

A SURVEY OF SAN PAINTINGS FROM THE  
SOUTHERN NATAL DRAKENSBERG

by

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An extended essay submitted in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Art

DEPARTMENT OF FINE ART  
RHODES UNIVERSITY

November, 1987.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my sincere appreciation for the valuable assistance given to me by the following people:

Mr Simon Hall, of the Albany Museum, for reading the draft, suggesting corrections and amplifications, and drawing my attention to several relevant papers and articles of recent publications.

Mr Aron Mazel, of the Natal Museum, for indicating positions of sites on maps and many discussions.

Mr Bill Small, the then forester of Cobham, for pointing out the locations of sites and providing horses.

Mr Keith Riggien, the forester of Garden Castle, for providing horses and his company on two trips.

A SURVEY OF SAN PAINTINGS FROM THE SOUTHERN NATAL DRAKENSBERGINTRODUCTION

The study of San rock art has undergone several different phases in approach to the interpretation of art. Two approaches are currently in use. The first emphasises the art as narrative or literal representations of San life and its proponents may be called the "art for art's sake" school. Adherents to the second approach make detailed use of the San ethnography<sup>1</sup> on the belief system of these people and are highly critical of the literalists because they provide no such context. The second approach has rapidly gained ascendancy and replaced the "art for art's sake" school over the last twenty years. The watershed came with the researches of Vinnicombe (1967) in the southern Drakensberg and Maggs (1967) in the Western Cape who both embarked upon programs of research which had quantification and numerical analysis at their core, so that they could present "...some objective observations on a given sample of rock paintings in a particular area..."<sup>2</sup> in order to compare and contrast paintings from geographically different areas. What Vinnicombe's numerical analyses clearly showed was that the eland was the most frequently depicted antelope and that it must have

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1. Ethnography: Study of human races, a science that deals with races and people and their origin, distribution, relations and characteristics.
  2. Vinnicombe, P. The Recording of Rock Paintings - An Interim Report, p. 283.

played a fundamental role "...in both the economy and the religious beliefs of the painters..."<sup>1</sup>, which opened up the search for what those beliefs might be and how they could be related to the rock art itself. In order to understand what the rock art was all about it was recognised that researchers had to meaningfully contextualise the art within the social and religious framework of the artists themselves. Without the provision of such a relevant context, as many different interpretations of the paintings could be made as there were people with imaginations. Such a piecemeal approach provides a meaningless jumble of subjective fancy which tells us something about the interpreters but nothing about the rock art. It is unfortunate that the advent of this explicitly social and anthropological approach marks the end of the amateur as a serious interpreter of San rock art, for the juxtaposition of the ethnography with the rock art requires a proper training in which the intricacies of symbol and metaphor can be recognised.

Development of various painting styles is irrelevant in the San rock art. A better understanding of the art is gained through the study of the people, their mythology and rituals. After all, what is important are the ideas, beliefs and value systems of the San. If ethnography serves as a way of corroborating the interpretations of the rock art it must place the rock art in a far different context than previous views.

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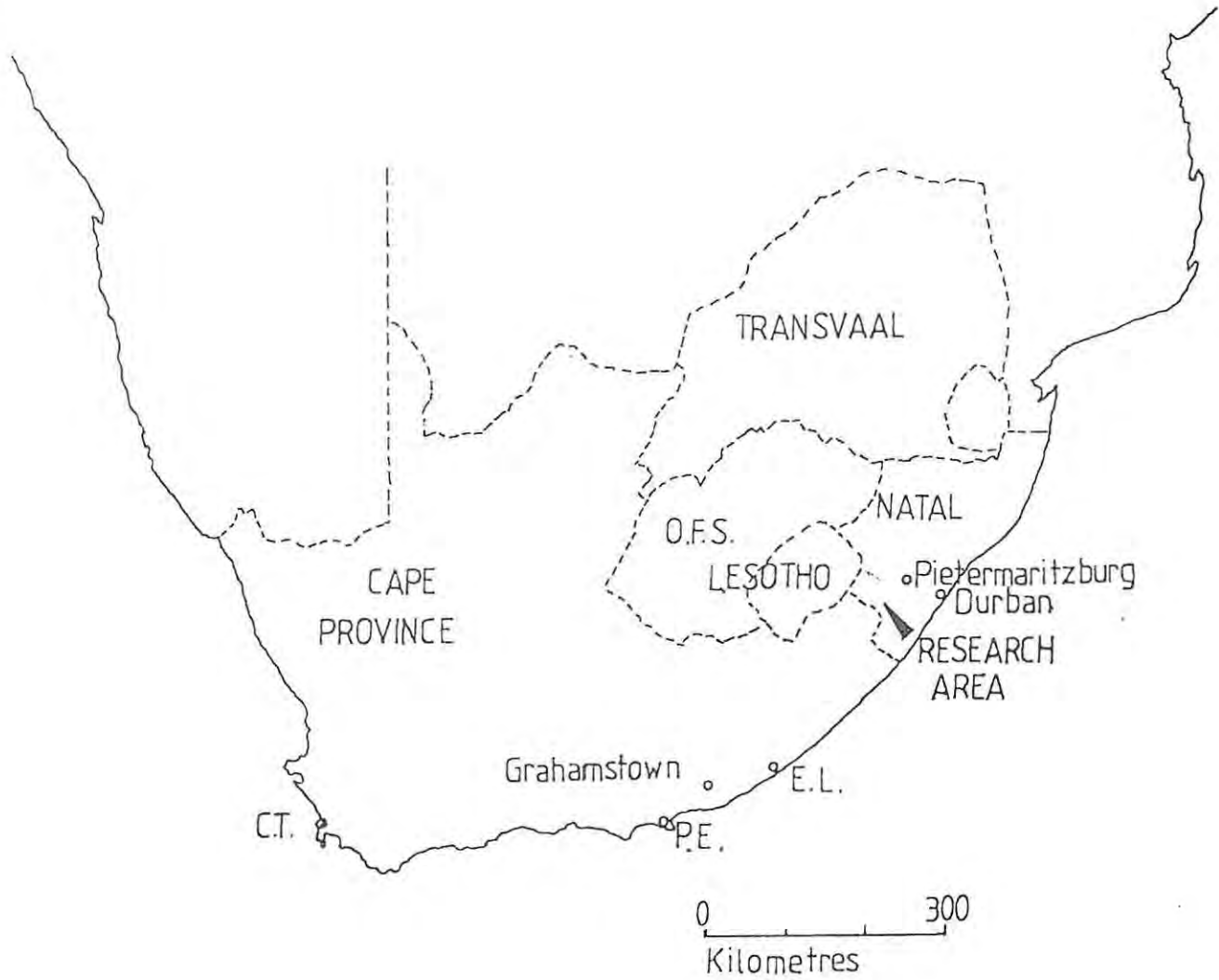
1. Vinnicombe. op. cit., p. 284.

At the forefront in using the San ethnography on their belief system and ritual for rock art interpretation is Lewis-Williams, an anthropologist based in the Department of Archaeology at the University of the Witwatersrand. He has pointed out that there is much symbol and metaphor in the ritual of extant hunter-gatherers still living in Botswana and Namibia, which can be recognised in the rock art. Another source of information is the extensive verbatim record of southern San ritual, mythology and general lifestyle made by Bleek in the last century, the value of which, for rock art interpretation, has only recently been recognised. What all these sources show is that San beliefs are similar over large areas of the African sub-continent and therefore, by extrapolation, provide the basis for "unlocking" rock paintings in areas where San groups were ruthlessly exterminated before any meaningful study of them could be made. Central to San ritual, which has been observed historically, is the trance state of the medicine men. In trance, medicine men undertake crucial work for the whole band in the form of healing, rainmaking and inter-band relationships which serve to emphasise and remind people of their economic dependencies and their productive role in maintaining those dependencies, which is especially important in these egalitarian societies which have little institutionalised hierarchy for control. The rock paintings are therefore symbolic statements of belief which are intimately related to everyday social and economic actions.

The framework favoured in this essay is that of Lewis-Williams and the explicit use of the ethnography for providing a

relevant context within which the rock art can be placed. Using the base laid down by Lewis-Williams and others, the purpose of this essay is to demonstrate the presence of trance symbolism in a small sample of San rock art recorded in the southern Drakensberg and to further emphasise the utility of this approach, over and above a subjective narrative approach, for the meaningful interpretation of San rock art.

