

Prehistoric Art: Their Contribution for Understanding on Prehistoric Society

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The pictures indicated as an art began their human invasion of the symbolic world, just started around 100.000 BP and more intensively since 30.000 years. The meaning of the relations between the men and with their world is produced by organization of representations in graphic systems by images, expression and communication in the same time. Since the first appearance of genus Homo, the development of cerebral and social evolution probably causes the ability to symbolize. Human uses the image to the modernity which is gives a symbolic way to the meaning for the beings and to the things (Vialou, 2009). This paper is a short report about development of contribution on study of symbolic behavior for interpreting of prehistoric society, from beginning period until recent times by several scholars.

When late nineteenth and early twentieth century scientists have accept that Upper Paleolithic art is being genuinely of great antiquity. At that times, paleolithic art was interpreted merely as “art for art’s sake”. The first systematic study of Ice Age art was undertaken by Abbé Henri Breuil, a great French archeologist. He carefully copied images from a lot of sites and reconstructs a development chronology based on artistic style during the first half of the twentieth century. He believed that the art would grow more complicated through time (Lewin, et.al., 2004). After the beginning study by Breuil, as a summary they are several contributions on study of symbolic behavior for interpreting of prehistoric society, such as for reconstruction of prehistoric religion, social structure of their society, information exchange system between them, and also as indication of cultural and historical change in prehistoric times.

Prehistoric Religion

Breuil developed the hypothesis that prehistoric art was functioned as a “hunting magic”, a way for ensuring fruitful hunts and profiting the animal victims. The Upper Paleolithic people of hunter gatherer societies were produce paintings in which a few species were overrepresented by comparison with the prevailing environment. Breuil reasoned that Upper Paleolithic people may have made paintings to ensure the increase of totemic and prey animals. This idea is supporting by the presence of the images in many caves which animals apparently impaled on arrows or spears. He says, even the absence of such weapons does not oppose against the concept, because an animal’s image might be impaled symbolically during a ritual performance in front of it (Lewin, et.al., 2004). From Bruil’s work he was known as the first scientist who suggests a different function and meaning of prehistoric art more than just “art for art’s sake”. His interpretation had an important effect for following studies in interpreting of Paleolithic art and opening new perspectives about it.

Hunting magic meaning may well explain some of the images in prehistoric art. Ritual of other kinds almost certainly centered on the art as well. But, something factors other than practicality also suggest to prehistoric people for seeks out and decorates deep caves which appear to be otherwise unused. Davis Lewis-Williams (1986), a South African archeologist has

suggests that the art is have shamanistic function. Shamanistic art is produced by shamans, priests who use magic in or after a state of trance. His model is based on conclusion to a study of San's art, which is known to be shamanistic and on a survey of psychological studies on the hallucinatory images produced during their trance.

The shaman has experiences during trance induced hallucination within the nervous system images, such as grids, zigzags, dots, spirals, and curves. These images may be manipulated into recognizable objects during the trance. Shaman may eventually come to see therianthropes, or chimeras of animal and human forms in deeper stages of trance. Lewis-Williams has suggests that San's art may have been part of prehistoric art (Lewis-Williams, 1986). Images that reflect these trance experiences are common in shamanistic art in South Africa and elsewhere. But, interpreting prehistoric art by ethnographic analogy must be consider with the comparison terms in middle range theory of ethnoarchaeology

Lewis-Williams has proposed a model of the shamanism or neuropsychological with a powerful impact on rock art research, and it has significantly added to our knowledge of past foragers life ways in southern Africa and elsewhere in the world. However, this model is primarily based on the view of shamanism as a universal and consistent characteristic of foragers over space and time. McCall argued that both theoretical and empirical have problems with shamanism model. He examines the relationship between the specific social roles and practices of shamanism also the comprehensive cosmological structures on which they are based in Southern Africa and Northern Eurasia. He argues in both cases that many cosmological beliefs are highly persistent and durable extending into prehistory. While the specific practices and roles of shamans are variable changing to follow the immediate and local needs of their communities. He suggests that rock art is easier for relate to the overarching cosmological dispositions of the people that produced it (McCall, 2007). He also suggests some theoretical and methodological alternatives recognizing about this interpretation.

Rock art is group of archaeological remains originating from the process of landscape enculturation. The rock art production is affected by many short-term and local contingencies, but rock art affects human behavior at scales beyond human lifetimes. The accumulation of rock art on landscapes represents a long-term of inter generational process. Therefore, McCall has argued that the content of rock art at regional scales is easier for related to the durable and persistent cosmological structures of prehistoric societies than to the variable, flexible, and transitory social practices of shamanism (McCall, 2007). This approach could be valuable in addressing the thematic stagnancy and hyperbolic interpretation of certain aspects on prehistoric art over large geographical scale and big differentiation of chronological ranges.

Another interpretation about prehistoric art is developed along an unexpected discovery of rock art paintings in 1994 at eastern Borneo. The uniqueness of the rock art is expressed in a rather high number of hand stencils (Chazine, 2000). He suggests an interpretation of the function on these negative hands stencils, the trend is towards healing practices (Chazine, et.al., 2008). Since Abbé Henri Breuil develops the first interpretation on the prehistoric art about hunting magic, until this moment we know another perspective about prehistoric art function and meaning associated with prehistoric religion such as shamanism, healing practice and prehistoric cosmology.

