13 An ontological approach to Saharan rock art

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1 Introduction: Ontological approaches in the context of Saharan rock art studies

As several authors have pointed out, archaeology is a highly anthropocentric discipline (Jones 2012; Fowler 2013). A conventional definition of the discipline is that it concerns the study of past human life and activities. Hence, any kind of engagement with the world is seen from the viewpoint of human beings: what it makes for humans, what it changes to human life, and what it says about the human condition. For decades, archaeologists have mostly emphasized the genius of the human mind, our creative spirit, and the success of technical innovations that litter our long history (Latour and Lemonnier 1994). However, this paradigm has come under attack in recent years, as demonstrated by the rise of symmetrical archaeology (Witmore 2007; Shanks 2007), anti-humanist perspectives (Thomas 2002; Calvert-Minor 2010) and, in general, an increasing deconstruction of what Tim Hayward had qualified as 'human chauvinism' along with speciesism and anthropocentrism (Hayward 1997, 53–54).

In this setting, several authors have suggested that archaeology and anthropology have long retained an ethnocentric Western-oriented discourse (Descola 2005; Latour 2005; Atalay 2006; Colwell-Chanthaphonh et al. 2010), implicitly assuming that our own conceptions of the world make an effective canvas to describe and understand the lives, thoughts, and actions of people from other cultures or other time periods. Going against this assumption, the 'ontological turn' has had a massive impact in the field of anthropology since the 1990s. Social anthropologists have called into question their ways of understanding of peoples' being, becoming, and interacting in and with the world (Viveiros de Castro 1998; Bird-David 1999). In archaeology, as well as in rock art research, ontological approaches are relatively new (see, for instance, Watts 2013; Buchanan and Skousen 2015; Alberti 2016; Harrison-Buck and Hendon 2018; Lahelma and Herva 2019; Brück 2019) and there are entire areas of research in which the impact and application of ontological approaches have been minimal.

This last statement is particularly true for North African rock art studies, a field in which there is a long tradition of research mainly concerned with stylistic and chronological analyses. In the Sahara, this tradition goes back to the 1930s and

1940s, with the pioneering works of Lhote (1958) and Graziosi (1942). The initial concern of these early works was the description of animal and human motifs: animals were conceptualized in terms of palaeoecological implications, and humans viewed within the scope of anthropobiological considerations (Muzzolini 1986). As the corpus of rock art began to represent a large volume, the 1980s–1990s were a period marked by stylistic and chronological analyses (Le Quellec 1998, 231–271). This period witnessed a passionate controversy between those who advocated for a 'long chronology' arguing that Saharan rock art started at the end of the Pleistocene, and those who supported a 'short chronology' suggesting that Saharan rock art started from the 8th–7th millennia BC onwards (Le Quellec 2013a, 16–17). Stylistic and chronological questions still dominate the debate in Saharan rock art studies. Broader and more integrative approaches have been developed since the beginning of the twenty-first century, including paleoenvironmental, GIS, and landscape analyses (e.g., Barich 1998; Di Lernia and Gallinaro 2010; Lenssen-Erz 2012; Gallinaro 2013; Honoré 2019a). Despite how fascinating many of these publications are, they are still grounded in some implicit assumptions of traditional archaeology, and especially the view that rock art is a set of images representing things *lato sensu* and that our task is to ascribe meaning on it. In this setting, ontological approaches have had little impact on this field of research.

Ontologies are a theory of being and becoming. Any approach in archaeology is based on an ontology, on a view of how the world is constituted and organized. Thus far, in Saharan rock art studies, researchers have implicitly assumed that our own naturalist ontologies were universal and, thus, did not need to be discussed nor challenged in interpreting this rock art. Following the ontological turn, I argue that considering the existence of other ontologies, especially relational ontologies, is key to an understanding of Saharan rock art. The reluctance of scholars to examine Saharan rock art through the lens of ontological theory may be explained by a number of factors. The lack of Indigenous knowledge and the absence of what has been called a 'cultural legacy' (Burt 2013, 70) in the area somewhat explain the tendency of Saharan rock art researchers to consider rock art a static imagery. This is related to a widespread belief in archaeology wherein ontological approaches are only possible when archaeologists have access to Indigenous information. This is what Sam Challis implicitly suggested when he wrote that ontological approaches in South Africa were possible because of the fortunate access to "some, if not all, of the Indigenous idioms that may obtain in contexts of art belonging to 'traditional' belief systems" (Challis 2019, 17).