Fig. 1.



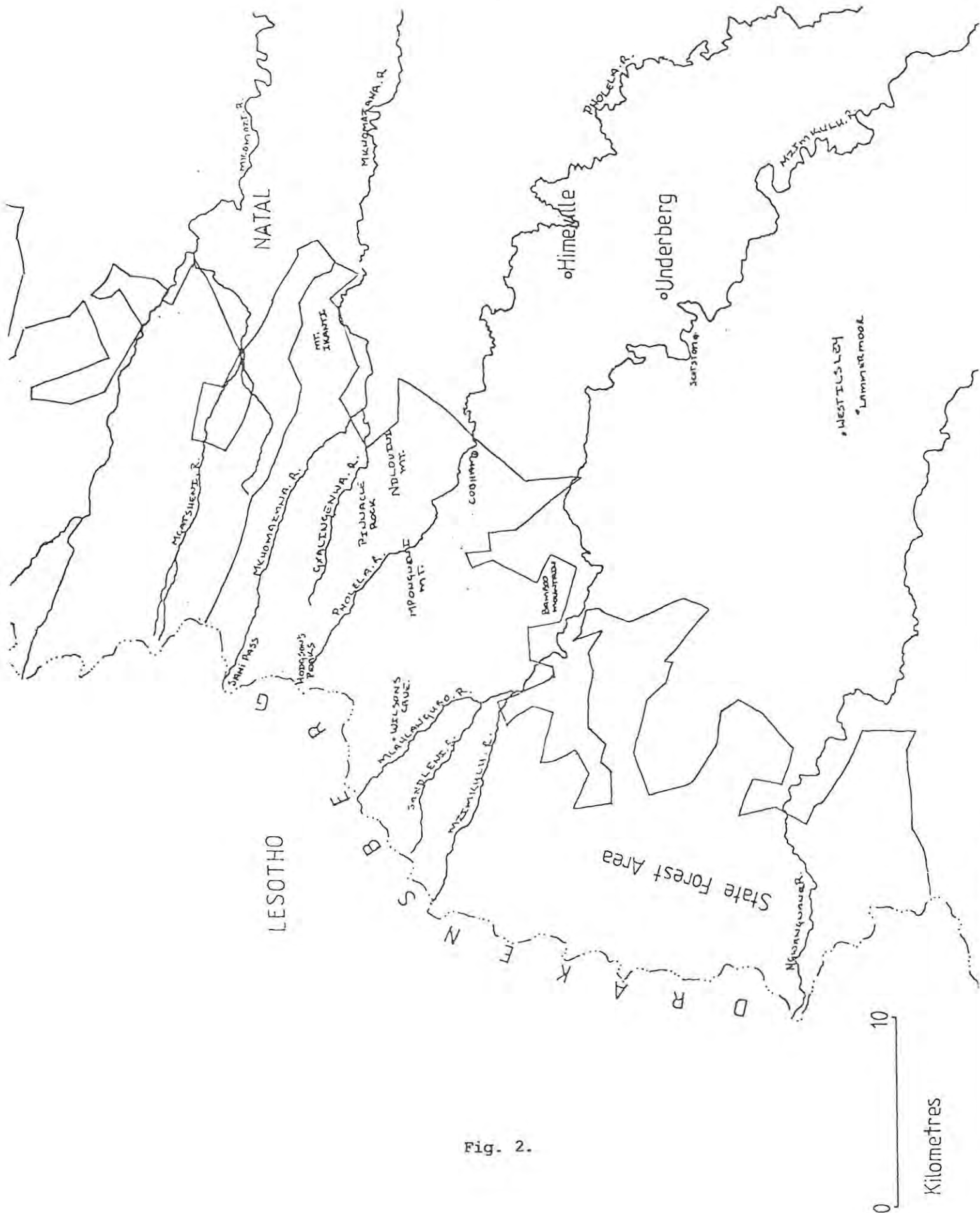


Fig. 2.

0 10

Kilometres

THE AREA DEFINED

PHYSICAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL BACKGROUND

This survey area of San rock paintings lies along the foothills of the Drakensberg escarpment at a height of 1500 to 2450 meters above sea level. The area incorporates the magisterial district of Underberg in the province of Natal, in between the Ngwangwana river in the south and the Mgatsheni river in the north. The peaks at the head of the Ngwangwana Valley marks the end of the high Drakensberg escarpment in Natal.

The 'Drakensberg' or 'Dragon Mountain' was originally called 'Khahlamba' by the Bantu people of Natal, a name meaning 'the row of upward pointing spears' or 'a rough bony object'.<sup>1</sup> The Sotho people refer to the escarpment as 'Dilomu tsa Natala' - 'cliffs of Natal'.

The escarpment was created by volumes of liquid lava-flows from a series of volcanic fissure eruptions, covering the earlier sandy sediments in Triassic times. Over the millennia, erosion produced the steep descent of land, carving the basalt lava into

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1. Carter, P.L. Late Stone Age Exploitation Patterns in Southern Natal, pp. 55-58.

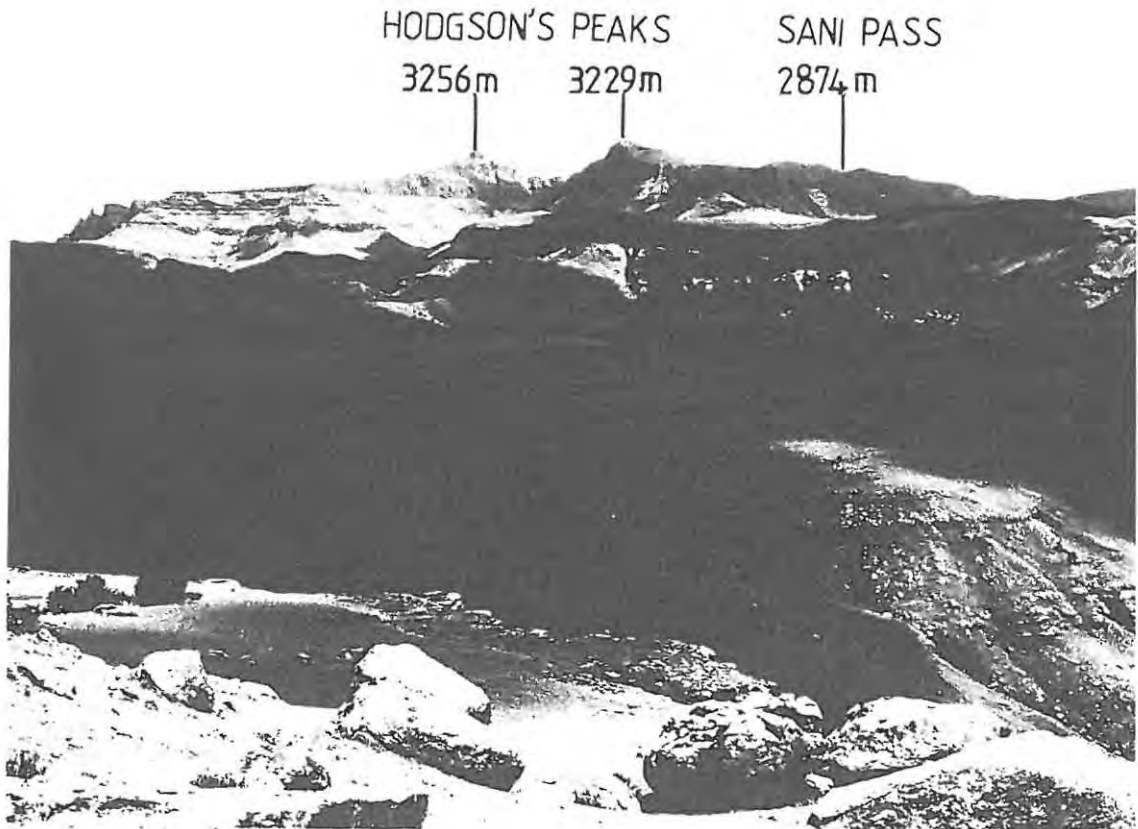


Fig. 3. The predominant mountains in this survey area are the Hodgson's Peaks which are easily recognizable from a great distance. The peaks acquired their existing name in 1862. Whilst searching for a group of cattle-marauding San raiders on top of the escarpment, Thomas Hodgson, a member of the commando in pursuit, was accidentally mortally wounded in the thigh by one of his comrades. Situated to the north is the Sani Pass, the existence of which was known to the San people who first opened up this route which remains the lifeline of eastern Lesotho to this day. At the top of the escarpment, the irregular masses of dark rock is basalt. Immediately below this is an exposed horizontal strata known as cave sandstone where the paintings are to be found. In the foreground huge boulders, which have tumbled down from adjacent cliff peaks, lie scattered around.

