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## BOOK REVIEW

**San Spirituality: Roots, Expression and Social Consequences. J.D. Lewis-Williams and D.G. Pearce. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 267 pp.**

San prehistoric art as well as more recent cultural practices reveal clues to the development of human symbolic, spiritual and religious consciousness. To arrive at this conclusion, Lewis-Williams and Pearce operate from a simple yet profound premise: the physical structure of the San brain is no different than anyone else's. That is, they are anatomically modern humans, therefore have the potential to experience similar states of consciousness that have been documented by modern researchers. With that in mind, the authors combine knowledge of the function of the human brain, particularly during states of consciousness, with ethnographic and material cultural studies of the San.

A particular point of focus is the Howieson's Poort Anomaly in South Africa. This period during the Middle Stone Age contains tools composed of an increased percentage of non-quartzite material and distinct crescent or trapeze shapes compared to tools made in the time periods before and after in the same region which are predominantly quartzite and of non-distinct shape. Lewis-Williams and Pearce suggest that this variation occurred because the makers or users were attracted to the quality of shine of the non-quartzite material. This quality of shine is reminiscent of the light that is reported to be seen by shamans during altered states of consciousness. Therefore, the tools indicate a perception and application of the symbolic among the San. The authors cite evidence from indigenous shamans in Australia, North America, and South America to support this observation. The shift back to the use of the previous material, quartzite, could be explained by the San finding a new way of symbolically expressing the state of altered consciousness.

Another example in which the functioning of the human brain is mirrored in Middle Stone Age art is in the use of therianthropes. These images in rock shelter paintings echo the altered state of consciousness in which shamans report actually *becoming* specific animals after merely thinking of them. In the case of the San, the shaman are able to transform into a lion to protect members of the clan against lions who threaten during the night. Conversely, a shaman can also transform into a lion and intentionally inflict harm on people. A shaman also can transform into a little bird, fly to a neighboring settlement and check on the physical condition of familial relations. The trigger mechanism to enter this state of transformation or altered consciousness is the healing or trance dance in which the entire San community participate. It is "the overwhelmingly most important San ritual....which transcends the levels of the tiered San cosmology." It is also "the hub of San life: from it, radiate spokes that penetrate into other rituals, myths, and into daily life." (82) The dance, along with its social, spiritual, and cosmological implications, exists as the principle subject of San rock paintings. Once the authors determined this, the paintings offered a wealth of new information about San spirituality. A painting of a dying eland, with zigzag lines emanating from it depicts the potency of eland which the San believe to be a source of their shamanistic power. Interestingly, one image shows the emptying of an eland's bowels, perhaps a crucial indicator that it is the energy release at the point of death not just death itself that releases this power. Lewis-Williams and Pearce claim that many of the San rock carvings depict what shamans actually perceive and experience in altered states of consciousness.

With such intriguing conclusions, Lewis-Williams and Pearce are critically and cautiously aware of the current limitations of archeological thinking which support a narrow materialistic interpretation of prehistory. However, they are committed to an interdisciplinary approach including the controversial concept of "neurotheology" which seeks to explain religious and spiritual experience in light of physical functions of the human brain. This is blended with archeological and ethnographic studies to form the evidence for their arguments.

As with any work that presents a paradigm shift or in this case arguably, a new paradigm, the evidence has to stand up against the critique of the paradigm itself before it is even applied within its new context. The authors handle this by openly stating instances where the variations in cultural

practices particularly those involving grave preparations, do not reconcile with their theoretical approach.

The tension with this research is that although it is methodologically sound and well conceived, it is ultimately trying to analyze aspects of perception that go beyond the “consciousness of rationality” coveted by Western scientists. (30) Lewis-Williams and Pearce are confident that discoveries in the study of the brain and its function will help lead the way but the tantalizing question lingers: To what extent can the “alert thinking and rational response to the environment” aspect of consciousness meaningfully comment on and engage the rest of the spectrum. As this line of research develops, we will soon have some interesting answers to ponder. Nevertheless, this work is an important step in understanding human consciousness and its relationship to expression and spirituality. For those who consider science and spirituality as being forever or innately irreconcilable, relegated to the mind bending theories of modern physics, or the airy rubric of New Age thinking, this work makes a strong case to the contrary. For those interested in the systematic study of the intersection between the material, historical, psychological, and spiritual, it is a fascinating read.

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