In this chapter, I challenge the aforementioned view and explore the potential of ontological and relational approaches to archaeological materials that are not associated to ethnographical data. First, I examine the anthropocentric foundation of our understanding of Saharan rock art with reference to a number of images 'representing' 'transmorphic beings' (Figure 13.1). Drawing upon the notion of transmorphism in Chumash belief (Blackburn 1975, 40), the term 'transmorphic beings' was originally coined by David Robinson to describe beings made by the combination of 'a collective range of parts' (human, animal, but also vegetable and probably astronomical bodies) in the Chumash imagery

(Robinson 2013, 67). Second, I seek to demonstrate that the absence of Indigenous knowledge on Saharan rock art does not make it impossible to reconstruct past ontologies. The challenge to approach ontologies, and especially relational ontologies (which are by essence non-material) from the material remnants of past cultures is widely shared and applies to any kind of archaeological material. In rock art imageries, ontologies constitute the invisible but significant canvas on which images were made. A relational approach can help to make ontologies appear like an after-image emerging from the corpus. And yet this relational approach must not only be image-based. Our own naturalistic ontologies have heavily influenced rock art studies (Moro Abadía et al. 2012) and directed interpretations towards the mere representational power of images. Saharan rock art studies still place a strong emphasis on representational images and their figurative value. This is probably related to the narrative nature of many of those images (Barbaza 2015). However, as Jones and Cochrane have pointed out (Jones and Cochrane 2018, 5–15), representational purposes constitute only a small fraction of motives and methods for the creation of art in many places and at different times, and Saharan rock art is certainly no exception to this. Evidence from the Saharan rock art corpus demonstrates that rock art was not only a way of displaying narratives, but also part of a wider engagement involving performance, gatherings, and ceremonies, making the invisible part of life visible (Honoré 2019b, 118–119).

2 Permeable essences: Transmorphic beings in Saharan rock art

The Round Heads of the Tassili n'Ajjer and the Akûkâs (or Akakus) in the Central Sahara (Algeria and Libya) are among the most popular images of

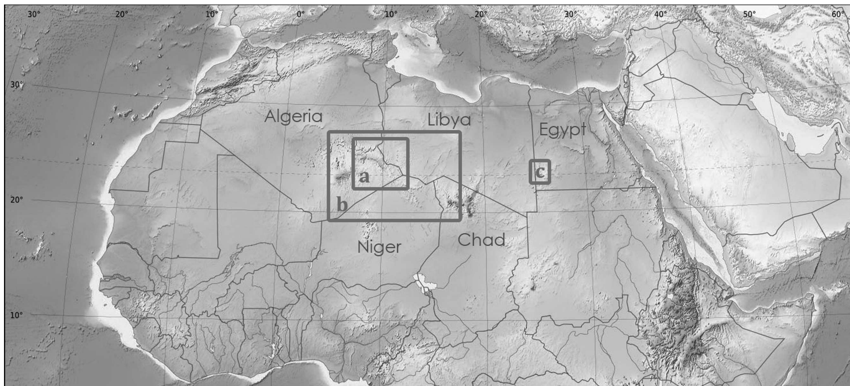

Figure 13.1 Map of distribution of Saharan rock art figures mentioned in the chapter: (a) Round Heads; (b) Theriantrops; (c) "Beasts."
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Saharan rock art. These representations are some of the most ancient paintings in the Sahara, with a chronology that ranges from 10,000 to 4000 BCE, depending on the authors (Di Lernia 2019, 107). Additionally, these images illustrate, probably better than any other element in the archaeological record, many of our biases and prejudices in the interpretative process. Round Heads paintings were discovered in 1933 by the French Lieutenant Charles Brenans, who was exploring the mountainous massif of the Tassili n'Ajjer with his army detachment. He reported two sites containing prehistoric paintings. One of Brenans' men, Henri Lhote, returned to the site in 1956 with an expedition of 14 people and 30 camels. During four seasons between 1956 and 1962, his team of painters and photographers documented 400 panels of rock art that were exhibited in 1957–1958 at the *Musée des Arts Décoratifs* in Paris (Lhote 1957). The exhibition largely substantiated a number of widespread ideas about Saharan rock art in France and Europe. In particular, these paintings became one of the prototypes of primitive anthropomorphic representations, with their characteristic neckless head, round and disk-like, the lack of facial details and their corporeal ornamentation (Figure 13.2). Amongst the Round Heads, Henri Lhote distinguished a number of styles and sub-styles. He called one of these 'Martians' because of the supposed resemblance of these figures to space-suited astronauts (Lhote 1955, 70). Although he certainly did not intend to offer a scientific definition of the aforementioned style, the term passed into the common parlance of Western archaeologists. The use of such a contemporary imaginary is generally considered romantic, outdated, and misleading (Le Quellec 2009).

