot be answered by science alone.

The participants gathered together the patient in the center of a room filled with the purifying smell of sweet grass. Boom-boom the rhythmic beating of a drum was a vehicle to carry the soul or mind to the world of the spirits. It is a drum twenty inches in diameter with one head; in Sioux "inyan wak'an" and literally means "the stone that speaks."¹

Often I have wondered why so many rock art sites are located in areas of phenomenal acoustics. A healing ceremony held in such a place would indeed, have the stones speaking, and echoing, answering the sonorous drums. Fools Crow, an Oglala Sioux Medicine Man said:

I can communicate with the spirits through the stones. There are the flying drums at the ceremonies...[The stones talk.] They tell me what the illness is and what medicine to get. I don't know myself. The stones say. They tell me what to do.²

These "speaking stones" drew my attention to the parallels of indigenous medicine and rock art symbols; for example, the appearance of medicine bags in rock art.

In the Northwest otter-skin medicine bags were common. In the Southwest fox, marmot, weasel or other small animals would have made a similar bag. These usually held red cloth and tobacco, and various herbal remedies.³

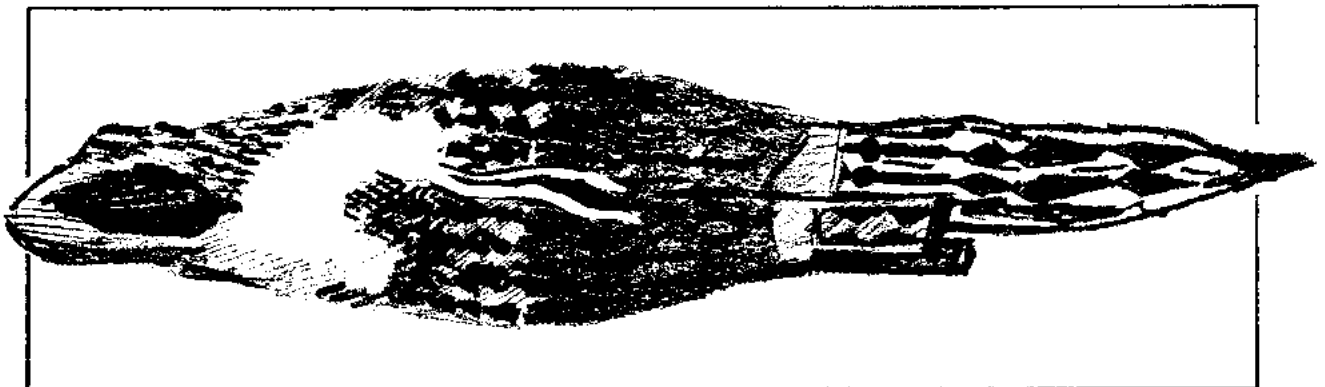


Figure 1: Winebago otter-skin medicine bag.

