

Speaking of Spirits

David J. Lewis-Williams and David G. Pearce, *San Spirituality: Roots, Expressions and Social Consequences*

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Sarah C. Brett-Smith, *The Making of Bamana Sculpture: Creativity and Gender*

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Within the almost infinite range of practices and beliefs that are available for cultural and historical analysis, those related to the “other world” remain the most elusive of all. Not that it has discouraged researchers from trying every possible theoretical angle, from Cultural History to post-postmodernism and from the most detached objectivism to total subjective submersion. In this review essay, I will compare two very similar, but also divergent attempts at capturing the essence of indigenous, African spiritual experience. The analysis of the authors of *San Spirituality* and *The Making of Bamana Sculpture* centres on the social category of the “artist-shaman”, from a perspective which they themselves label “interpretive”. Both texts provide great teaching material for a variety of classroom applications: material culture studies, sociology of knowledge, comparative religion, gender studies, heritage studies, the fieldwork paradigm, contemporary debates and more.

Two journeys to the other world

In the early eighties, Lewis-Williams and co-workers at the Rock Art Research Institute (University of the Witwatersrand) initiated an entirely novel understanding of Bushman/San visual art, based on the analysis of archival linguistic material, San ethno-history and ethnography, and studies of altered states of consciousness. They suggested that rock art was essentially shamanic and that many, if not most paintings, depicted the healers’ journey into the other world. Their interpretive window on visual art, at the time of its inception in the late 1970s, was considered radical for two reasons: in terms of the academic field of rock art studies it offered an exciting new beginning; in addition, it contributed to the wider cultural struggle against colonial ideology in Southern Africa. Lewis-Williams opposed the kind of prejudice that is aptly expressed by the nineteenth-century historian, George McCall Theal, who suggested that the San “were incapable of improvement, and as it was impossible for civilised men to live on the same soil with them, it was for the world’s good that they should make room for a higher race”.¹ Members of the Rock Art Research Institute earnestly confronted prejudice in academic and popular discourse by means of a perspective that celebrated hunter-gatherer expressive culture as one of the “great achievements of humankind ... an art of striking complexity, both intellectual and

1 J D Lewis-Williams and T Dowson, *Images of Power: Understanding Bushman Rock Art* (Southern Books, Johannesburg, 1989), p 4

aesthetic”.² The Institute’s activities over the past three decades have culminated in dozens of contributions, journal articles and a host of excellent monographs.

Each decade, I would like to suggest, roughly, coincides with a different phase in the development of the shamanic paradigm. The eighties was really a period of discovering and defining the shamanic hypothesis and of consolidating and refining the basic principles of analysis. This era was concluded with the publication of *Images of Power*: a comprehensive study, both in terms of a discussion of theoretical aims and of praxis. The iconographic analysis is almost encyclopaedic and covers an impressive spectre of images meticulously traced by team members in rock shelters nationwide. By the time *Images of Power* was published, the new school of thought had been established firmly. During the next decade, the paradigm was explored and expressed further by means of concrete data furnished by sites from all over the subcontinent. The institute secured international fame. Shamanic art became synonymous with rock art, and the interpretive paradigm tantamount to rock art studies. The publication of *The Mind in the Cave*³ introduced a third phase of the development of the paradigm, characterized by a search for new ground. By the end of the 1990s, the proponents of the shamanic hypothesis not only felt comfortable to expand their search for the traces of San spirituality outside the realm of visual art, they also turned their attention to the archaeology of the Old World. They easily found evidence for shamanic art in the major Palaeolithic rock art sites and successfully revolutionised age-old, well-established interpretations in Euro-Asian prehistory. In a sequel to *The Mind in the Cave*, entitled *Inside the Neolithic Mind*,⁴ the interpretive paradigm claimed a host of famous sites and artefacts of the Neolithic period.