In interpretative terms, archaeologists have long assumed that the tall anthropomorphic figures of the Round Head paintings were part of a prehistoric religion. The term *Grands Dieux* first appeared in the writings of Henri Lhote (1958, pl. II). These 'Great Gods' consist of a series of oversized figures, up to 6 m high, in the style of Round Heads paintings. In his book *À la découverte des fresques du Tassili* (1958), Lhote described one of the figures as the 'Abominable Sandman,' belonging to the group of Martians (Figure 13.3). Another famous 'Great God' in Sefar of 2 m high has been called the 'Great White God,' the 'Fisher God'—as it seems to hold a fish, and another the 'Rain God,' as the figure is superimposed on a presumed rain cloud. While researchers agree that such figures in the group of Round Heads could have many interpretations (see for example the hypothesis of masks, in Lajoux 1977), the reiterate use of a religious terminology has contributed to a reduction of these numerous different interpretations into a single understanding that is based on Western constructs, and especially on our modern division between the natural and the supernatural. This religious interpretation of rock art was once common currency among rock art scholars. After all, at least until the 1980s, the understanding of prehistoric art was grounded on what Mary Douglas called 'the myth of pious primitive' (Douglas 1975, 81), the idea that Indigenous peoples are universally religious by nature—in the sense we give to 'religions.' Moreover, these interpretations assume that the authors of these paintings made a distinction between the natural ('normal' people) and the supernatural ('Gods').

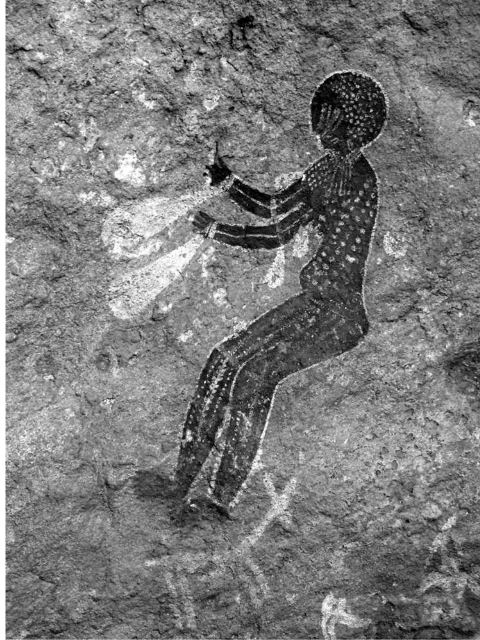

Figure 13.2 Round Head human figure on the wall of Tan Zoumaïtak shelter, Tassili n'Ajjer, Algeria (height: 0.72 m).
Source: Copyright Christian Mathis.

The so-called 'theriantrops' (figures mixing human and animal body parts in the Central Sahara) can also illustrate a number of widespread ideas about Saharan rock art (please see Figure 13.3). Images of anthropomorph-like beings are not uncommon in Saharan rock art. For instance, there are about 421 representations depicting a human body with an animal head in Central Sahara, mainly in the Messak and the Tassili n'Ajjer massifs, sharing some formal affinities (Le Quellec 2013b, 157). After Lewis-Williams' works on southern African rock art (Lewis-Williams 1981), the shamanistic hypothesis has been tentatively applied to the rock art record of the Central Sahara. A variety of images have been taken as signs of shamanism: rounded heads because of their deformed appearance (Fagnola 1995; Anati 1995), ovoid bodies (Soleilhavoup 1998), mushroom-like shapes (Samorini 1990, 1992), spirals, lines, and what would be qualified as formlings (Searight 1997), 'jellyfish' being interpreted as phosphenes (Fagnola 1995), motifs on animal coat overrunning it or looking like a ladder being interpreted as entoptic phenomena (Soleilhavoup 1998), and abstract images presumably resulting from altered states of consciousness (Anati 1988). Among such interpretations, floating humans and theriantrops have been viewed as potential images of shamans (Sansoni 1980, 1994). Likewise, because Round Head paintings do not fit the Western 'naturalistic' ideal, they have

Figure 13.3 "*Grand dieu*" of Sefar, also named the White God or the Rain God, Tassili n'Ajjer, Algeria (height: 2.80 m).
Source: Copyright Christian Mathis.

sometimes been considered as inspired by hallucinations. In other words, they have been regarded as evidence of 'the existence of an African shamanism, vanished in Northern Africa while surviving in Southern Africa' (Soleilhavoup 1998, 32).