Prehistoric Social Structure

A famous French archeologist, André Leroi-Gourhan has developed a thesis that says the prehistoric art in some way reflected the society behind the art that produced it. He noted that the inventory of animals depicted was comparable throughout Europe, and they described the presentation as remaining remarkably stable through time. That observation contrasts with a large amount more nearby idiosyncratic nature of portable art. For Leroi-Gourhan, wall art reflected the duality of femaleness and maleness, also central and periphery in society. Certain images were representing for maleness, while others were female. The cave images thereby reflecting a certain type of social structure. They were arranged female representations occurred at the center, with male representations located around the periphery (Leroi-Gourhan, 1982). His work had the important effect of emphasizing social context in interpreting Paleolithic art. Through prehistoric art, we could more better understanding about the social structure of prehistoric people.

Denis Vialou and Henri Delport in their independent studies conclude that less overall uniformity of structure connects the painted caves than originally envisaged by Leroi-Gourhan. Vialou and Delport acknowledge that most of the caves follow some kind of structure, but caution that each cave should be viewed as a separate expression. Diversity begins to emerge as a more realistic interpretative lens based on view that the upper Paleolithic societies have a diversity of people, a diversity of cultures, and a diversity of the art (Lewin, et.al., 2004). After their study, at the moment archaeologists have shifted from trying to understand what an individual art or group of art might represent for attempting to understand the social context in which those images were produced. If we would more better understanding about the social structure of prehistoric people, we must attempt to divest from modern interpretations of the natural bias in our modern eyes and minds. Without this way, we will contaminate our interpretation to understanding the prehistoric people social structure.

Information Exchange System

The basic principal of this argument is a model about cultural interaction for explains a prehistoric art system. Information exchange theory provides the basis for this proposed model, by perceiving style from a functional perspective of the art distribution seen as a medium for the expression of social affiliations. The concept of social context such as public versus private has been really important in developing this model (Lewin, et.al., 2004). Prehistoric art has belief that style is a means of non verbal communication or as a language used to identity negotiation between groups in prehistoric period. Art have used in prehistoric people to communicate each other between them.

A study of rock art by McDonald, (2008) in the Sydney region proposes a function of the rock art as a prehistoric information superhighway. Groups around this region who were not in constant verbal contact with each other were able to communicate important social messages. They also demonstrate both broad scale group cohesion and within group distinctiveness through stylistic behavior. In the Sydney region people have signaled information about themselves and making interaction more predictable during a period of substantial social change (McDonald, 2008). Based from rock art study in the Sydney region, complex patterns of variability in rock art contexts demonstrate the character of the contacts between groups. The

function of the rock art as a language was seen from areas where the intensive influence from these contacts may have the biggest result.

As an information exchange system, the rock art also functioned for territories marking arrangement between communities in prehistoric times. Ramirez, et.al., (2000) have made an investigation on the Iberian peninsula megalithic art which propose the analysis of the graphics location for delimiting the occupied territories during Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods. Their argument based on the graphic and technical perspectives that the art of inside megaliths sites is basically developed parallel to the outside art in painted shelters or in engraved rocks in the open air sites. Because of that, they able to delimit a megalithic style on various supports located in existing areas of the prehistoric territory.

Ramirez and colleagues found conditions about these zones are not random. Megalithic art have been chosen by their economic and symbolic meanings, and also several of those graphics location reflects a visible system for territories marking. They proposed about a territory model for graphics in relationship with the occupation of the landscape in the south-west Iberian peninsula in the last prehistoric times. (Ramirez, et.al., 2000). It is clear that rock art is an important feature of Neolithic and Chalcolithic society. They suggest a key role in structuring the landscape and allowing us to sight the rich symbolic life of prehistoric peoples.

Cultural Change

A lot of archaeologist regards prehistoric art as a secondary archaeological data source. Berrocal and colleagues (2007) have use Levantine rock art which found along the Mediterranean region of the Iberian Peninsula, as a case study to show how rock art can be a very significant data. Levantine rock art complex has been considered to be typically Mesolithic due to its distinctive hunting scenes. A review of certain archaeological indicators provides new arguments about its chronology, its socio-cultural attribution, and its significance. Berrocal, et.al., faced with the chronological problem presenting the evidence that led to the recent concern of the Levantine style as Early Neolithic in synchrony with two other rock art styles, which are Schematic and Macroschematic. They propose that rock art is a central and independent source of information to explore the historical context of the Neolithisation of Mediterranean Iberia. Its wide geographical distribution allows them to study different and complementary territories as a single entity. These contrasts with the limitations posed by the study of settlements, whose differences at a regional scale, are usually interpreted in terms of cultural variability (Berrocal, et.al., 2007). Based from this study, we can understand that rock art considered as a important aspect in the organization of social landscapes. Rock art must not to be treated just as an ideological factor of the Neolithisation product but also as a key in understanding this cultural and historical process.

McClure and colleagues (2008) didn't agree that Neolithic rock art in Mediterranean Spain can be used as a primary source of archaeological information regarding the transition to agriculture in this region. Because problems of chronology increase a requirement to interpret rock art distributions carefully, and rock art must be analyzed in the context with another archaeological data. The control of accurate dating in testing hypotheses was also demonstrated by Garfinkel, and friends (2010), in extraordinary prehistoric rock art record which depicting tens of thousands about animal images in the Coso Range of eastern California. They have made a study about the relationship between aboriginal hunting, forager ecology,

bighorn prey population levels, and the production of rock art. They review archaeozoological evidence that the Coso desert bighorn sheep population was strongly depleted during the Newberry period after 1500 BC. They found the dating of the rock art shows a correlation between bighorn depletion and increased rock art production. These data are consistent with the arrival of Numic foragers ca. 600 AD who competed with the Coso Pre-Numics and eventually terminated the Coso rock art tradition (Garfinkel, et.al., 2010). From the result of their study, we know that chronology aspect is one of a key to made interpretation about rock art, and also it must be analyzed in their own context of archaeological data. Without better know in their context of form, space and times we will make a misunderstanding in builds of reconstruction about prehistoric society.

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