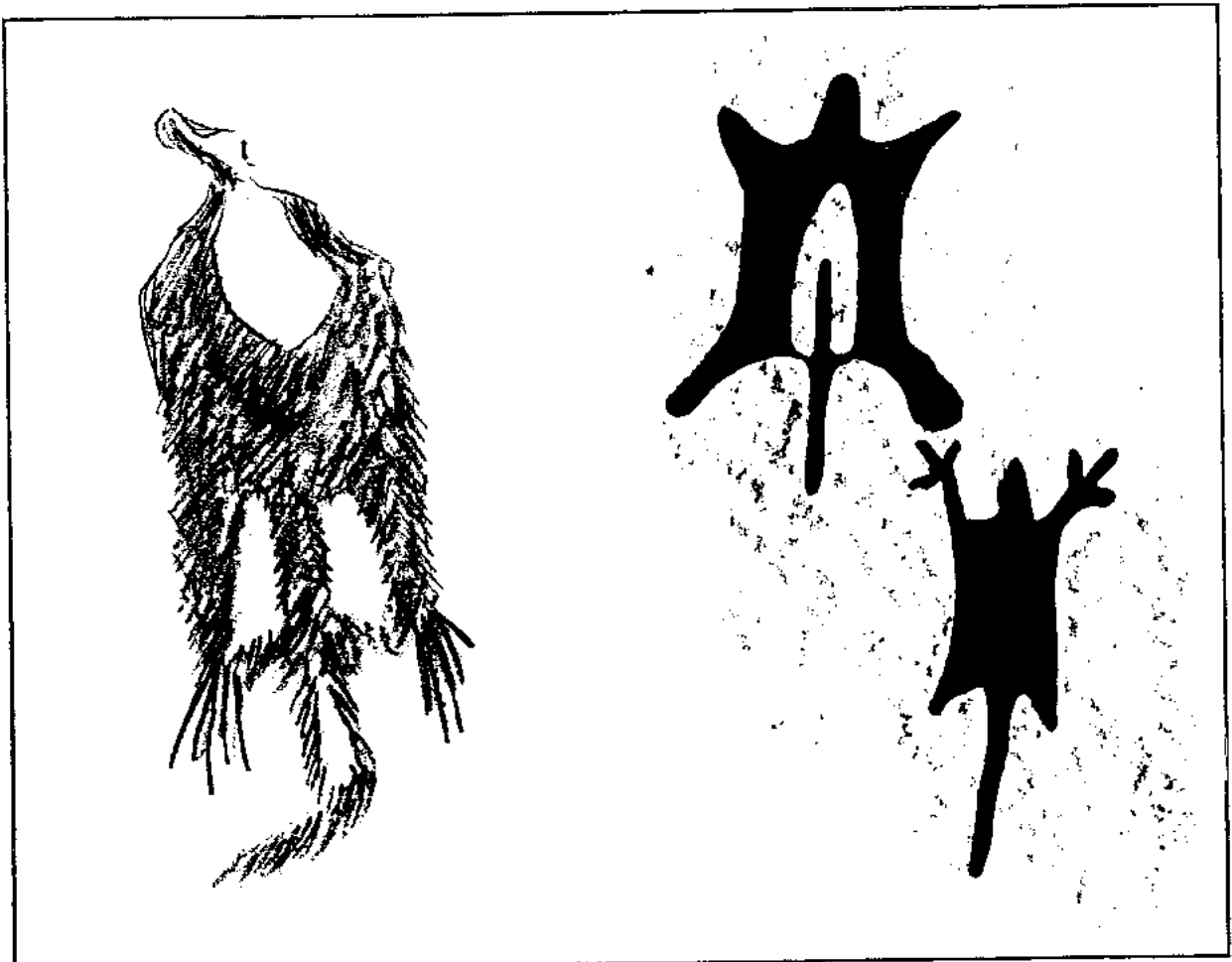


Figure 2: Animal-skin medicine bag and petroglyph from Newspaper Rock.