San Spirituality, which was published in-between, is, to a certain extent, a re-edition of *Images of Power*. It is a basic textbook, presenting the shamanic hypothesis and its theoretical concepts, against the general background of San religion and ethno-history (Chapters 4, 10 and 11). Needless to say, the book has gained conceptually in depth and detail, when compared to its predecessor. In addition to familiar views, *San Spirituality* also includes novel applications of the paradigm, illustrating its expansion into new intellectual territories. This is evidenced by the inclusion of a wider discussion on San initiation rites (pp 154, 160-164); mythology (pp 52-53, 109, 164 and onwards) and *art mobilier* from a variety of sites, including the very recent engraved ochre pieces of the Blombos Cave. The first three chapters are the most innovative ones. Chapter 1 (“Mind, Stone, Spirit”), aims at resolving the so-called Howieson Poort anomaly. We find the authors concerned with Stone Age typology and technology, more specifically, with the mysterious appearance of modern types of artefacts in earlier, older levels of archaeological stratigraphy and chronology. The Howieson Poort site also produced artefacts in unusual materials like silcrete, translucent quartz, chalcedony, chert and hornfels. Stone tools found below and above the anomalous level, are most commonly made of quartzite. The authors, in their analysis, highlight the fact that the “new” materials glitter. With the help of “shiny stones” found in other places of the globe, the mysterious artefacts are subsequently explained as belonging to the shaman’s out-of-body-journey toolkit.

2 Lewis-Williams & Dowson, *Images of Power*, Preface

3 J D Lewis-Williams, *The Mind in the Cave: Consciousness and the Origins of Art* (Thames and Hudson, London, 2002)

4 J D Lewis-Williams and D G Pearce, *Inside the Neolithic Mind: Consciousness, Cosmos, and the realm of the Gods* (Thames and Hudson, London, 2005)

Chapter 2 explores ideas on human consciousness and the evolution of cognition in the human species (which form the major focus of *The Mind in the Cave*) further. Chapter 3, “Cosmology, Graves and Transition”, investigates the links between San funerary rites and the shaman’s other worldly travels. The relationship, it is suggested, is simple: “the grave-hole was both the physical mechanism for placing the body underground and a symbolic entrance to the subterranean spirit realm” (p 59). The remaining chapters echo the same issues and concepts covered in *Images of Power*, be it in a more detailed and convincing way.

At the time when Lewis-Williams discovered the spiritual nature of San rock painting, Brett-Smith was involved in a similar project in Mali. During her fieldwork on the subject of sacred wood sculpture, Sarah Brett-Smith came across a genderised universe, similar to the one identified by Herbert in *Iron, Gender and Power*.⁵ Metallurgy, it was suggested by Herbert, can be (re-)defined in terms of its cosmological grounding, as a technology of transformation and as a power field by means of which humans attempt to control the social and natural worlds. Iron working is explained in terms of a “procreative paradigm”, as the ritual appropriation and replication of female powers of fertility. Brett-Smith defined wood carving from a similar perspective, only her approach was perhaps more militant and definitely less historical. Furthermore, the author of *The Making of Bamana Sculpture*, in terms of methodology, followed in the footsteps of McNaughton, who subjectively explored the universe of the Mande blacksmiths⁶ through an apprenticeship with a master. In doing so, they both managed to partially lift the veil of secrecy and mystery surrounding the profession of the blacksmith-carver. Brett-Smith introduced herself and her field-assistant to selected masters as students in need of instruction (pp 2, 8). However, whilst McNaughton admits to have learned only “what any beginning Mande apprentice might learn: the Mande principles of secrecy but not the secrets” (p xvi), Brett-Smith claimed to have elicited not just secrets, but the secret of secrets: namely, a feminised realm of production of ritual sculpture (p xix).

Spiritualising San painting

Lewis-Williams was not the first researcher to apply San religious concepts and beliefs to the analysis of rock art. In 1873 Joseph Millard Orpen, a magistrate in the Cape Colony, copied a number of paintings during a military expedition against a defiant indigenous ruler. Orpen obtained commentaries on the images from Qing, a young /Xam guide he had befriended during the campaign. A year later, the German linguist Wilhelm Bleek facilitated the publication of Orpen’s pioneering interpretive exercise. Bleek defined the spiritual nature of the paintings as creativity of “a higher character ... a truly artistic conception of the ideas which most deeply moved the Bushman mind, and filled it with religious feelings”.⁷ In doing so, Bleek provided the foundation for the decoding of San visual art. Together with his sister-in-law, he produced 12 000 pages on San language and culture. The manuscripts, recorded in the 1870s and housed in the Jagger Library of the University of Cape Town, contain fastidious interviews with /Xam convicts who lived with the Bleeks in Mowbray, Cape Town. When Lewis-Williams consulted the Bleek Archives

5 E W Herbert, *Iron, Gender and Power: Rituals of Transformation in African Societies* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1993)

6 P. McNaughton, *The Mande Blacksmiths: Knowledge, Power and Art in West Africa* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1988)

7 Lewis-Williams & Dowson, *Images of Power*, p 29

in the early 1970s, he decided to take up an intellectual endeavour initiated a century earlier. The timing was perfect. In the 1960s, rock art researchers in South Africa modelled themselves on the empiricist aspirations of prehistoric studies worldwide and in doing so aligned themselves with a new global academic fashion: the Science of the Artefact. By the mid-1970s, this paradigm had regressed into a dry and dull enterprise, often descriptive and statistical in nature. The scene was ripe for an alternative.