Rock art scholars have called into question the shamanistic paradigm (Muzzolini 1988–89, 1995; Le Quellec 1999, 2006). In particular, the universal application of this paradigm to images from completely different cultural traditions is to be taken with great caution. This constitutes an illustrative example of 'approaches that simply slotted rock art into pre-existing, and overarching, anthropological categories' (Jones 2017, 176). In a recent paper, Soukopova compared Round Head down-headed animals to San rain animals, suggesting they similarly depict altered states of consciousness on the basis that 'they are both indeterminable as a species and apparently very similar in form' (Soukopova 2011, 205). Without heeding the geographical and chronological distance between the two groups, the author concludes that 'considering a possible common base of the African culture and its great conservatism, it would not be surprising to find similar elements in the prehistoric Round Head art and in the more recent San art' (Soukopova 2011, 206).

The search for formal analogies has often driven research on Saharan rock art. This is the case, for instance, for a series of 35 images of 'composite' creatures

combining animal and human traits found at five rock art sites in the Gilf el-Kebir massif (SW Egypt). These images have been called 'the beast(s)' or 'the headless beast (s)' (Le Quellec et al. 2005; Kuper 2013). Their chronology varies according to author (Le Quellec et al. 2005; Kuper 2013; Honoré et al. 2016), but it can reasonably be assumed to date to around 6000 BC. Jean-Loïc Le Quellec has suggested Wadi Sūra paintings prefigure mortuary beliefs known in the Nile Valley at pharaonic times. He has argued that the 'headless beasts' show formal similarities with the great devourer Ammut; the 'swimmers' are analogous to the 'drowned of the Nun' (the primitive ocean) described in the Book of the Dead of the Egyptian New Kingdom; and the hand prints to the hieroglyphic sign Ka (Le Quellec et al. 2005, 196). More recently, Miroslav Bárta (2010, 2014) sees in one of these beasts depicted in white a formal comparison with the later God Nut from the pharaonic times (Figure 13.4). These formal similarities do not take into consideration the different chrono-cultural contexts, separated by at least three millennia and hundreds of kilometres.

Following recent advances in ontological and cosmological perspectives, one of the major weaknesses of the aforementioned theories (regarding either the Great God of Sefar or the Headless beast of Wadi Sūra and Wadi Ras) is that they take representations as fixed narrative entities, establishing a semiotic relationship between images that are often occurring within different and/or successive layers

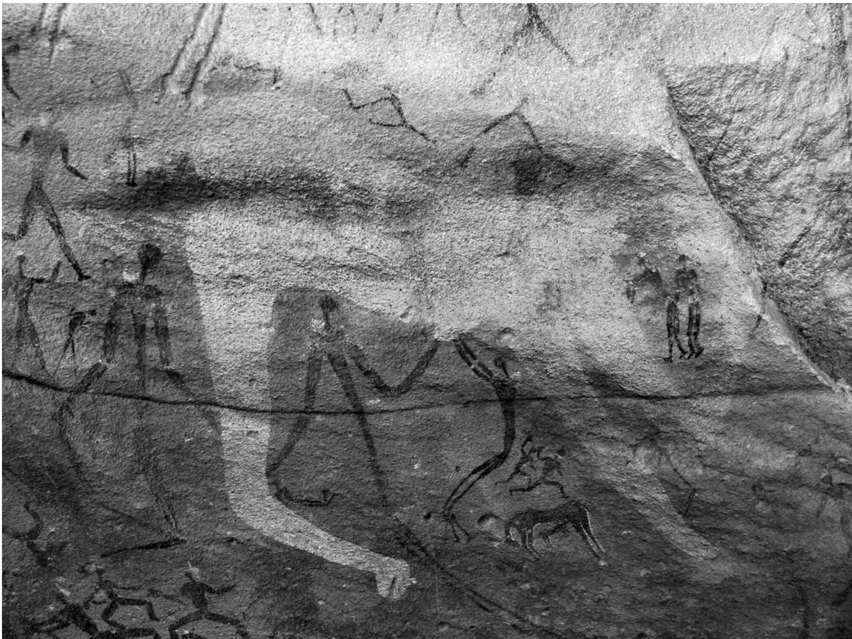

Figure 13.4 Complex scene including a white "beast" on the wall of Wadi Sūra II shelter, Gilf el-Kebir, Egypt.
Source: Copyright Emmanuelle Honoré.

of paintings. At Wadi Sūra II, for instance, hand representations constitute the earliest phase of paintings; the 'swimmers' are part of the next phase; and the so-called 'beasts' belong to a later phase. While superimpositions may sometimes be significant and motifs may dialogue even if they were not painted at the same time (Honoré and Ego 2020), there is no evidence of such an interaction at Wadi Sūra II. As this example illustrates, we often build narratives of past mythologies on the basis of our own intellectual background.