gullies and ravines.<sup>1</sup> Underneath the layer of basalt is the cave sandstone which is a fine-grained deposit extending along the entire length of the escarpment at an altitude of between 1700 and 2000 meters. Over the ages the sandstone has been undercut, providing shelters with suitable painting surfaces. Below the main berg lies the so called 'Little Berg' with its undulating parkland, interrupted only by erosive rivers creating deep gorges on their courses down towards the Indian ocean, one hundred and seventy kilometers away. A quote from Sir John Barrow, writing in the nineteenth century, sums up the setting:-

The kloofs or chasms, washed by torrents of water rush down the steep sides of the high stratified mountains, frequently leaving a succession of caverns, of which the Bosjesman chooses the highest, as not only removing him farther from the danger of a surprise, but giving him also <sup>2</sup>the command of a greater extent of country.

There exists a large seasonal variation; hot summer days are often interrupted by sudden and violent thunder and lightning storms which are frequently accompanied by devastating hail. Winters are dry with more than a hundred and fifty nights of frost a year. Snow falls on an average of six to twelve times a year depending on the altitude and may occur in any month of the year, although the heaviest falls occur during the winter months. Short winter days are clear and sunny with a marked diurnal variation with the night temperature often falling below minus

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1. Vinnicombe. op. cit., p. 1.

2. Barrow, J. An Account of Travels into the Interior of South Africa., p. 239.

fifteen degrees Celsius.

A high quality pasture exists on the highland sourveld of the Underberg flats, with typical alpine vegetation in the higher mountain regions consisting of short grass and scrubby heath devoid of nutriments. The highland sourveld begins to shoot far earlier in spring than most other veld types due to early spring rains. However, most sourveld grasses become unpalatable on reaching maturity, hence the name 'sourveld'. The veld is only useful for grazing for five months of the year; from April to September the veld has little or no grazing value.<sup>1</sup>

Seasonal availability of good grazing governs the distribution of game animals which may also have influenced the movement of the mobile hunter-gatherer. There is little doubt that the San and the eland migrated in winter from the highland sourveld down towards the middleveld where the vegetation was more sustaining. This may suggest an annual summer ceremony in the Berg in which painting formed an integral part.<sup>2</sup> (See Fig. 44.).

With adequate supplies of game and vegetable foods it was

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1. Carter. op. cit., pp. 55-56.

2. Vinnicombe. op. cit., p. 5.

economically possible for large sized bands of San to inhabit the mountains in the summers of plenty. Vinnicombe points out the correlation between the San people and eland. In the winter months the eland, as well as the San, disbanded into smaller units as a course of survival.<sup>1.</sup>

#### PREHISTORIC AND HISTORIC BACKGROUND

The people of the area were called 'Bushman' by the Europeans and 'San' by their neighbours, the Hottentots. The latter called themselves Khoi-Khoi and the term Khoisan has been coined to accommodate the two people who were of the same racial type. The name 'Bushman' is felt to be pejorative. Therefore I will refer to these people as 'San' which seems to be preferable.<sup>2.</sup>

The San are descendants of a long process of in situ evolution. This period of prehistory, within which the rock paintings were executed, is archaeologically known as Later Stone Age. The San are associated with the microlithic stone industries of the Later Stone Age, which provides evidence of the use of a bow and arrow for at least ten thousand years.<sup>3.</sup> There is no doubt that the San people were responsible for the paintings that

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1. Vinnicombe. op. cit., p. 5.

2. San, Soaqua, Sonqua: These are all probably terms which were also given by Khoi herders probably meaning 'people who have no stock' and to a degree, also pejorative, but nevertheless preferable.

3. Woodhouse, H.C. Bushman Art of Southern Africa, p. 22.

remain on the walls of shelters. Their pre-history can only be reconstructed by archaeological sources and documents left by their enemy, the European settlers, who regarded them as vermin.<sup>1</sup> The modern San people of the Kalahari desert are not fugitive descendants of the Drakensberg San. The indigenous people of the Drakensberg area belonged to the southern San, a linguistic group distinct from those to the north. By the end of the nineteenth century all knowledge of their language was lost, when the last San inhabitant was shot. The European arrival in the Underberg district in 1886 coincided with the final extermination of the Drakensberg San.

In 1863 on the upper reaches of the Thukela river, Anderson gave one of the few firsthand descriptions of the Drakensberg San and is worth quoting:-

The woman was not old or young, of a yellowish white colour, a few little tufts of wool on the head; eyes she had, but the lids were so closed they were not to be seen, although she could see between them perfectly; no nose, only two orifices, through which she breathed, with thin projecting lips, and sharp chin, with broad cheek-bones, her spine curved in a most extraordinary manner, consequently the stomach protruded in the same proportion, with thin calfless legs, and with that wonderful formation peculiar to these Bushmen tribes,...The woman measured four feet one inch in height. ...Their language was a succession of clicks with no guttural sound in the throat, ... .<sup>2</sup>

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1. Vinnicombe. op. cit., p. 9.

2. Anderson, A.A., Twenty-five Years in a Wagon., p. 13.

The San family unit usually consisted of three generations, with strong family ties, especially between parents and children. Some ten to thirty people would occupy a cave, screening off the floor area with branches, skins and rocks. The availability of game and foods of the veld would determine the size of the band unit. They had no leaders nor had they any word meaning 'chief'.<sup>1</sup> Their society was essentially egalitarian. Grouping of family units and appointments of leaders only became necessary later as European and Bantu started to threaten their existence.

They were a highly sophisticated people in perfect harmony with their environment, having no need to keep cattle or plant grain as all their needs were met by nature. Their knowledge of plant-life was phenomenal, both edible and poisonous. Brian Maguire, botanist at the Bernard Price Institute, informs us that San girls could identify seventy-five different species of plants and were accomplished botanists by the time they were eight years old.<sup>2</sup> They had a profound knowledge of the medicinal properties of plants. The San knew how to treat snake bites by inoculation, a method still used today in modern medicine. They would rub a stone on the skin until it bled, then rub in a small amount of venom as an antidote. The San were feared, admired and respected for their knowledge of medicine by all who came in contact with them.

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1. Bleek, D.F. The Mantis and his Friends: Bushman Folklore, p. VIII.

2. Woodhouse. op. cit., p. 30.

They had a knowledge of the stars, dividing them into night stars and dawn stars. According to their mythology they were able to identify two of Jupiter's moons with the naked eye, before they were discovered by astronomers with telescopes.<sup>1</sup> In the field of geology they understood the rock-strata. They knew which stones they could flake into tools and arrow heads, which iron oxides and minerals to use in the making up of pigments.

The hunter-gatherer San had come into contact with the pastoral Hottentots Khoi-Khoi in the southern and western Cape since at least 300 A.D.<sup>2</sup> In the coastal area of Natal, negroid farmers were present between 400 and 500 A.D., and in the Tugela basin a little later. Archaeological indicators show that there was interaction between the hunter-gatherer San and the negroid farmers and that the impact may have been considerable. This impact is indicated by a decrease in certain stone tool types, presumably a reaction to the substitution of those tools with ones of iron. The possibility exists that some hunter-gatherer San forged new economic relationships with negroid farmers, revolving around exchanging meat or domestic carbohydrates for rain-making prowess. In all probability the influence of the negroid farmers must have been felt in areas way beyond the territories they had settled.