Lewis-Williams provided just that. He identified the trance dance, a shamanic healing ritual, as the single most important event in the religious practices of the San, and subsequently investigated its relevance to the study of their visual art. Healing rituals, he discovered, involved a musical performance in which all members of the group participated. Women sat around a central fire, surrounded by a circle of dancing men. The rhythmic clapping of hands and singing of women, combined with the sounds of dancing rattles and thudding steps of men, allowed the shamans to undertake an out-of-body journey into the dreaded world of spirits, where they replenished their healing powers. On their return, the potency was reactivated to fight illness and misfortune (pp 81-91).⁸

Other aspects of trance experience depicted in the rock paintings, could be identified and interpreted further with the help of a second data source: neuropsychological research. Indeed, studies of altered states of consciousness proved extremely useful in explaining two of the most common of images in San rock art: those enigmatic half beast-half men and the abstract or geometrical shapes (pp 166-175). The former, it was suggested, depicted “shapeshifting” – the metamorphosis of shamans on their journey to the spirit world. The geometric shapes, on the other hand, were accounted for as so-called entoptic designs – the images created inside the brain during the initial stage of hallucinating. All sorts of data relating to the somatic experience of trance – such as shivering, back and stomach aches, the sensation of flight, buzzing sounds and flickering vision – were used by members of the institute to explain those details of the images that went previously unnoticed or had remained unexplored. These include dots, flecks, lines, elongated or supine bodies, winged humans and many more (pp 32-33, 124-133). By the late 1980s, the Witwatersrand rock art team proposed a whole new conception of rock shelters as storehouses of potency that enabled contact with the spiritual realm, healing, rain making and animal control (pp 179-181).⁹

Feminising Bamana carving

Brett-Smith, on the other hand, derived inspiration from her own doctoral work on the symbolic meanings of geometric designs on girls’ circumcision clothing. The author of *The Making of Bamana Sculpture* set out for Mali in 1983 with a clear agenda in mind, namely to look for some symbolic connection between male sacred objects and female procreativity (p 48). Iron and wooden sculpture amongst the Bamana, she established, was created by blacksmith-sculptors (*numuw*), one of several endogamous artisan groups. Not every blacksmith created ritual sculpture. For those who desired to join the limited fraternity, a mere technological apprenticeship was not sufficient. Selected novices had to link up with a master and receive specialised training. They needed to learn the workings of *nyama*, how to protect themselves

8 See also: Lewis-Williams & Dowson, *Images of Power*, pp 30ff

9 See also: Lewis-Williams & Dowson, *Images of Power*, p 36

from it and how to harness it for the benefit of fellow humans. *Nyama*, she was told, was the potency or mysterious physical and spiritual energy that dominated life (p 52). Blacksmith-sculptors, like other “casted people”, were known as *nyamakalaw*: the handles-of-*nyama*, “human instruments for mastering this unpredictable energy” (p 38). More importantly, she established that the ritual carver had to enter into a spiritual contract (*sarati*) with a personal djinn, one of the capricious, unpredictable and often malevolent spirits from the forest. In return for the status and fame of master carver, she was told towards the end of her research, a djinn expected her partner to gradually abandon his masculinity, even sacrifice one of his beloved ones. Such was the price to be paid for receiving the best commissions, acquiring fame, attaining the highest levels of inspiration and infusing supernatural strength into carvings (pp 68-71, 112). The “feminisation” of the artist through *sarati* constitutes the central theme in Brett-Smith’s project. Within the narrative of *The Making of Bamana Sculpture*, the artist’s association with the Dark Side mediates the conclusion in the final chapter, namely that “The Foundation of the World is with Women” (the title of Chapter 7).