3 Approaching the ontological dimension of Saharan rock art images

In this section, I would like to provide a substantive example of how we can effectively apply ontological approaches to Saharan rock art, by developing a case study on the 'headless beasts.' In order to approach the ontological dimension of Saharan rock art images, I propose to consider two different dimensions that are somewhat intermingled in these 'transmorphic beings': first, the idea of combination, made visible in the mixing of elements from different beings; second, the idea of potential flux (which implies notions of connection, sharing, exchange, mutability and transformation). However, as we have seen in the previous section, scholars have only taken into consideration the combinative dimension, but not the element of flux in their interpretations of the Gilf el-Kebir 'headless beasts.' In this setting, most authors see these composite creatures as depictions of fixed mythological entities mixing animal and human parts.

A detailed examination reveals the complexity of these 'composite' representations. First, the so-called 'beasts' are indeed a combination of body parts, but those parts vary from one representation to another. For example, some images depict a long tail, others a short tail. Similarly, some representations have hooves, while others have paws or feet. In short, there are no two identical 'beasts.' All these variations make it difficult to support the idea of one unique and fixed entity within a formalized narrative frame. Second, it seems that different kinds of 'beasts' might coexist within the same scene. For example, on the wall of WG/73 shelter, a large beast is depicted with a smaller beast between its legs (Figure 13.5). This co-existence clearly contradicts the idea of one monolithic entity. Third, the Gilf el-Kebir beasts indeed consist of a combination of animal body parts, but human attitudes are also clearly expressed. This may reflect the idea of a life continuum expressed in trans-species beings that combine animal and human traits beyond our naturalistic classifications. Fourth, the so-called 'beasts' displayed in several scenes show different degrees of interaction with people. This explains why some authors have focused on the narrative aspects of these paintings. However, this relational aspect needs to be fully explored. For instance, 'beasts' are never depicted as self-contained entities; they exist *because* of the relationship they have with people. In other words, it seems that these representations were oriented towards the different elements of the world and not intended for humans themselves. Finally, the body of the 'beast' itself is not just a matter of appearance, and it is not only depicted to make internal properties visible through their physical

Figure 13.5 A "beast" with another "beast" between its legs on the wall of WG/73 shelter, Gilf el-Kebir, Egypt.
Source: Copyright Emmanuelle Honoré.

aspects. It is, in fact, a place of both action and interaction. The relationship with the surrounding human figures is one which includes not only having physical contact with the body of the beast, but also merging with it. Some human figures do extend their arms towards the beast, mostly to the 'points of entry' (or exit) of the body: where the head should normally be, the genitals, and the anus (Figures 13.4 and 13.6). Two beasts have got a human body half taken inside their own body at the upper point of entry/exit, between the two bumps where the head should be (Figure 13.7). One beast is depicted with the hand of a human figure pointing to its anus. Yet another beast is displayed with a multitude of small human figures just beneath an erect penis. As these examples illustrate, the active, performative, and transformative role of the beast's body should thus be considered to be as important as its formal variations. Such traits make these entities differ from *Ammut* or other deities to which they are usually compared.

The crucial point here is how we can shed light on the ontological swing of things in which these images were conceived. In such an approach, 'relationships, rather than things, constitute the basic structure of the world, the network which gives consistence to reality' (Carli 2016, 97). The careful examination of the beast figures and their context brings to light the fact that their relationships with the