Archaeological evidence indicates that the ancestors of the

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1. Bleek. A Brief Account of Bushman Folklore, p. 11.
  2. Schweitzer, F.R. and Scott, K.J. Early Occurrence of Domestic Sheep in Sub-Saharan Africa, p. 547.

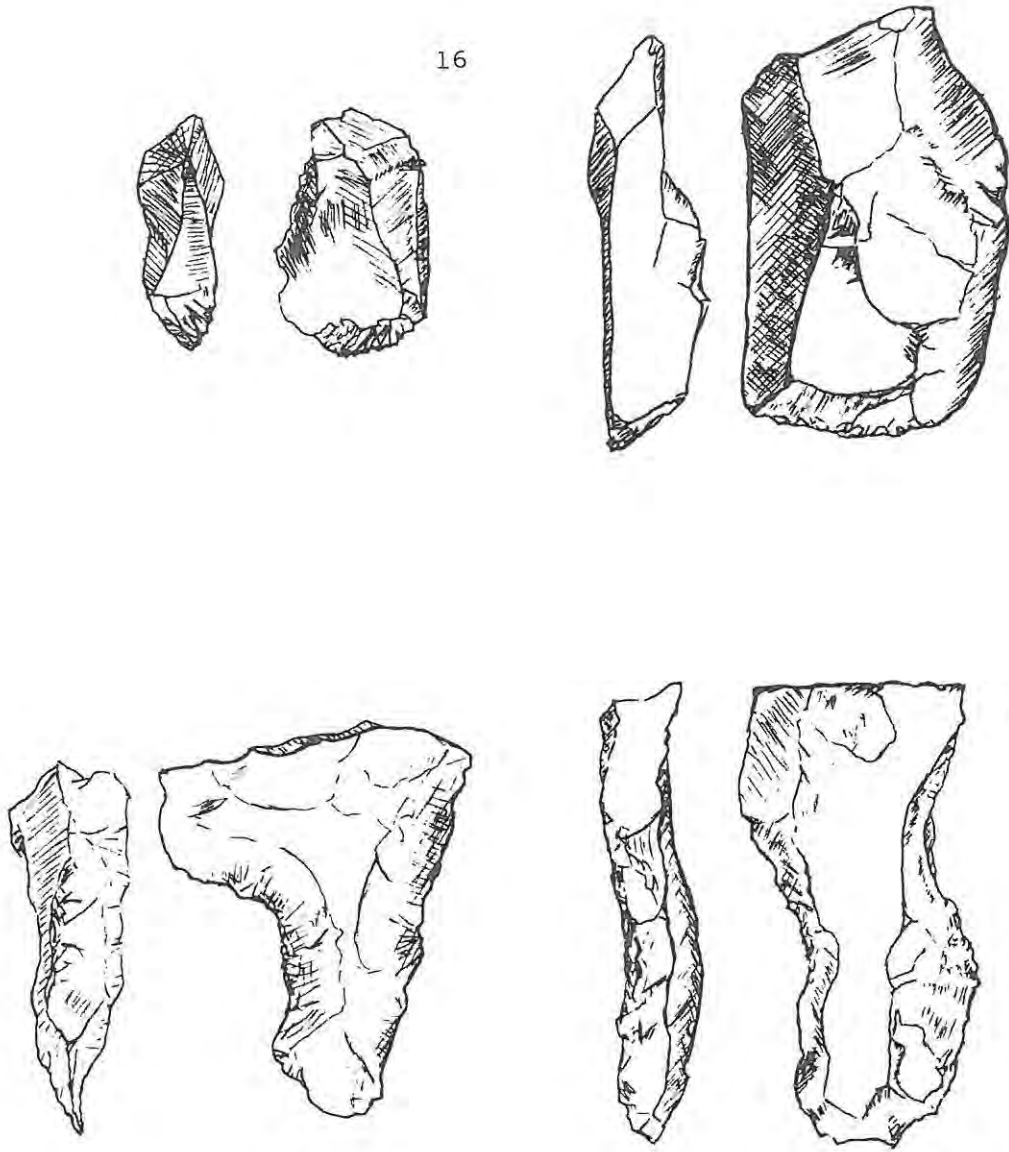


Fig. 4. Typical Later Stone Age tools found in the research area. The lower two pieces are known as adzes and the characteristic concave edges resulted from wood-working in a "spokeshave" type of action.



Fig. 5. Early Iron Age pottery made by mixed farmers between about A.D. 200 and 1000. These farmers were among the first to impinge upon traditional Later Stone Age life ways. (Illustration from material in the Albany Museum.)

San had lived in the mountain terrain for six to eight thousand years of their own free will,<sup>1</sup> sustaining life with an abundance of game and vegetable foods. Radiocarbon dates inform us that Iron Age man was present in the Tugela valley in the Seventh century and west of Escourt by the thirteenth century. The Little Berg formed a natural boundary between the negroid farmers and hunter-gatherer San, and for the next five centuries they seemed to live in a relatively harmonious co-existence. Evidence from archaeological and historical sources indicate trading and some intermarriage took place between the two groups.<sup>2</sup> San women were much sought after as wives, and evidence can be found of San features and clicks which have been incorporated into the Bantu languages of southern Africa.

The Amazizi was a Bantu tribe in close contact with the Berg San in Natal and Lesotho. The Amazizi were the only Bantu tribe in southern Africa to have adopted the use of the bow and arrow.<sup>3</sup> They were cattle breeders and sowers of grain down in the plains so their interests did not clash with that of the San, as there was room enough for all in a land of plenty.

The rise to power of Ishaka and the Zulu nation from 1812 onwards brought an end to peace in the region. Successive waves

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1. Liedenberg, D.P. The Drakensberg of Natal, p. 11.
  2. Willcox, A.R. The Drakensberg Bushmen and Their Art, p. 5.
  3. Willcox. op. cit., p. 5.

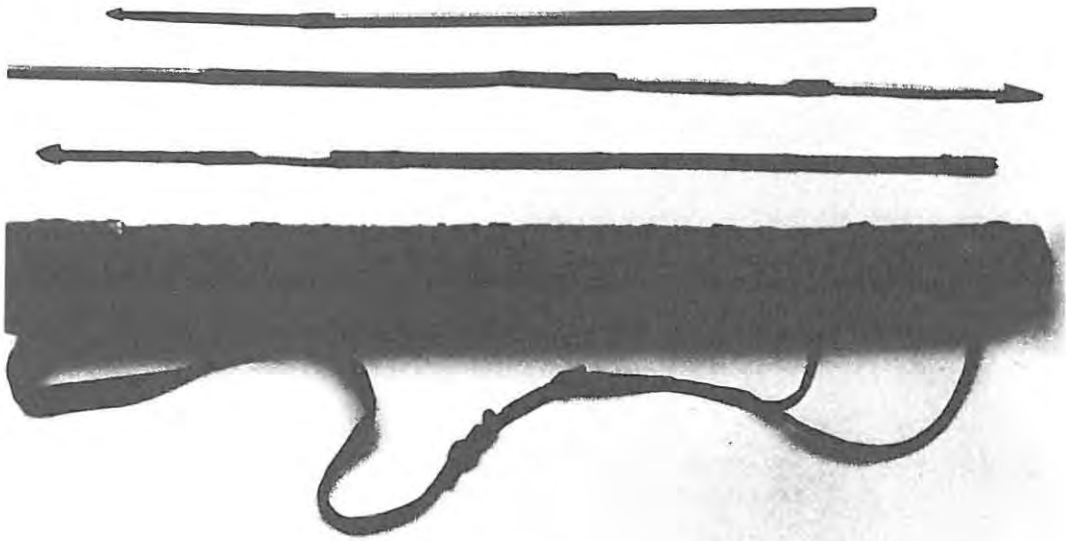


Fig. 6. Ethnographic examples of hunter-gatherer quiver and arrows, in all probability similar to those used by the Later Stone Age painters in the research area. The examples illustrated have iron points, but traditionally the points would have been made from bone or stone. (Material: Albany Museum.)

of refugees from the Zulu impis fled to the Drakensberg, in turn attacking the San who were already in the Berg. The Bantu, bereft of their cattle and a livelihood, sought refuge in the deep gorges and gulleys of the Drakensberg, where graves and fragments of their pottery have been discovered.<sup>1</sup>

The European was a latecomer who lacked respect and understanding of the San. They ignored land claims, therefore were subject to reprisal on their stock almost immediately. Their impact on the San was quick and fatal. In 1824 there was a settlement of hunters and traders in Port Natal who started moves inland.<sup>2</sup> In 1835 the missionary, Captain Allen Gardiner, passed the foot hills of the Underberg District, and he was the first person to write an account of his observations of this survey area. There is little doubt that the trek with a wagon, horsemen and cattle depicted in a rock shelter on Bamboo mountain near Underberg is that of Captain Allen Gardiner. These must have been some of the first horses seen by the San of this area, and many paintings of horses date from this period onwards.