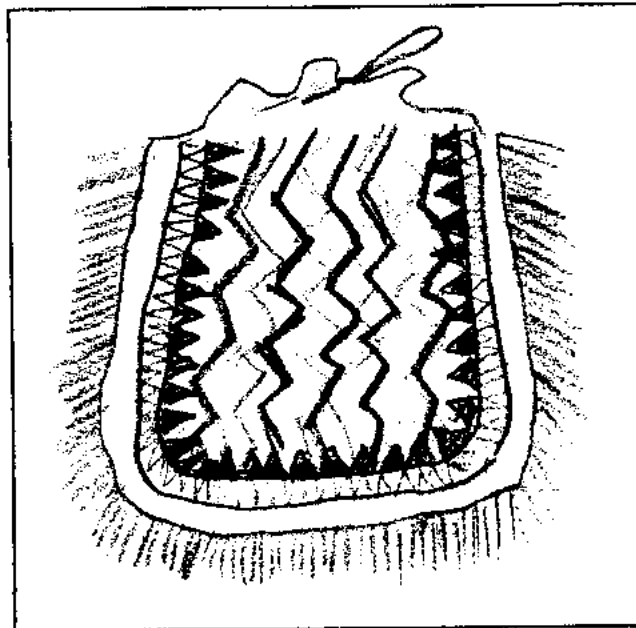


Figure 3: Pima medicine bag

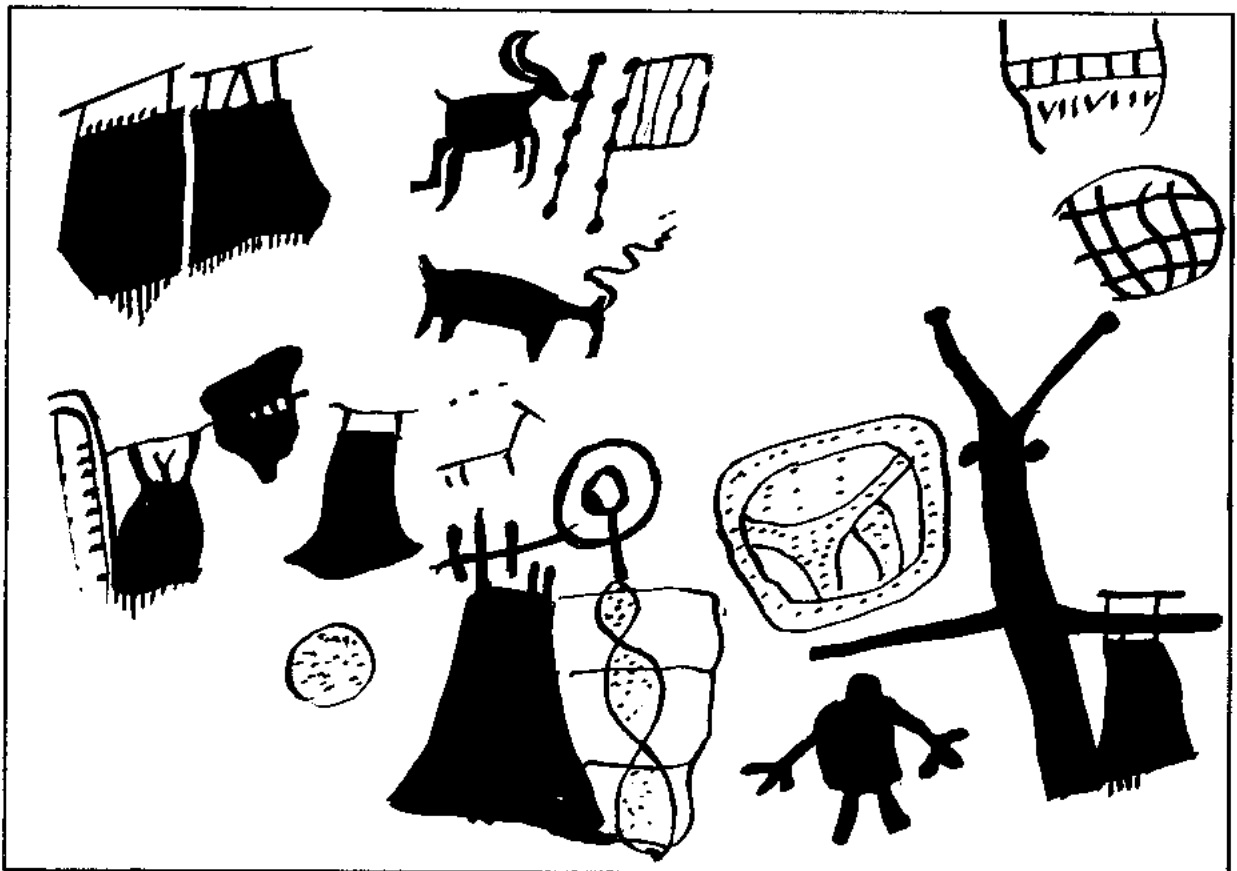


Figure 4: Petroglyph from Cosos, California

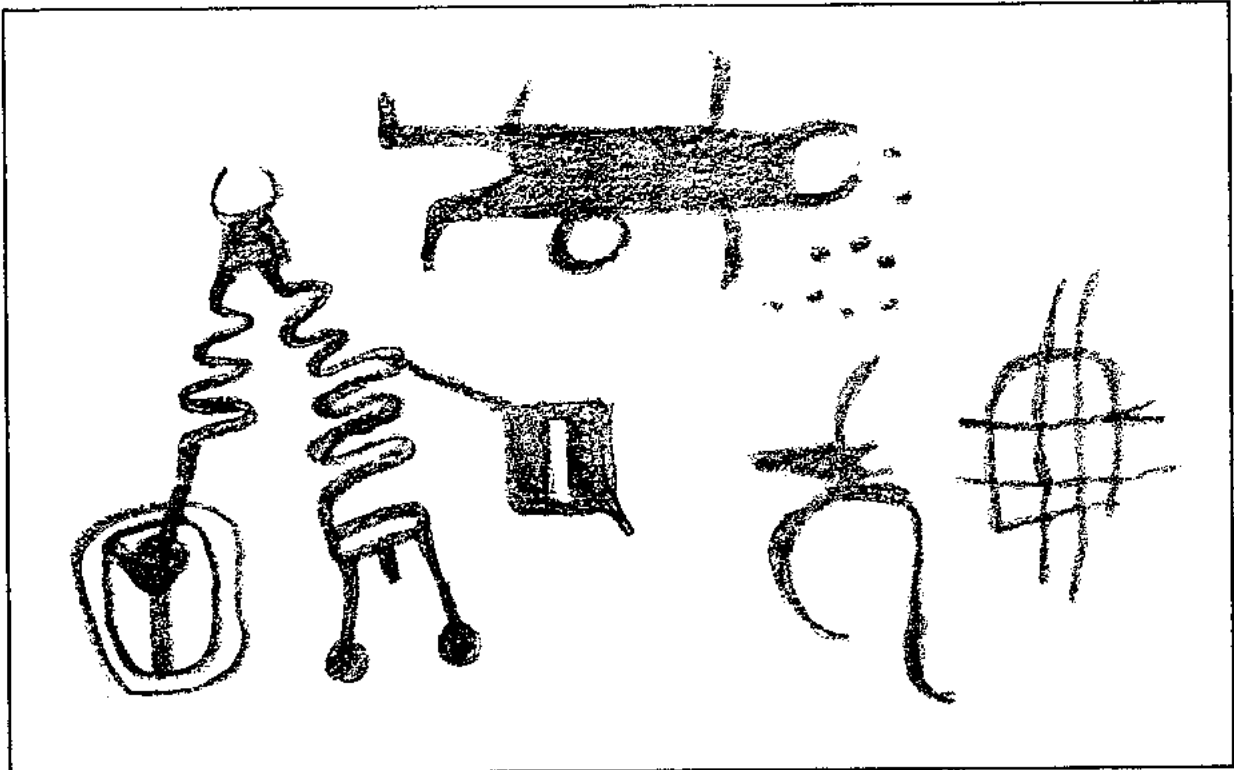


Figure 5: Petroglyph in Nine Mile Canyon, Utah

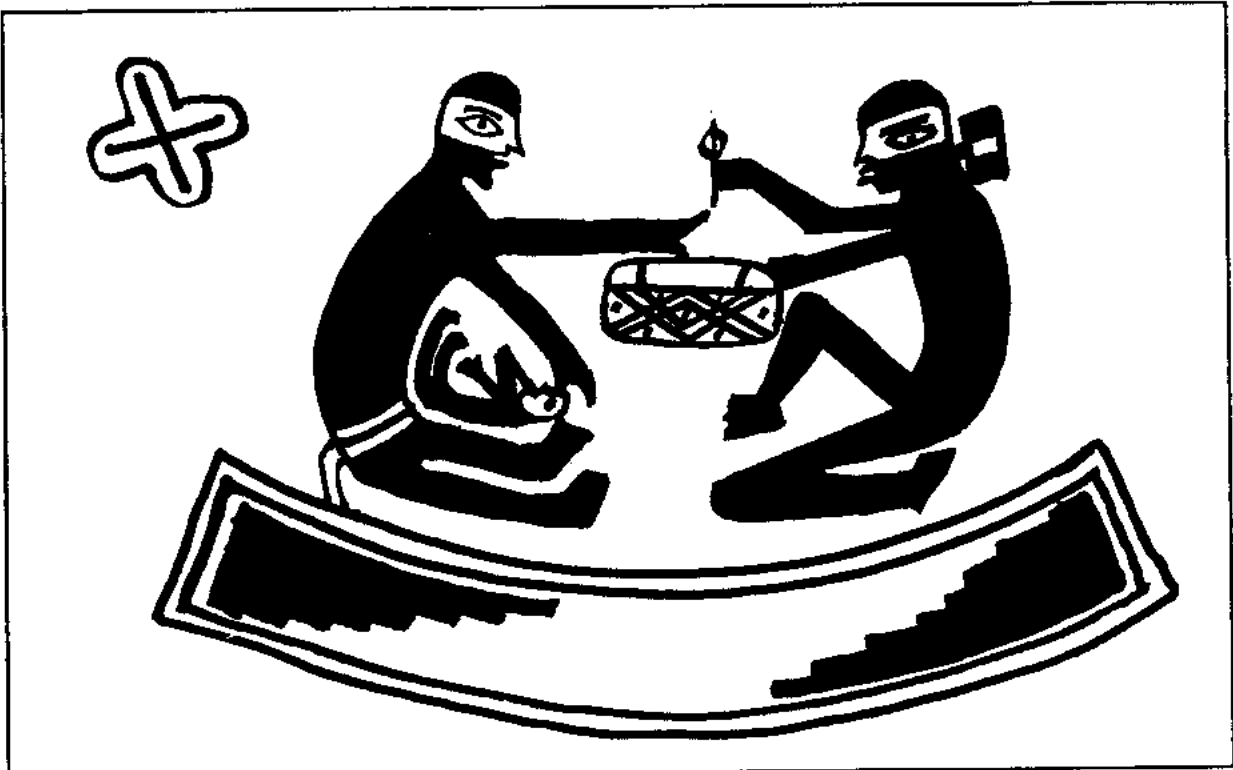


Figure 6: Mimbres pottery

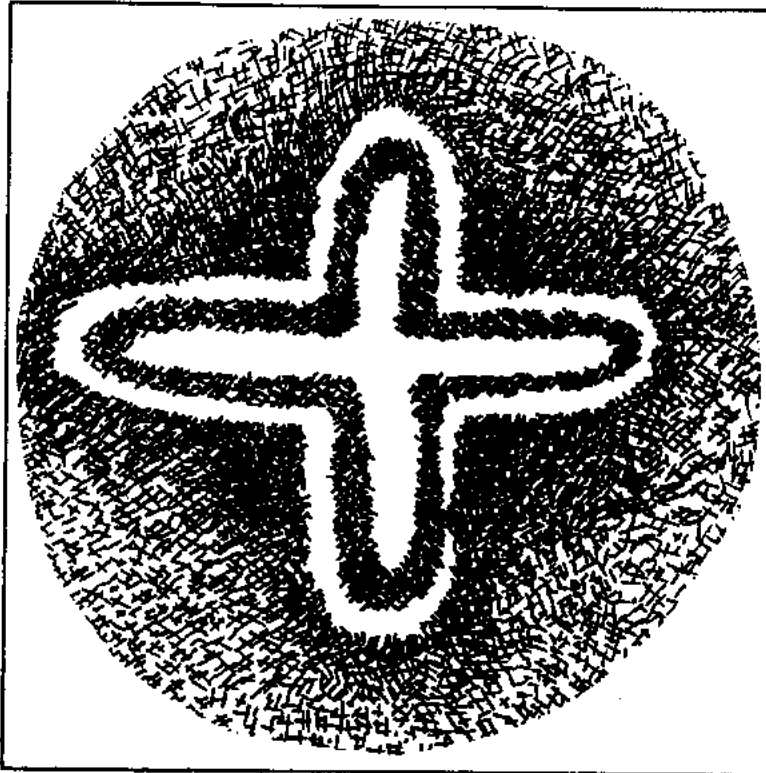


Figure 7: Traditional Venus symbol

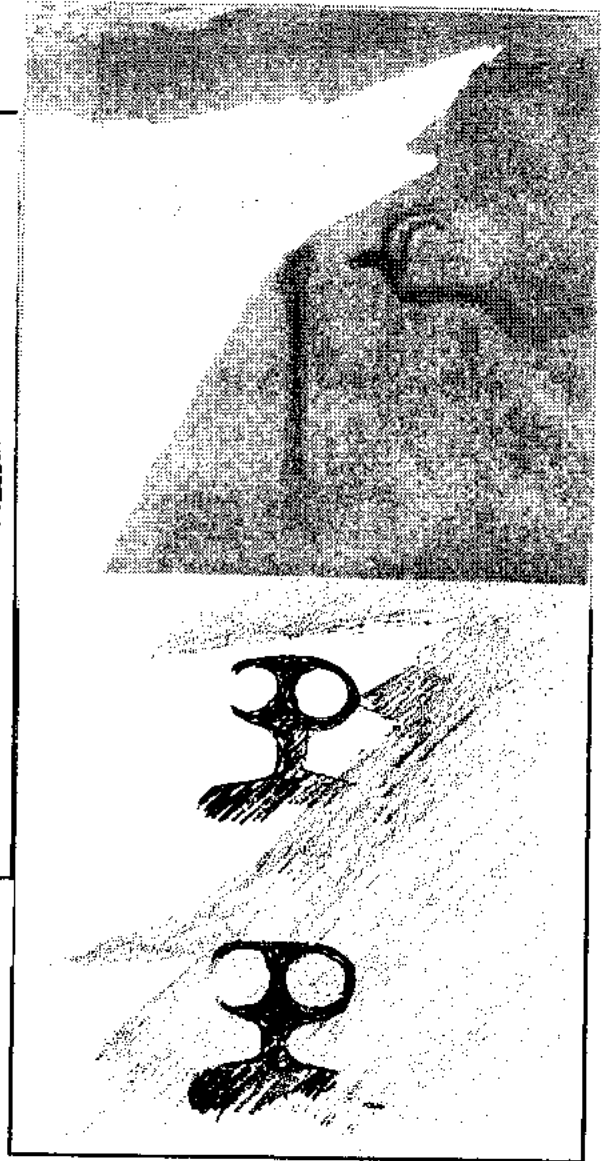


Figure 8: Photograph by Clifford Rayl

Figure 2 shows another medicine bag made of animal skin. On the right is a petroglyph from Newspaper Rock, stretched out in a similar manner. Notice the similarity of light and dark patterns on the bag and on the petroglyph. Obviously this is the same animal, but is this a glyph of medicine bag? Perhaps.