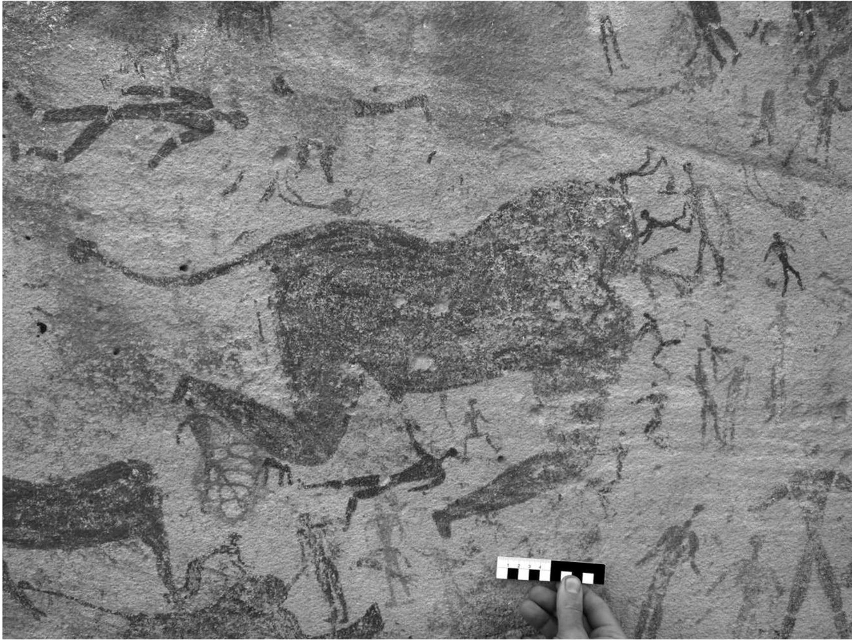

Figure 13.6 Human figures extending their arms towards the body of a "beast" on Wadi Sūra II shelter, Gilf el-Kebir, Egypt.
Source: Copyright Emmanuelle Honoré.

world are as important as their own individual descriptions—on which Saharan rock art research has always put the focus. The varying appearance of beasts could suggest, for instance, that the artists wanted to realize different entities sharing animal traits and human attitudes. The beasts share characteristics that are categorized by species in our naturalistic ontology. It is possible also that the painters sought to represent how some beings change their appearance over time. They could also have shown the merging of beings, or the transforming of some entities under the action of others. In any case, they have conceptualized the body as being more than a soul-and-mind carrier, as a place that could be a world in its own.

What this case study intends to show is that some Saharan rock art motifs can be approached differently, not focusing only on their description as self-contained entities, but also considering that they get their full life and power as an active part of a whole. In order to offer a new interpretation of the 'Round Heads' case, and especially the 'Great Gods' case, it is necessary to properly describe the figures and their interactions. Another idea that we must reconsider from an ontological viewpoint is the widespread assumption that Saharan rock images are static and conceptually simple (that is, they represent beings or things that correspond to one of our own conceptual boxes). At the same time, the

Figure 13.7 A "beast" surrounded by a multitude of simplified human figures on the wall of Wadi Sūra II shelter, Gilf el-Kebir, Egypt.
Source: Copyright Emmanuelle Honoré.

narrative aspect of Saharan rock art—which is an important trait in this corpus—needs to be reconsidered. For instance, in the Gilf el-Kebir, the dramatism of some images indicates the role of rock art images as conveyors of emotions. Several beasts are depicted with an outstretched tail, not only portraying movement, but also evoking fury (Figure 13.1). The whole scene suggests the feelings of fear and fascination experienced by the human figures around the beasts and conveyed to the viewer. Besides mere representational power, this opens new avenues of research on 'the sensory and affective character of rock art images' (Jones 2017, 172–173).

Beyond the traditional paradigm of symbolism, the lived dimension of rock art can be investigated with regards to the question of ontologies. At Wadi Sūra II, several scenes of collective gatherings showing dance and music evoke the context of feasts and performances within which rock art was presumably done (Honoré 2019b). The active power of images probably explains why so many superimpositions were done on the same panel, whereas more suitable surfaces for doing rock art were available in the vicinity. In most Saharan rock art studies, we have denied the possibility for images to be beings, entities, or things (rather than merely being *representations* of beings, entities, or things). In a discussion at the Sainsbury Research Unit in Norwich (UK) in January 2020, John Kelechi Ugwuanyi

reported a meaningful anecdote: Speaking about statuettes and fetishes kept at Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at Cambridge, an African fellow told him that many of his ancestors were in prison in Cambridge. He said they were indeed captured with the intention of being displayed in the museum. This reminds us that artefacts are not always viewed as inert materials. Likewise, rock art images are not necessarily to be viewed as inert materials. We need to consider that they can embody beings or spirits themselves, instead of merely representing beings or spirits. This is why they are not always mere paintings or portraits.

4 The emergence of African pastoralism from an ontological viewpoint

It is remarkable that the aforementioned examples mostly refer to hunter-gatherer groups. Pastoralist practices spread from around the 7th millennium BCE in the Sahara. Archaeologists have examined the transition from hunter-gatherer groups to 'food producing' societies in Northern Africa from a variety of viewpoints, including demographic, social, and economic. However, in this chapter, I want to suggest that one of the fundamental changes defining this transition is the emergence of a new ontology associated with pastoralist groups. In the case of the rock art sites from the Eastern Saharan massifs (Gilf el-Kebir/Jebel el-'Uweināt region), a number of processes indicate this ontological transition: (1) A significant increase in the number of rock art sites; (2) a decrease in the number of figures depicted on each site—rock art sites become smaller; (3) a wider dispersal of rock art sites; (4) a reduction in the diversity of the themes; (5) a decrease in the human/animal ratio; and (6) the almost complete disappearance of depictions of large groups of human figures. Whether these changes are due to new populations spreading the practice of pastoralism is not the issue: the point is that such changes seem to indicate a renovation in the practice of rock art (1, 2); a new use of the territory (2, 3); the emergence of new visual and/or symbolic universes (4, 5, 6); a change in the conceptualization of human-animal relationships (5); and the development of new social activities and organizations (6).