The San stole large numbers of horses from the farmers and learnt the art of running down an eland on horseback in a hunt. The eland has a large fatty deposit around its heart and tires easily, therefore a horse has the ability to outrun an eland. The

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1. Willcox. op. cit., p. 7.

2. Brookes, E.H. and Webb, C. de B. A History of Natal., pp. 4-6.

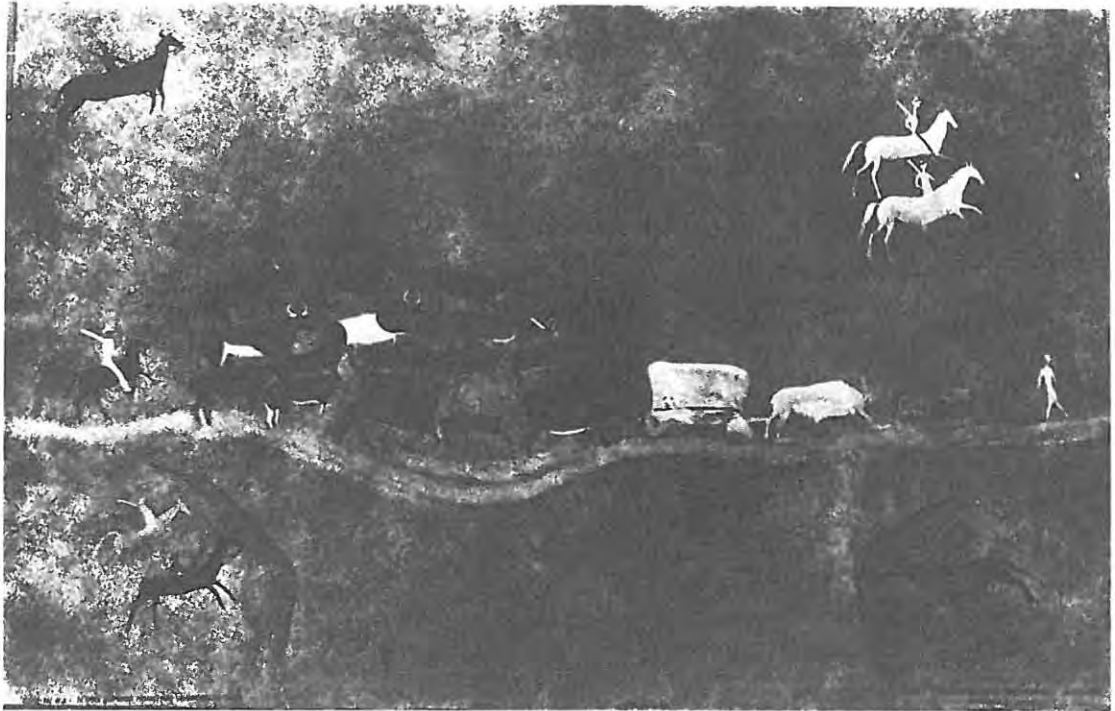
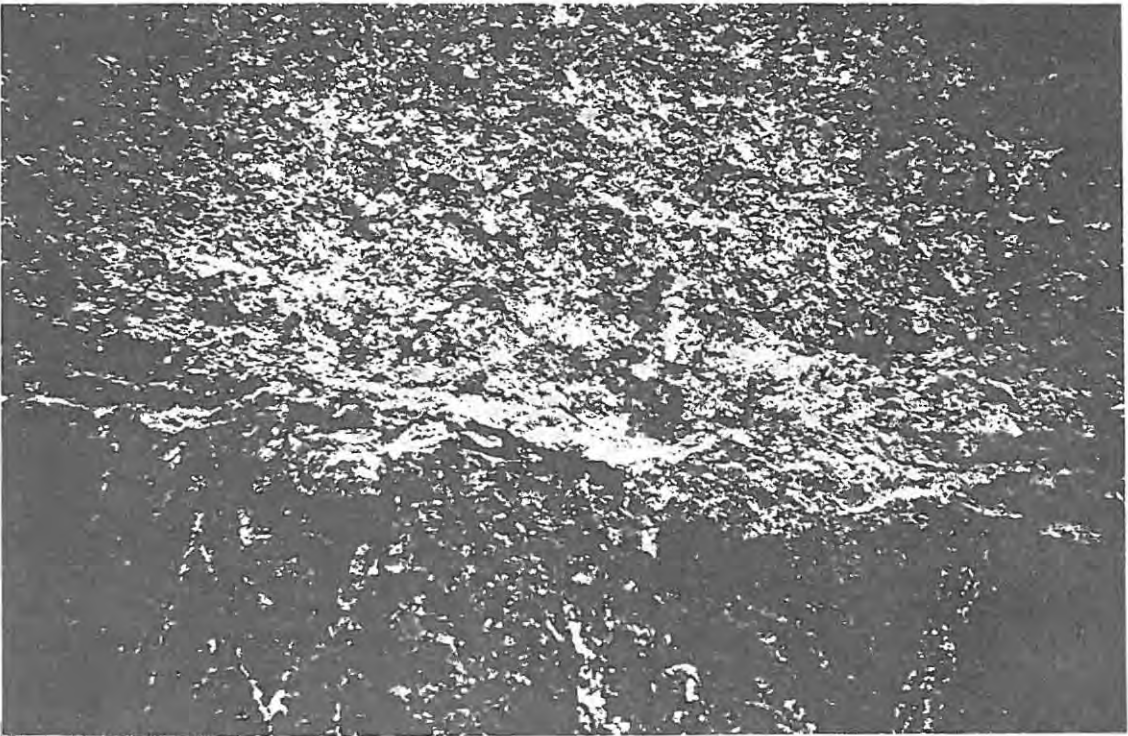
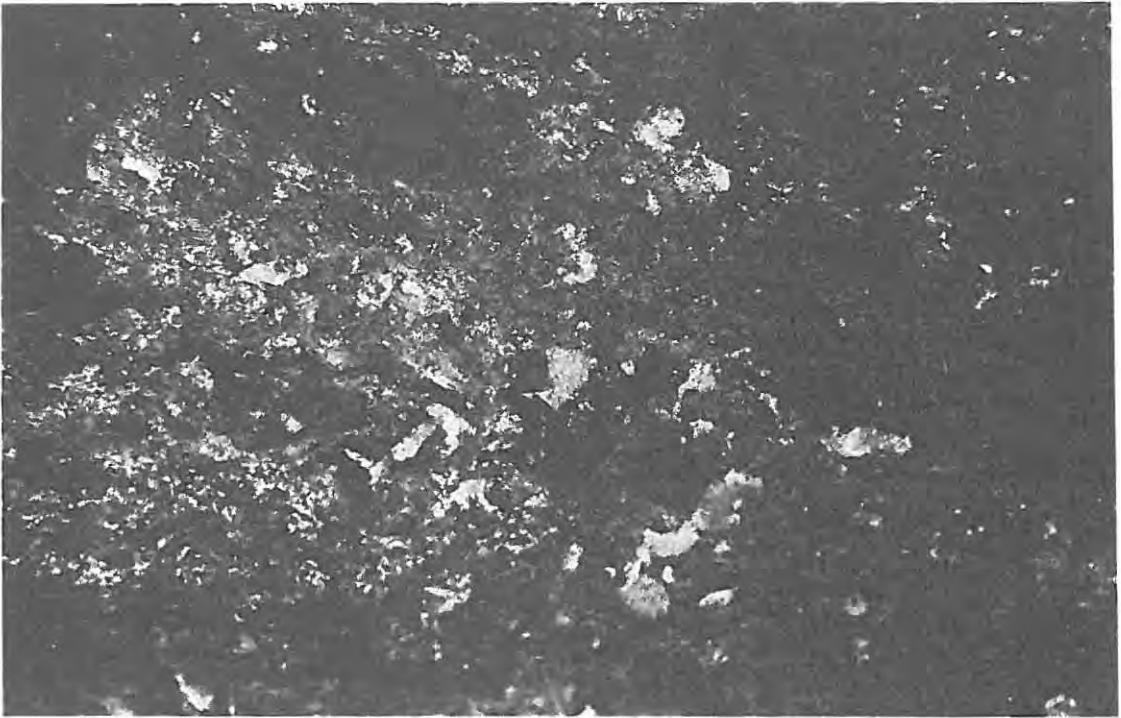


Fig. 7. This scene is probably that of Captain Gardiner and his party who travelled along the foot of Bamboo Mountain in 1835. The trek depicts a 'voorloper' leading a covered ox-wagon. Armed horsemen with brimmed hats drive the slaughter cattle from the rear. The scene is painted in white, orange and black. (Tracing by P. Vinnicombe: Natal Museum.)