In the final analysis, I would say, the feminisation hypothesis rests on two conceptual equations by means of which the process of carving is compared to sexual intercourse and childbirth. Intercourse and childbirth are the crucial paradigms, the author suggests, that facilitate the understanding of the true nature of male creativity (p 235). The equations emerged from the analysis of interview data and are evidenced by strikingly similar ritual interdictions characteristic for the realms of both human and artistic creativity (pp 203, 229).

First equation: Carving = Intercourse. In carving, it is suggested, the artist appears to be performing an act that is comparable to having sex (p 204). Both sex and carving are enveloped in an aura of secrecy, privacy and respect, which are manifested in learned behaviours of avoidance, personal discretion and correct euphemistic speech (p 206). Sex and carving alike are perceived by the Bamana as *baara*, important, sacred and highly ritualised forms of work. As such they demand isolation and involve danger (p 207). They are also known as *gudow* (secrets).

Avoidance, silence and secrecy also characterise the second equation: Carving = Childbirth (p 224). Taboos relating to control over bodily functions (breathing, speaking, seeing, drinking, eating, urinating) dominate both types of creation. Transgression of these taboos by pregnant women and ritual carvers are believed to result in failure of the creative process (p 217). Because the two creative processes require the pursuit of *nyama* – life force (pp 219, 222, 223, 229) – they are considered to be ultimately unknowable and are pervaded with danger: “the tomb is open” for future mothers and for carvers alike. Both “go to battle” (pp 218-220). They also demand *laada* (customary food offerings) and the ritual washing of the body after completion (p 230). Of course, for those familiar with iron smelting studies, none of this comes much as a surprise. Herbert explored the realm of the smith extensively in terms of symbolism and the beliefs pertaining to human procreation. The same perspective, however, is entirely novel in the study of wood carving. However, the real source of originality (and controversy) in the work of Brett-Smith, derives not so much from her emphasis on the symbolical affinity between creativity and procreativity, but from the feminisation hypothesis it provides evidence for. The world of male carving and, by extension, of male authority, the author proposes, is modelled on the world of women. Here, Brett-Smith ventures well beyond Herbert. The sexual act is not just a

secret (*gundo*), she explains, it is the first secret. It is also the first law and the first form of human association. Having sex, it is proposed, is the paradigm for all ritual secrets; it is the primordial secret arrangement imitated by lawmakers in the councils and initiation lodges. It is a prototypical act from which all important kinds of union, uniting and assembling have followed (pp 212-214). The natural power of a woman is said to be far stronger than the “artificial” social laws instituted by men and the physical violence used to enforce them. The power of the female sex, it is concluded by the author, is inevitably greater than the power of ritual objects (p 215).

The story of Bamana sculpture is not yet over. The grand finale, the secret of secrets, is reserved for the final chapter. For this Brett-Smith depends on the main informant, Kojugu, and on Mara, her field-assistant, to whom it was revealed in the early hours of the morning (p 2). Forget what you have ever read on the subject of African woodcarving, and on the exclusion of women from the carving trade. In the not so distant past, the author claims, selected women could be secretly trained for the purpose of ritual carving, on condition that certain signs confirmed their inborn capacities to do so (p 239). Because the creative power of male carvers is merely a reflection of the essence of womanhood, the author reasons further, carvings made by women themselves must have been so much more powerful. Men spend years in the bush seeking out spiritual assistance, but female carvers are simply born with those powers. Men obtain spirits artificially; women have the innate ability to communicate with them (p 238). In short: the carvings of men are only bizarre replicas of an artificially created femininity (p 234). A woman’s *nyama* is bigger (p 220) and as a result, her authority becomes more terrifying. She can manipulate far more fearsome ritual objects than her male counterparts (p 241). Therefore, men depend on female carvers for their survival (p 251). Women are at the pinnacle of the hierarchy of producers of sacred objects and their ritual carvings provide the village with the ultimate weapons of defence. They are the real contenders for the mastery of the invisible world. They are the ultimate creators and destroyers, hence: the foundation of the world is with women (pp 252-253).