I have suggested elsewhere that Saharan hunter-gatherer rock art was probably related to large events and gatherings occurring at certain times of the year and in permanent places (Honoré 2019a) and, therefore, probably had a performative dimension. In this setting, we can challenge the links between hunter-gatherer rock art and life events. For instance, in the Eastern Sahara, pastoralist rock art is more numerous and is spread throughout a myriad of small sites across the territory. This could mean that rock art evolved towards a more familial practice. Taking this question into account, a case can be made for a certain 'democratisation' of rock art. In the case of hunter-gatherer societies, it seems that rock paintings were made at a limited number of sites, probably on special occasions and by specific people. In the case of pastoralist societies, however, rock art has been documented in a larger number of sites and without a clear association with specific events, to the exception of usual pastoralist practices. Interestingly, the change in the size and dispersal of sites parallels the shift in the

size of human groups represented: it seems that the large sites with depictions of large groups of people specific to hunter-gatherer societies evolved towards smaller sites with depictions of smaller groups in pastoralist traditions. At the same time, I have documented a certain standardization in the way in which human images are represented. For instance, on the pastoralist site of WG/35 in the Gilf el-Kebir, in different layers of a painting, there is a repetitive motif of a couple gendered as a man and a woman, holding each other's hands and keeping the herd (please see Honoré 2015, Figure 4). What can be described as a family unit merges with the productive unit. Zooarchaeological evidence (bone remains found in hearths) indicates that pastoralists at that time still relied on hunting for their meat supply (Riemer 2007, 133–134). This probably means that different types of groups and organizations coexisted, depending on activities.

The change in the repertoire of rock art images is striking. It is a fact that with the arrival of pastoralist people in the area, cattle became of capital importance; this has been observed in all regions of the Sahara (Dupuy 1995, 164). However, despite this being transcribed by rock art images, archaeologists still underestimate both the role of cattle and the role of pastoralism in the change of subsistence strategies. For the Gilf el-Kebir, it has been stated that 'the pastoral component obviously did *not* play a major role within the subsistence strategies' (Riemer 2007, 134, my emphasis). This assumption is based on a reduction in the presence of bones of domesticated animals (less than 50%) and the high proportion of arrowheads in lithic assemblages. However, hunting and pastoralism are not mutually exclusive. In fact, we see an increasing diversity of food supplies rather than a straightforward replacement of earlier food sources (Honoré 2012, 33–40).

In archaeological research, pastoralism is often reduced to a subsistence strategy; this is probably related to the prominence of zooarchaeology and its economical emphasis when referring to animal domestication. However, the fact is that pastoralism encompasses a much greater number of changes, some of which are from an ontological order. In this setting, rock art images constitute, perhaps more than any other aspect of the archaeological record, a formidable gate for archaeologists into the ontologies and worldviews of past human groups. In the case of Saharan rock art, a number of changes indicate an ontological revolution. These changes include (1) The high dominance of cattle in the overall repertoire; (2) A change in the dimensions of the figures represented (for instance, cattle can be oversized compared to human figures); and (3) The importance of udders, depicted in details and often oversized as well, possibly stressing the importance of milk resources (please see Shaw 1936 about Mogharet el-Qantara and Honoré 2012 about WG/35). Analyses of absorbed residues in prehistoric pottery from Libya show that dairy products were extensively processed during the Middle Pastoral period (from 5200 to 3800 BCE) in the Libyan Sahara (Dunne et al. 2012). Scenes of milking are found in the rock art of the Messak in Libya (Lutz and Lutz 1995, amongst others), the Ennedi in Chad (please see Jesse et al. 2007, Figure 6), and the Libyan Desert (please see Figure 171 in van Noten et al. 1978). Some misleading views on the early pastoralist practices in Africa, and especially in North-East Africa, exist because archaeologists tend to rely on bone evidence and focus on meat consumption. This is problematic because, in