Figs. 8 and 9. These two depictions of ox-wagons are on the farm Kilmun which is in view of the route taken by Captain Gardiner along the Drakensberg.

horse revolutionised the San's normal hunting practice. Horses also provided meat when required, with the added advantage of being self transporting.<sup>1.</sup>

In Captain Gardiner's recorded accounts of indigenous game in this district, he mentions seeing eland, gnu or black wildebeest, large herds of hartebeest, a lioness with four cubs, jackal, coveys of partridge and duck on the Ngwangwana and Mzimkhulu rivers.<sup>2.</sup>

The major European invasion of the Natal interior was made by the Voortrekkers from 1837. By 1840 they had started occupying land under the Berg, forming permanent settlements.<sup>3.</sup> The San were now surrounded by the white farmers on the one side and the Drakensberg escarpment of Lesotho on the other. The European hunters entered the Berg and began to shoot large numbers of game. The San's territory decreased and so did their food supply. They had no alternative but to retaliate by hunting on the farms of the white settlers, making no cognitive distinction between wild and domestic animals. They gained great skill at rustling herds of horses and cattle at dawn, driving them into the mountains using their ingenuity in getting cattle up '...Berg

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1. Callaway, H. Nursery Tales, Traditions and Histories of the Zulu., p. 353.
  2. Gardiner, A.F. Narrative of a Journey to the Zoolu Country in South Africa., pp. 320-326.
  3. Vinnicombe. op. cit., p. 12.

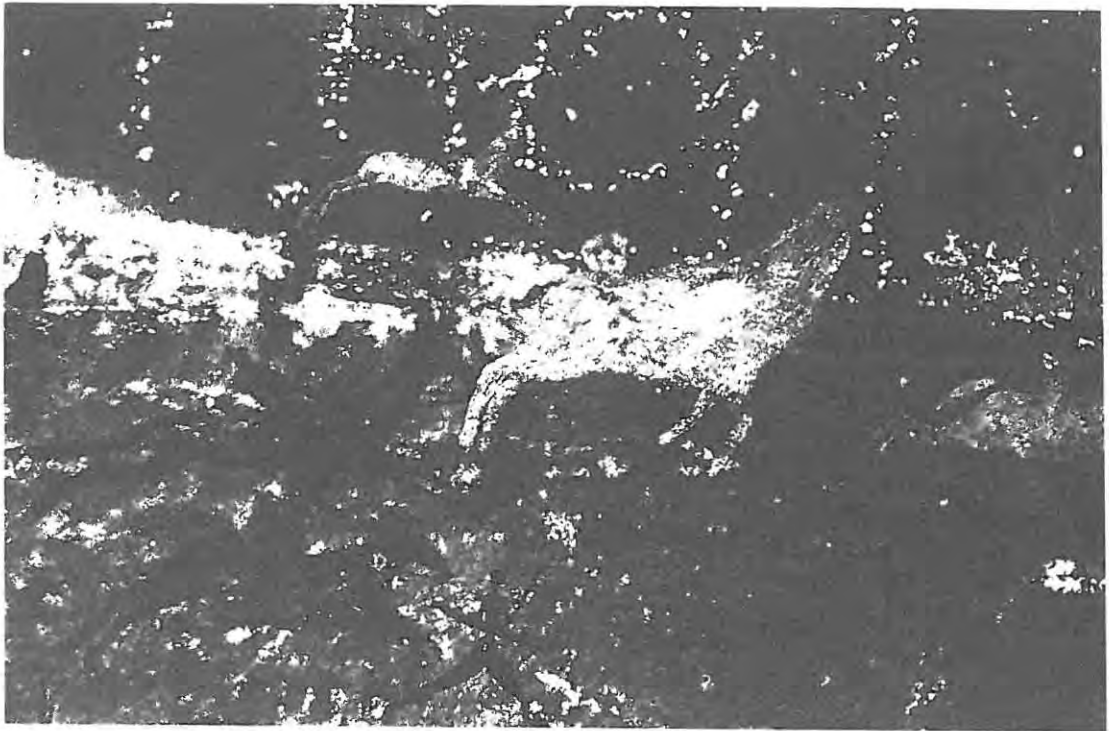


Fig. 10. Hunter-gatherer contact with Europeans gave rise to many changes in the traditional system. One was the acquisition of horses which revolutionised their hunting and cattle-raiding capabilities. Horsemen with knobbed headdress pursue an eland. The items of equipment held in the horsemen's hands are uncertain, although they are often associated with horsemen. These items are possibly bundles of spears or arrows.

passes by placing fresh dung in front of the herd.<sup>1</sup> There are several shelters depicting paintings of such raids in this survey area. (See Fig. 37 and Fig. 60.) On many occasions the San got away, but when they were overtaken, the men would be shot and the women and children would be taken captive to work on the farms.

In 1869 hunting parties were organised with the aim of exterminating the last of the bands of San along the Drakensberg. Their bows and arrows could not compete with the guns of the white man and the last large bands were destroyed.<sup>2</sup> The remainder fled into Lesotho, where they were absorbed by intermarriage or died in further fighting. The San posed an obstacle for the European settlers in their progress into the interior of southern Africa. The only answer to these land hungry settlers was to exterminate the San, yet these people held the historical right to the land. They had survived in this area for thousands of years. The extermination of the San in the nineteenth century brought about the end of a long artistic tradition.

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1. Irwin, P., Ackhurst, J. and Irwin, D. A Field Guide to the Natal Drakensberg., p. 43.

2. Carson, I.A.R. Rock Art of Africa., p. 121.

THE PAINTED CONTEXT AND PAINTING TECHNIQUES

All rock paintings in this survey area were executed in sandstone shelters, some exposed, while others are well protected from the weather. Sizes of shelters vary from the largest, with a floor space of approximately 500 square meters, to a small rock outcrop, or a mere fallen boulder. As this is a well-watered region, all sites are within a hundred and fifty meters of water. The majority of shelters are on the north- or east-facing slopes, thus having sunshine for most part of the day. Occasionally south-facing shelters occur, but are damp and cold. Most sites are situated at a high vantage point with an excellent view of the valleys, giving them a greater command of the plains below.