Domesticating spirituality

The major disappointment with Lewis-Williams’ otherwise most exciting journey, is that it somehow fails to reach its destination. Just as the reader is about to enter the other world, she is reminded that it is all mere hallucinations, and so the journey ends in an anti-climax. The actual vision quest of the healer has been spirited away or has been reduced to a mere attachment to the discussion, an interesting afterthought. These limits to the interpretative paradigm, in my opinion, are largely self-imposed. They are most obvious in those paintings that are said to contain “aquatic metaphors”, a class of icons of which the Linton Rock Art Panel is often mentioned as prime example (p 132). This magnificent ensemble – the largest panel on exhibition worldwide – was removed from a painted shelter in the Maclear district in 1917 and transported to the South African Museum in Cape Town. On the left-hand side of the panel appears a supine figure, surrounded by fish and eels. Based on a combination of data from the Bleek archives, San ethnography and neuropsychological studies, it is suggested after analysis, that it depicts a shaman entering the spiritual realm during a trance ritual. Lewis-Williams reached this conclusion as follows. He learned from Bleek’s *Xam* informants that shamans were able to enter a waterhole during trance rain-making rituals and that trancing healers are men who had “died and lived under water” (pp 171-172). Recent narratives from the Kalahari corroborated the journey

into the realm of water spirits as an important religious theme in San cosmology. Further, “death” is commonly used amongst the San to refer to the healer collapsing during trance dance. In order to solve the aquatic image puzzle, one more fact needed to be added, from another major data source: neuropsychology. Inhibited movement, affected vision and loss of awareness – commonly experienced by subjects in altered states of consciousness – have been described by those subjects as a kind of drowning. Conclusion: the icons of fish and eels, depicted in combination with the “dying” shaman, refer to the out-of-body journey of the healer into the underwater world of spirits. All pieces fall neatly into place. So far, so good.

What Lewis-Williams is implying here, but not saying in so many words, is that the bodily experience of trance actually shapes the shaman’s visions, which in turn “explain” the existence of beliefs in an underwater realm of spiritual forces and beings. Phrased differently: the real (but implicit) focus of the image analysis is the identification of features of induced altered states of consciousness (rather than the exploration of spiritual experience). Another set of paintings which reappears throughout the *oeuvre* of Lewis-Williams, the Ezeljagdspoor Panel (p 172), basically tells the same story, but ends in an interesting twist. It depicts a central figure, the body of which is represented by a long undulating line, surrounded by smaller fish-tailed humanlike beings. Bleek, inspired by a myth he had obtained in 1870 about a girl dragged into a dark pool by water-maidens, contemplated that images like this most probably illustrated San mythology. Initially, Lewis-Williams, inspired by Bleek, looked for a trance-based interpretation in the same spiritual under-water realm. Perhaps, he suggested, the fishlike figures (ichthyanthropes) could be healers diving into deep holes (as was the case in the Linton Panel). Later, his analysis took an unexpected turn. Through the mediation of similar images in nearby shelters, depicting human figures with forked tails and long arms placed backwards, parallel to their sides, he proposed that the fish-people were in fact swallow-people! Bird-men are indeed found in recent narratives from the Kalahari, describing ritual specialists who changed into swallows in order to face dangerous rain storms and protect their fellow human beings. Once more, with the help of data sourced from neuropsychological literature, Lewis-Williams concluded that these images depict the hallucinatory experience of flying, and so, a new kind of trance metaphor came into existence, known as the “flight metaphor” (pp 121-122).

In terms of basic methodology and conceptual framework, there is very little change between *San Spirituality* and its fifteen years-older predecessor, *Images of Power*. In fact, it almost seems as if his position has become more explicitly rationalist. Never before has he been more direct about his “materialist position”:

Religion is not so much an attempt to explain the natural world, its regularities and catastrophes, and to cope with death, as a way of coming to terms with the electrochemical functioning of the brain (p xxiv)

The deciphering of rock art imagery, on the whole, I feel, does not venture much beyond the matching of particular icons, shapes and forms, with details furnished by the studies of altered states of consciousness. This kind of analysis comes over as a little too convenient and mechanical for its own good, in addition to being reductionist. It certainly provides the analyst with a false sense of control over the interpretive process. Also, the concept “metaphor” remains a central feature in the analysis of both monographs, and the term “metaphorical model” is used as synonymous with “interpretive approach”. “Metaphor”, incidentally, is used rather

loosely. In some contexts it refers to San figures of speech, which, we are told, are sourced from their keen observation of animal behaviour. On other occasions, metaphors must be understood with reference to the dichotomy “non-real or visionary” versus “real”. In this context they are references to religious experience or ways of explaining to fellow hunters and gatherers the “bizarre world” beyond the realm of the living. Elsewhere, again, metaphors refer to a principle underlying the art and to an analytical tool for its analysis and for the decoding of images. Metaphors, it is proposed, can be perceived as building blocks which have been joined by the artists in the more complex panels and can be similarly joined or plumbed by the interpreter. Some metaphors are said to be universal (Pan San), whilst others are more limited in distribution. Some, it is admitted, may be purely idiosyncratic and express the hallucinatory experiences of individual painters/shamans. Metaphors, seemingly, are quite a number of different things ...