A better example, however, comes from the comparison of the following medicine bag (Fig. 3) and rock art site (Fig. 4). In the *Handbook of North American Indian*, this California panel is considered a "medicine bag panel."⁴ Notice the fringe on the bags, the zig-zag patterns in the upper right, and the series of dotted lines. A medicine man has various means of marking his herbs. Common symbols were knots on the string on each individual bag. He could identify the species associated with the type of knot or the number of knots. In the lower right of this picture notice the Medicine man with a bag draped on his arm and under the other arm a small anthropomorph. Perhaps the patient?

Figure 5 is a petroglyph from Nine-Mile Canyon. Is this a shaman, medicine bag, and patient? This image is repeated in Figure 6: a medicine man, his bag, and below his arm, a small patient. This is a Mimbres Pot described by Boma Johnson, and up in the left corner notice a Venus symbol.⁵

The Venus symbol has also appeared in Native American medical history. According to Jake Herman, Sioux, some people use "hanblec'eya" to cure certain illnesses. "Hanblec'eya is the day crying, the morning cry to the morning star. They have four poles and four tokens and four winds."⁶

Figure 7 is the traditional Venus symbol. Interestingly, in rock art Venus is depicted as a cross, an image with four arms. Perhaps these "arms" represents the poles and the surrounding line represents the four winds. Venus figures are often involved with solar interactions. Important solar dates, solstice, cross quarter, and equinox were days of heavy ritualistic activity. There is no reason to believe that rituals regarding the health of individuals or the well being of the tribe were overlooked on such days. In fact, the sun itself was often used as a healing agent.