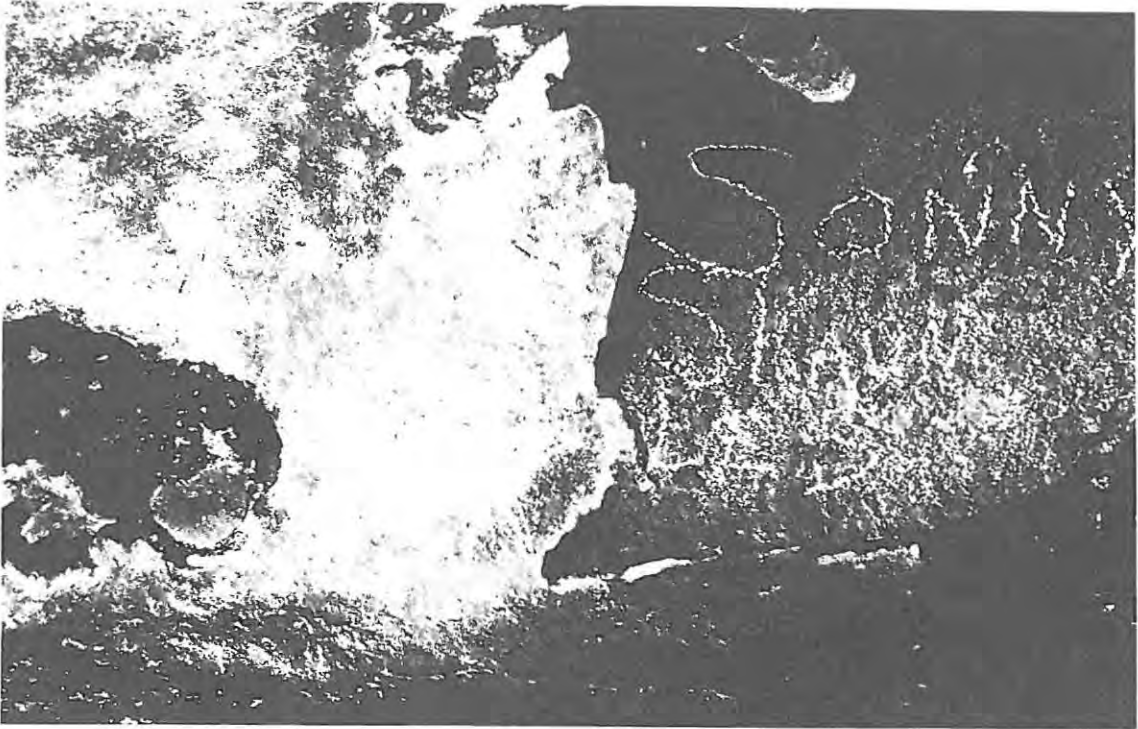
Much has been written about pigments and binders used by the San, most of which is speculative and totally unsubstantiated. This guesswork has been treated as fact by many, thus creating a large amount of confusion. Many problems have to be overcome with the chemical tests that are performed on the paintings, as many factors such as weather, exposure or sun may influence the results of the tests. Independent tests have been performed by various people, leading to heated debates and disagreements as there is not one test, but many different tests, all with their own shortcomings. Until 'controlled' chemical tests are conducted, speculation and guesswork will continue.

The durability of the paintings depend directly on factors such as the granular consistency<sup>1.</sup> of the paint, penetration of the rock surface, the efficiency of the binder, amount of exposure to the elements and the texture of the rock surface.<sup>2.</sup> Further damage is caused to the paintings by animals rubbing against the painted surfaces, water damage and vandalism. Vandalism is responsible for extensive damage and, in many cases, total destruction of paintings. With the inclusion of sites in the local hotel tourist itinerary, I fear many sites will be obliterated for ever.

Pigment mining and diggings date back to the Middle Stone Age (100,000 B.C.) in southern Africa. At an excavation at Border Cave in northern Natal, where ground pigments occurred down to bedrock, the finds of artefacts and bones tested exceeded the radiocarbon dating limits (approx. 40,000 B.C.).<sup>3.</sup>

The predominant colours used in this survey area tend to be red and brown. There is no doubt that pigments used by the San were mainly earth pigments of various red oxides, ranging from dark to light red.<sup>4.</sup> In this survey area, red tended to be the

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1. A finely ground pigment would constitute a superior paint.
  2. Rudner, I. Paints of the Khoisan Rock Artists., pp. 14-20.
  3. Boshier, A. and Beaumon, P. Mining in Southern Africa and the Emergence of Modern Man., pp. 2-12.
  4. Rudner. Khoisan Pigments and Paints, p. 43.



**Fig. 11.** One of many examples of vandalism which takes place in the Drakensberg and poses a serious threat to the survival of many paintings.

more durable pigment, and generally, where a painting has weathered, the reds have stood the test of time. The main ferric oxide for red is haematite which is found in nodules in the cave sandstone. The nodule, on being broken open, exposes the solid pigment, which is then finely ground to a powder on a grinding-stone.<sup>1</sup> Many grinding-stones stained with pigment have been discovered along the Drakensberg. I have witnessed two such grinding stones in this survey area: one at a site in Cobham State Forest and another on the upper reaches of the Sandleni river. These earth pigments are fast colours, although the tonality will differ due to weathering. There is evidence that the San heated ferric oxide to produce a range of different colours apart from the natural variations in colour.<sup>2</sup>

Hydrous ferric oxide was used in the production of yellow and tests have proved that the main ore is limonite.<sup>3</sup> Although no solid evidence exists, it has been suggested that a variety of plant pigments and yellow clays could have been used; these would not however, have had the permanency of limonite.

Orange is also obtainable in natural form in nodules found in the cave sandstone. Alternatively, orange can be achieved by mixing red and yellow pigments.

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1. Willcox. op. cit., p. 47.

2. Rudner. Paints of the Khoisan Rock Artists., p. 19.

3. Ibid. p. 19.

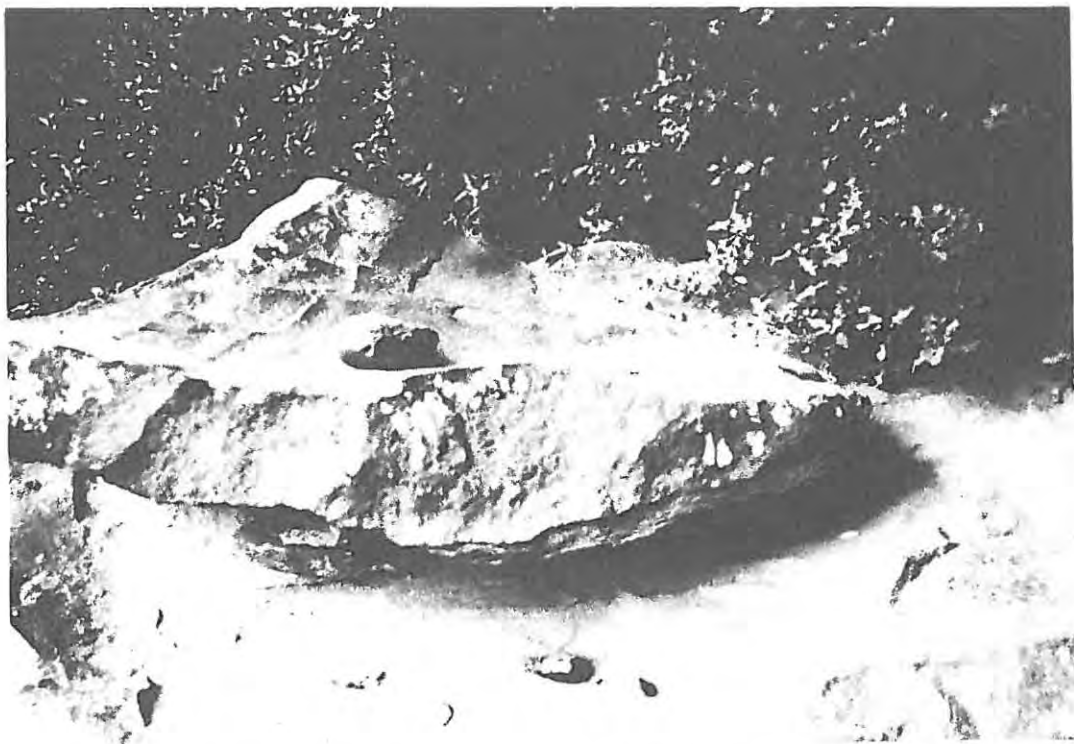


Fig. 12. A dolorite grinding-stone on the upper reaches of the Sandleni River. Nodules of ochre pigment were found in the surrounding area.

Independent tests have revealed the presence of charcoal in some black pigments. Although no solid evidence exists, some have suggested manganese and graphite.<sup>1</sup> Black tends to be a fugitive colour but in some sites has lasted as well as the ferric oxide pigments. Black appears frequently in polychrome paintings of inland, being used for detail such as facial features, horns and hooves.