Over the past few decades, the shamanic hypothesis has assumed the position of ruling paradigm within the realm of rock art studies. Its proponents have, largely, “footnoted away”, or simply ignored criticism from a variety of backgrounds, such as prehistorians, art historians and anthropologists. *San Spirituality* continues this tendency to sideline constructive commentaries, which address such critical weaknesses as the a-historical and isolationist features of the interpretative paradigm (pp 209-10). Dowson, in a highly original essay entitled *Reading art, writing history*,¹⁰ accepts that the general context of rock art production was indeed shamanistic rituals (p 333). This comes little as a surprise, Dowson being the co-author of *Images of Power*. However, he also warns against the concept of an oversimplified, static San culture. Instead, he emphasises, shamans and their art reflected changing social circumstances. The images in the rock shelters, he concludes from a case study in “Nomansland”, evidence “diverse struggles and change, not stability” (p 30). A second critical study, by Jolly (*Symbiotic interaction between Black farmers and South-Eastern San*),¹¹ seems equally supportive of the suggestion that the history of the San was inextricably tied to the history of its immediate neighbours. Jolly indicates, with the help of the very same sites mentioned in *San Spirituality*, that some of the San rock art imagery may well depict religious concepts borrowed from Nguni and Sotho farmers. In doing so, he provides support for the notion of “hybrid or creole cultures”, a generally neglected concept in Southern African anthropology.

10 T D Dowson, “Reading art, writing history: rock art and social change in southern Africa”, *World Archaeology*, 25, 3, 1994, pp 332-342

11 P Jolly, “Symbiotic interaction between Black farmers and South-eastern San Implications for Southern African rock art studies, ethnographic analogy, and hunter-gatherer cultural identity”, *Current Anthropology*, 37, 2, 1996, pp 377-388

Genderizing spirituality

The analysis of Brett-Smith and the feminisation hypothesis seem equally forceful. In terms of fieldwork methodology, *The Carving of Bamana Sculpture* is bound to raise some eyebrows. The entire study is, essentially, based on interviews with one female mud-cloth artist and three male sculptors. Two of the carvers approached the author during the drought of 1983, soliciting trade secrets in exchange for assistance. "I know what you are looking for, and I can tell you what you want to know!" (p 3), is not how one expects an impartial research participant to introduce herself. Moreover, Brett-Smith employed a third party to carry out her interviews with the master carvers. She also depended on one single master, Kojugu (a pseudonym) for almost three quarters of the entire study. Interviews with Kojugu came to an end when he started to demand large sums of money and "seemed either unable or unwilling to recall the details of ritual practices he had once expounded with such startling clarity" (p 4). Nyamaton, a second carver, was released, mainly on account of "his taste for self-glorification" (p 3). Basi, the oldest of the three, had ceased carving ritual sculpture thirty years earlier and made his "fervent opposition" to the project obvious from the start (p 4). In a nutshell: for her initiation into the secret and sacred realm of ritual carving, the author had to rely on an over-willing, a suddenly unwilling and a half-willing, out-of-practice informant.

How has this deserving project gone wrong? I would like to suggest that, in the final analysis, it is not really the data itself, or the way in which it was collected that should worry the reader most, but rather the way in which the feminising narrative was, generally, "forced" upon the data, either by simply misreading it, or by ignoring alternative readings. The worst instance of data misreading (if not mis-reasoning) appears in the discussion of *dariya* (ritual openness) and can be summarised as follows: healers are open, women are open, therefore healers are feminine (p 75)! Far more numerous are the occasions where the author fails to read data in a manner that could undermine the central thesis. To start with: "demasculation" and "feminisation" cannot be used interchangeably, as the author does. Excessive love-making weakens a man, Kojugu explains to Brett-Smith. Carving ritual sculpture leaves the artist weak "like a woman", the master adds. A carver of ritual sculpture, the author concludes from this, gradually loses his virility and turns into a woman (pp 75, 203). The production of ritual flutes, we are told, requires the presence of women. Is this indicative of the spiritual power of women or does it underline the principle of cosmic unity of the sexes? Or should it simply be read as the appropriation of female powers by the male carver and the *komo* society for whom the flutes are carved (p 210)?