This is an excerpt from The Navajo Door by Leighton:

All these people are gathered, their attention focused on the patient, bringing their influence and expectations to bear on his illness, their very presence implying that powerful forces are working for his well being. The Singer as the mouth piece of the Holy Beings, speaks in their voice and tells the patient that all is well. In the height of the ceremony the patient himself becomes one of the beings, puts his feet in their moccasins and breathes in the strength of the sun.⁷

Figure 8 is a sequence of slides, courtesy of Clifford Rayl, showing an anthropomorph inhaling the sun. This pictograph inhales and then exhales, absorbing the power of the sun.

Whether from the sun or other supernatural powers, the medicine man gets help. Fools Crow said to a patient, "bring red, yellow, black and white cloth and 405 cloth-wrapped tobacco offerings-one for each spirit."⁸

Holy Dance, Rosebud Sioux, said, "The spirits are very small. A good medicine man will have about 500 of them. If he is not so good, he will have less."⁹

Perhaps many of the miniature images we come across in rock art are these small healing spirits that help the shaman. At the Procession Panel there is a lengthy row of small spirits led by a shamen who can be identified by their crooks, "poros." Similarly, small spirit-like pictographs cover the walls of Wild Horse Cave.

In this petroglyph the shaman is accompanied by a flute playing spirit helper (Fig 10). He is also accompanied by two birds. In the *Ethnography of the Northern Utes* it is said, "The [medicine man] stated first the authority by which he practiced his profession, describing a past vision, usually of a bird or animal."¹⁰

One last example of medical anthropology evidenced in rock art takes us to Fish Cove and a Navajo account:

A man of the Navajo Long Salt family became ill because of nightmares caused by restless spirits. His family sought help from an old Blind Medicine Man from Tsegi County who held a three-day sing. For his pay he asked for five butchered animals with the heads and the lower legs removed at the knees.¹¹

In Figure 11 a deer was painted completely, then ritually slaughtered. Blood was painted on and the head removed by a second layer of paint that visually decapitates the image. Also, a close look reveals hash marks at the knees. There is a small anthropomorph hovering over an animal; perhaps this is the medicine man or a small spirit helper. Is this site part of a ritual, an exchange with the spirits for a cure?

I would like to conclude with a statement from Mel Brewster, a Northern Paiute:

We have a medicine rock. We stop there and leave sage, or tobacco, or money and pray because that rock is powerful. . . old people told me. Those petroglyphs are there to heal people. When these white people go to them, they become happier. Some white people spend their whole lives looking at them and it makes them feel better. It makes their lives more meaningful. So even though they are white, those rocks are healing them.¹²