most cases, African pastoralism is not practiced for meat consumption. Additional changes include (4) The individualized and careful depiction of cattle coats indicating how they are valued, even on an individual level; (5) Alongside the individualized coats (Dupuy and Denis 2011 for the Tassili-n-Ajjer), the frequent depictions of collars at the neck of cattle, stressing the importance of appropriating animals (Honoré 2015); (6) The number of cattle associated to each herd keeper, showing that there is an extreme increase of livestock, which probably cannot be attributed to food subsistence considerations alone. Cattle are coveted riches and are key to social interactions. Several scenes of 'battle for cattle' are found in the rock art of the Eastern Sahara. According to the violence depicted, prehistoric people were ready to die for their cattle. A final change indicating an ontological revolution is (7) the symbolic dimension of cattle, which was indicated by Neolithic cattle burial practices (Di Lernia et al. 2013; Smith 2005) and echoed in some representations of seemingly headless bovines in rock art (Honoré 2012).

Altogether, these changes indicate that cattle played a central role in pastoralist cosmologies. It is not only that cattle held an obvious symbolic value, it is also that every interaction was organized and ruled by the intermediary of cattle. Most relationships of those early African pastoralist groups to the world revolved around this animal, thus defining a new prehistoric ontology: '*animal as anima*.'

5 Some concluding thoughts

Ontological approaches began in archaeology only a decade ago. In Saharan rock art research, scholars have traditionally worked out basic cultural and stylistic chronologies which they interpret, for the most part, from ecological and symbolic perspectives. As this chapter has demonstrated, these approaches present a number of limitations, among which are the 'representational' idea of rock art and the focus on formal analogies. Moreover, an analysis of these traditional interpretations demonstrates how we often build narratives about past mythologies on the basis of our own intellectual backgrounds. Something similar can be said about the importation of the shamanistic hypothesis to explain Saharan rock art—which could be viewed, however, as tentative—to introduce the idea of other ontologies. Ontological categories defined by anthropologists, such as Descola's four ontologies (animism, totemism, analogism, naturalism—Descola 2005), should be used for their heuristic value. Applying ready-made categories is not only naïve, it 'superimposes the model over the art, thus reifying the model itself' (Robinson 2013, 61). Archaeology must not be the poor relation to anthropology regarding the use of ontological theory.

For the aforementioned reasons, I have suggested in this chapter that ontological approaches may be an alternative standpoint to approach Saharan rock art images and, more importantly, to understand the main shift that this visual corpus reflects: the transition from hunter-gatherer to pastoralist societies. Changes in rock art practices between the two groups seem to indicate profound mutations in the way they viewed the world. Hunter-gatherer rock art refers to a world of permeable essences, with a life continuum expressed in transmorphic beings. Figures like the 'beasts' of Wadi Sūra/Wadi Ras do not appear as

composite bodies having a constant and stable identity. Rather, they are composed of different elements and recomposed in different contexts. The idea of a 'becoming' rather than a 'being' is expressed through such entities, and the process of transmorphism is made possible by and through the interaction between things *lato sensu*. Likewise, human beings are transformed by their contact with and passing through the body of beasts.

In Saharan pastoralist rock art, there is no trace of transmorphism, of the merging of beings and of composite entities. Pastoralist rock art reflects a world revolving around cattle. Relationality is still paramount. However, relationships exist primarily between humans and humans, or humans and cattle, all as distinct and stable entities. Relationships of humans with cattle revolve around caring, keeping, and breeding; and conversely, relationships of cattle with humans are set on companionship, value, and symbolic power. Although such relationships are essential to pastoralist life, they *participate* in defining what things are; a certain immutability of being is made visible through the standardization of formal appearances. Consequently, it does not seem too farfetched to argue that the way entities are depicted relates more to an essentialist ontology than the non-essentialist ontology transcribed in the previous hunter-gatherer rock art, as seen from the case studies in this chapter.

Even in the absence of Indigenous knowledge, images can help approach how past people negotiated their position within the world. In Saharan rock art, which goes with no 'cultural transmission,' ontologies appear like an after-image, the canvas on which the whole conception of life, things, and beings springs to life. In this chapter, I have tried to move away from the focus on meaning and the representational approach that have always prevailed in Saharan rock art research. However, I agree that such an attempt is still very tentative. More important than engaging with only the question of ontologies, reconnecting rock art to archaeology—as has been done for about two decades in our field of research (Gallinaro 2013; Di Lernia 2019)—conveys a vivid picture of the relationships of the last hunter-gatherers and the first pastoralists to the world around them. As such, the lived dimension of rock art, too often seen as an inert material, can still reappear.

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