More disturbing, some of the observations, which supposedly define the feminisation hypothesis, are encountered in other contexts too – an important fact which is conveniently overlooked by the author. This certainly weakens their rhetorical value. For instance, "the tomb is open", it is said, for women in childbirth *and* for ritual carvers. This, supposedly, illustrates the feminisation of the carvers. However, this metaphor applies equally well to other dangerous enterprises, for example, battle, hunting, and distant journeys, where the feminisation hypothesis does not apply. Similarly, *baara* and *laada* are part and parcel of a host of dangerous ritual endeavours (not just giving birth or carving), and discretion, avoidance and euphemistic speech, of course, are not only characteristic of carving or sex (p 206). *Nyama* features in many other contexts than a discussion of the female sex organ. In

fact, it is a generic category encountered in discussions of illness, healing and misfortune. The same goes for taboos involving bodily functions (like breathing, spitting and defecating) and ritual bathing and cooking, which are encountered in a wide variety of sacred and secret contexts (pp 228-230). In short, the supportive evidence for the conceptual equations which Brett-Smith has proposed, is found in many other contexts than the realms of carving, sex and childbirth. This makes the edifice of feminisation so much less convincing. Finally, the study, supposedly, addresses Bamana carving in general, but actually limits itself to a very particular type of ritual carving, namely the one that assists a master (or his client) in reaching the highest forms of fame. These instances, most probably, are tolerated exceptions, rather than accepted norm and, in any case, belong to the realm of *sorcellerie* rather than religion (pp 83, 207).

Experiencing the spiritual

I cannot, of course, suggest a different ending to these narratives of San rock art and Bamana sculpture. The authors of both journeys to the other world set out on a rationalist or reductionist course of their own choice, and by doing so, determined their destination. What I would like to sketch, however, in the final section of this essay, are some notes on an alternative course. For the construction of a “more interpretive” window on spirituality, one can find inspiration in the ongoing debate surrounding the ethnography of the Griaule-Dieterlen School. Brett-Smith, incidentally, is aware of this debate (pp xviii-xix) and aligns herself with one of its major proponents, James Clifford (p 7), at least as far as his suggestions on the initiatory and hierarchical nature of research and of indigenous knowledge are concerned. I will make use of two diametrically opposed evaluations of Griaule’s fieldwork by Van Beek¹² and Clifford¹³ to sketch the controversy.

The critique of Griaule is one of those never-ending stories in African studies. Just when everybody presumes that the battleaxe has finally been buried, somebody decides to unearth it once more. In an essay entitled *Dogon restudied*, Van Beek qualified, if not criticised, Griaule’s work as a kind of “revelation” of an African cosmological system and philosophy. He was surprised, more particularly, by its astonishing completeness and sophistication, which he described as “unparalleled in any other ethnography” (p 139). During his own restudy of the Dogon, on the other hand, Van Beek traced very little of Griaule’s construct of a society pervaded by religion. The concept of a supernatural world was found to be vague and diverse and the creation myth ill-defined. Symbolism seemed fragmented and the core concept of *nyama/force vitale* appeared of little relevance to the Dogon (p 148).

Van Beek explains these discrepancies in terms of fieldwork methodology, with reference to the concept of “double mediation”. He suggests that all ethnography is by definition “a tale of two cultures”, as well as “a tale about tales”. Ethnographic writing is shaped almost as much by the ideas, values and preconceptions of the researcher, as by the “mental baggage” of the informants (pp 139, 152). The author of *Dogon restudied* identifies the following factors as important in shaping Griaule’s

12 W E A van Beek, “Dogon restudied: a field evaluation of the work of Marcel Griaule”, *Current Anthropology*, 32, 2, 1991, pp 139-167

13 J Clifford, “Power and dialogue in ethnography: Marcel Griaule’s initiation”, in J Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1988)

work: an ambitious personal nature; a fascination with the great explorers; his training under Mauss; a cryptological view of culture; an acute interest in semiology; and a firm belief in the civilising mission (*mission civilatrice*) of the anthropologist. Furthermore, the informants were keen to confirm, affirm and oblige Griaule's interpretations because of their cultural orientation towards courtesy, overt harmony and hierarchical structure. In the final analysis, Van Beek concludes, Griaule's work is the outcome of his personal preconceptions and enthusiasm, combined with the blessings and collaborative support of a few selected informants (pp 152-155).