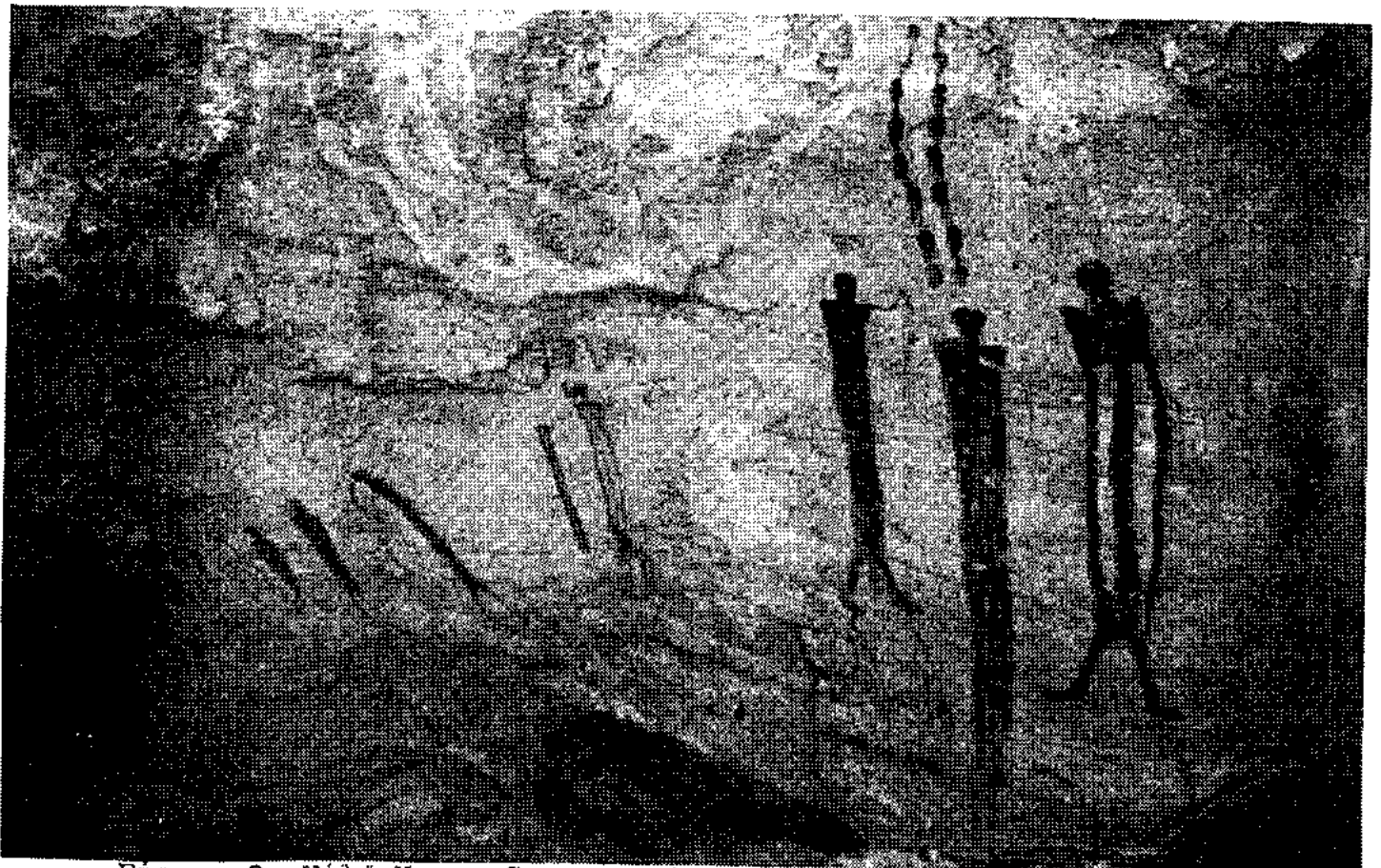


Figure 9: Wild Horse Canyon, photo by Vernon Bush

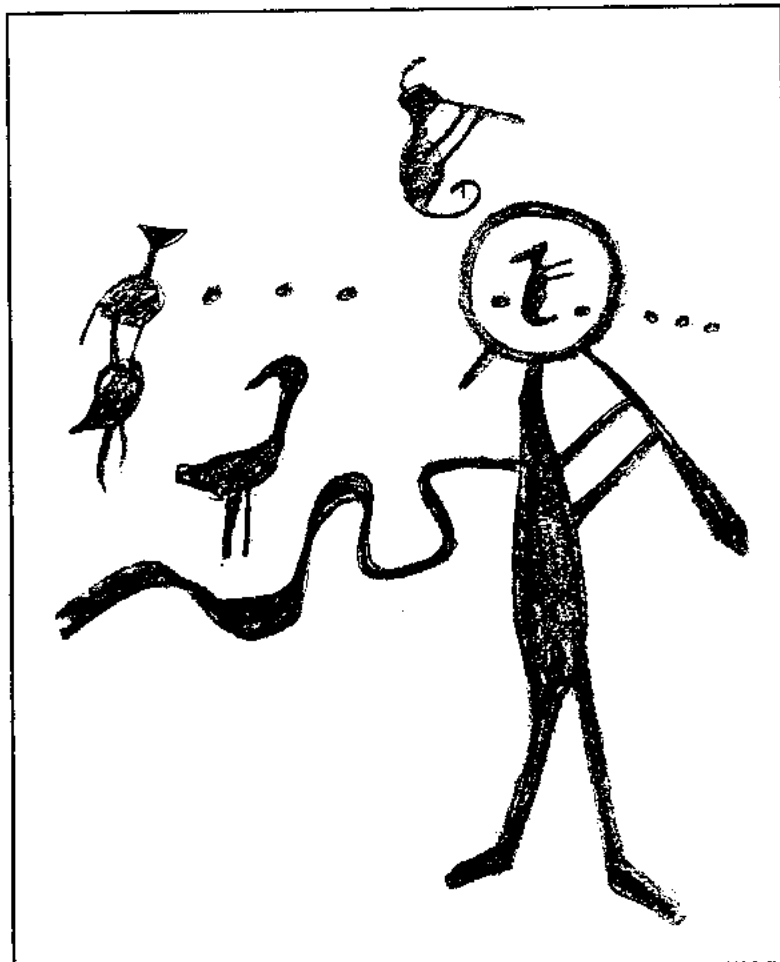


Figure 10

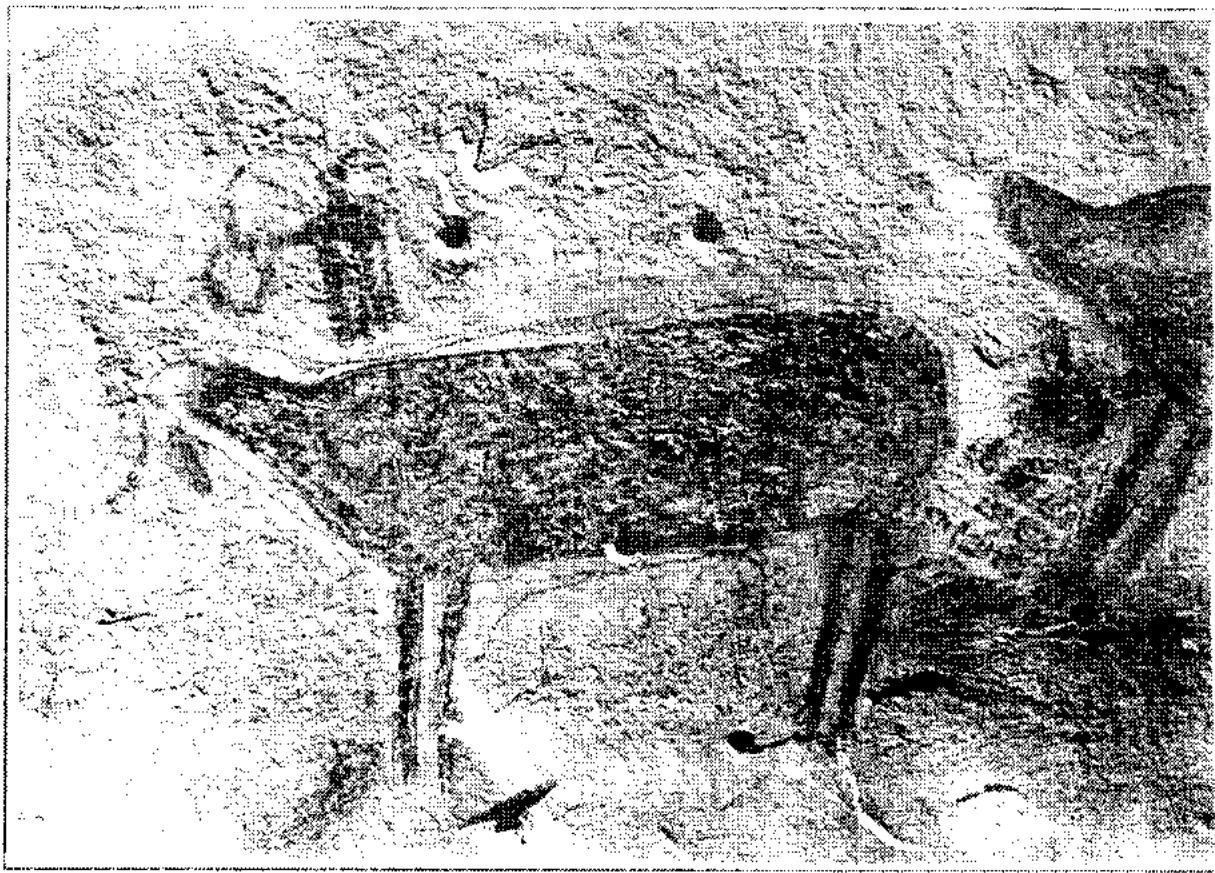


Figure 11: Pictograph at Fish Cove: photograph by Vernon Bush

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Endnotes

1. T. Lewis, *The Medicine Men: Oglala Sioux Ceremony and Healing* (University of Nebraska Press, 1990) p. 76.
2. T. Lewis, *The Medicine Men: Oglala Sioux Ceremony and Healing* (University of Nebraska Press, 1990) p. 78.
3. T. Lewis, *The Medicine Men: Oglala Sioux Ceremony and Healing* (University of Nebraska Press, 1990) p. 110.
4. W. D'Azevedo, *Handbook of North American Indians: Great Basin* (Smithsonian Institution, 1986) p. 220.
5. B. Johnson, "A Unique Expression of the Venus Star Symbol Among the Petroglyphs of the Lower Colorado River," *Utah Rock Art Vol. XIV* (Utah Rock Art Research Association, 1995) p. 72.
6. T. Lewis, *The Medicine Men: Oglala Sioux Ceremony and Healing* (University of Nebraska Press, 1990) p. 86.
7. Leighton cited in G. Foster, *Medical Anthropology* (John Wiley & Sons Pub, 1990) p. 38.
8. T. Lewis, *The Medicine Men: Oglala Sioux Ceremony and Healing* (University of Nebraska Press, 1990) p. 76.
9. T. Lewis, *The Medicine Men: Oglala Sioux Ceremony and Healing* (University of Nebraska Press, 1990) p. 87.
10. A. Smith, *Ethnography of the Northern Utes* (Museum of New Mexico Press, 1974) p. 162.
11. B. Steiger, *Indian Revival of His Spiritual Heritage and It's Relevance for Modern Man* (Doubleday and Company Inc., 1974) p. 100.
12. L. Kelen, *Sacred Images* (Gibbs & Smith Pub., 1996) p. 76.