Clifford, in contrast, has praised Griaule's research as "one of the classic achievements of twentieth-century ethnography" and his methodology as "one of the few elaborated alternatives to the Anglo-American model of intensive participant observation" (pp 58, 60). Critics of Griaule, Clifford explains, have failed to distinguish between the early and later stages of his field encounters at Sanga, and therefore did not appreciate his shift from a documentary to an initiatory conception of fieldwork. The early work, in which a calculated struggle for control governed the field encounter, was dominated by collection and observation. It was here that Griaule applied battlefield tactics (mapping, all sorts of visual information, including aerial photography and interrogation) and encouraged members of his team to act as detectives or magistrates (pp 65, 67, 72, 73). However, by the 1950s, he had changed methodological course and decided to focus on a very limited number of *collaborateurs indigènes* (p 72). Here appeared a very different Griaule, open to the authority of selected informants and ready to accept the insights of these learned interlocutors. The anthropologist became a transcriber, translator, exegete and commentator, whose main task it was to produce a kind of second level ethnography (pp 83, 85). Clifford also presents an alternative reading of Griaule's intrusion into Dogon society. He suggests that his active and aggressive posture should not be taken at face value. Rather, Griaule's ethnography-as-battle-and-interrogation should be understood as a mix of metaphor and irony. In Clifford's understanding, the conception of fieldwork as role playing and as a theatrical undertaking has a valid analytical function (pp 68, 73, 75, 79, 84). Griaule, Clifford concludes, was not in favour of a methodology of participation, friendship or ethnography as an educational experience. Clearly, he preferred to act the stranger's role, but that did not prevent him from establishing close collaboration based on mutual respect, as well as "complicity in a productive balance of power" (p 76). In fact, it is precisely because of his insistence and determination that such a marvellous and penetrating ethnography could be produced.

In the final analysis, Griaule's work must be understood as a kind of fiction or ethnographic cultural invention, nothing more, nothing less. Any debate about whether the texts are produced by a Dogonised Griaule or by Griaulised Dogon (p 60); whether they are "true" or "false" (pp 60, 80); whether they reflect personal originality or cultural typicality (p 85); whether they are individual speculation or cultural knowledge (p 82), somehow misses the point (p 75). To sum up: the deep knowledge or *sagesse* presented by Griaule in his texts blends his understanding of Dogon cosmology with that of the main indigenous research participants – such as Ogotommeli – in an almost organic way. The course Clifford suggests, here, is simply a kind of "literary anthropology".

San Spirituality, I have indicated earlier on, essentially reduces the shaman's vision quest to a set of "illusions" or "hallucinations", and classifies the underlying beliefs as "non-realistic" and even "bizarre". Throughout the analysis, the reader is reminded of the otherness of San culture, rather than of the spiritual world. The historian Roy Willis presents quite a different approach in *Some Spirits Heal, Others Only Dance*.¹⁴ At first, a great deal of the book appears fairly conventional. It contains a fair deal of "straight" descriptive ethnography; a discussion of a census of 208 healers; a search for the historical origins of local healing practices and for the etymological roots of healing concepts. On the other hand, the text is original, in that it also records in great detail, Willis' personal journey of spiritual experience, subjective understanding and feeling. This is not just another book on spirit healing. It is an open-minded attempt to explore the powers of the healer and, more generally, of "human selfhood expanding beyond established knowledge and experience".

A final note on emotional understanding and feeling, two key elements in the interpretive analysis. I have yet to come across a better text to introduce "affective understanding" than Renato Rosaldo's first chapter of *Culture and Truth*,¹⁵ in which he introduces the reader to a post-modern critique of objectivity, detachment, neutrality and impartiality. For more than a decade, Rosaldo had refused to accept (or perhaps had failed to understand) the indigenous explanation of Ilongot headhunting as an act of rage and a means to cope with grief caused by death in the immediate family. It was only after the tragic death of his wife in 1981 and his personal experience of anger-in-grief that followed, that he came to realise the importance and intensity of the emotional dimension of culture and of cultural analysis. Rosaldo can be explored further in *The Anthropology of Experience*.¹⁶

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14 R Willis, *Some spirits heal, others only dance* (Berg, Oxford, 1999)

15 R Rosaldo, *Culture and truth. The remaking of social analysis* (Routledge, London, 1989)

16 E M Bruner, *The anthropology of experience* (University of Illinois Press, Illinois, 1986)