In analytical tests, silica, gypsum and china clay have been found to be present in white pigments.<sup>2</sup> In this survey area the granulation of white pigments tends to vary from an almost translucent veneer to a thick paste. This thick pigment does not constitute a durable paint as it does not penetrate the rock surface and tends to flake off in areas. The pigment varies from a pure white to a yellowish white, or grey white, indicating the use of different pigments or possibly the media affecting the final colour. It is not known to what extent the choice of media or weathering affects the colour. As a rule, white is a fugitive colour, which is evident in many paintings where only traces of white pigment are visible. However, I came across a number of paintings where the white pigment, specifically of the thinner variety, was fresh, having lasted as well as the ferric oxide (red) pigments. White is often used for detail, indicating beadwork on figures (see Fig. 13.) and in one site an entire

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1. Rudner. Khoisan Pigments and Paints., p. 250.

2. Rudner. Paints of the Khoisan Rock Artists., p. 19.

group of small antelope was painted in white (see Fig. 14.). Vinnicombe<sup>1.</sup> suggests in her findings that in some instances white paint was used as a primer or an outline.

Tests conducted using blood as a pigment, have proved that blood fades and disappears in a short space of time,<sup>2.</sup> although it has not been ruled out as a component of the paint.

Once again, a large degree of speculation exists as to the properties of binders used in conjunction with the pigments, many of which are unsubstantiated or second- and third-hand information. Media which have been mentioned in literature include '...various animal fats (sometimes heated), plant fat, urine, blood, bile, water, milk,<sup>3.</sup> eggs, plant sap, gum, honey,<sup>4.</sup> saliva, salt, beeswax and gelatine; it is also said that pigments were used without a medium.<sup>5.</sup>

In this survey area the consistency of the paints varied visually from what appeared to be a stain to a thick paste. The most likely medium used as a binder for the pigments is that of animal fat. Ione Rudner performed a number of experiments, mixing

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1. Vinnicombe. op. cit., p. 139.
  2. Rudner. op. cit., pp. 15-16.
  3. The San were not herders of cattle, therefore it is highly unlikely that milk was used as a medium.
  4. In an experiment using honey as a medium, it was found that ants ate the painting away.
  5. Rudner. Khoisan Pigments and Paints., Table 2., p. 26.



Fig. 13. Detail such as beadwork below the knee is painted in white.

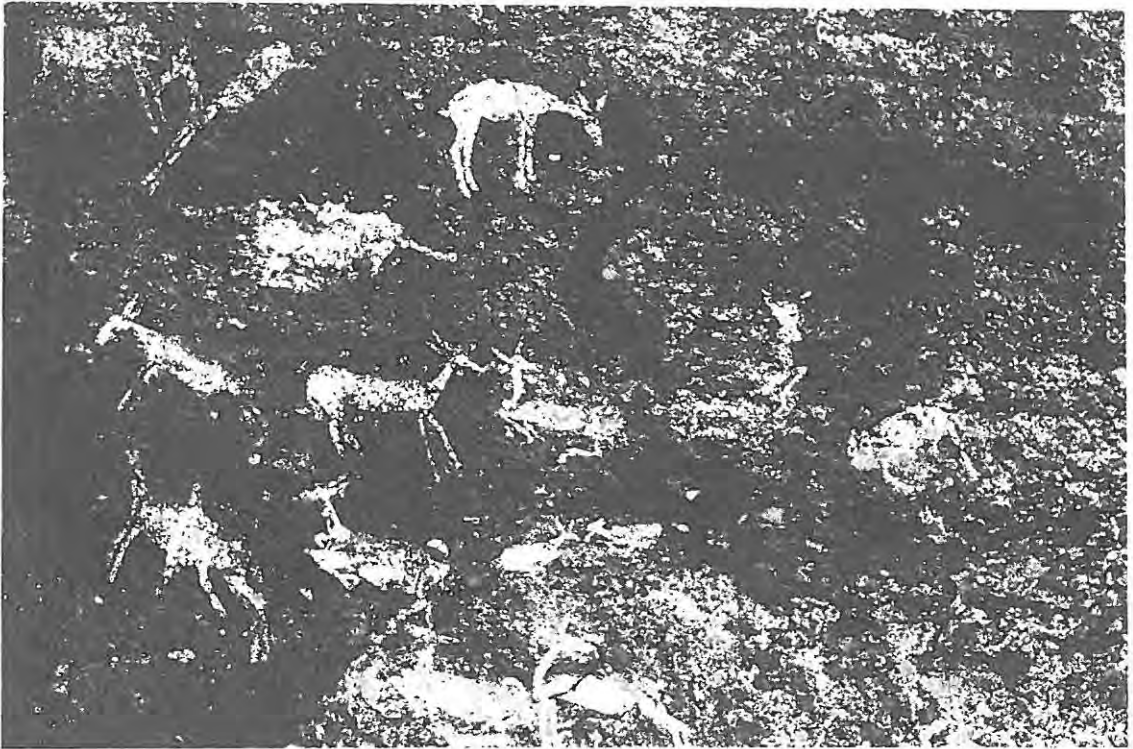


Fig. 14. This site was only discovered during the fieldwork for this essay. The antelope are delicately painted in a variety of restful poses. All the antelope are executed in white, with the paint appearing remarkably fresh.

beef fat with fine ash, another with charcoal as pigment, then added a small amount of water which produced a good painting emulsion. In another experiment, she used sun-warmed fat and pigment applied to a wet wall which worked equally well. Rudner concludes that there is no doubt that warmed fat would have been a suitable medium.<sup>1</sup> There are numerous sources of fat from animals and oils from plants which could have been used and most probably were, mixed with other ingredients.

How<sup>2</sup> mentions that a Basotho informant had seen San people painting and thateland blood was used as a medium. Denninger<sup>3</sup> performed chemical tests in order to prove the presence of blood in the pigments; it was found to be present in only some cases. In other cases Denninger's tests proved an absence of amino acids (blood), therefore this would mean either blood was not used or that the paintings are older than two thousand years - (time taken for amino acids to break down). The types of tests employed by Denninger are questionable, therefore the results should be treated with scepticism. Where these tests were positive (for amino acids) this does not mean that blood was used, only that a protein was used. For example it could have been milk, egg or gelatine, all of which contain amino acids. Vinnicombe<sup>4</sup> experimented with blood as a binder, finding that

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1. Rudner. op. cit., p. 20.

2. How, M.W. The Mountain Bushmen of Basutoland, p. 37.

3. Denninger. The Use of Paper Chromatography., pp. 80-84.

4. Vinnicombe. op. cit., p. 182.

pigment mixed with blood constituted a more durable mixture than without, but does not state over what period or how this was performed.

It has been suggested by some that egg tempera could have been used successfully, but there is no indication that egg formed part of their paints. With the San's vast botanical knowledge, plant sap or resin could have been used successfully, although there is no evidence to substantiate this fact either. A variety of media was available to the San, which could be used on their own or mixed, in liquid or paste form to suit the individual. From available information the most probable medium is fat, possibly with other additives such as blood. There are so many conflicting reports on results of experiments that our knowledge should perhaps be based more on early written accounts, until controlled chemical analyses are performed.

A passage pertaining to paint which is worth quoting was written by George W. Stow in 1905:-

The last known bushmen artist of the Malutis was shot in the the Witteberg Native Reserve, where he had been on a marauding expedition, and had captured some horses. He was evidently a man of considerable repute among his race. He had ten small horn pots hanging from a belt, each of which contained a different colour paint. The informant of the writer told him that he saw the belt, that there were no two colours alike, and that each had a marked difference from the rest.

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1. Stow, G.W. The Native Races of South Africa., p. 230.

Unfortunately this relic of a horn pot belt has been lost.

Early in 1986 an old woman who is a first generation descendant of a San, was interviewed by Pieter Jolly and Lewis-Williams. Her father once lived and painted in a shelter in the Tsolo district of Transkei. She has a knowledge of San rituals and beliefs and knew of rock paintings. She claimed to be able to explain the meanings of the paintings and methods used by her father. It is of great significance that she suggested that paint was prepared in a ritualistic manner containing blood and fat of a ritually slaughtered eland. The eland is the largest and strongest antelope, therefore they are believed to possess more potency. As a result of the ritual, the paint transcuded a power which could be procured by placing one's hand upon the painting. She was emphatic that the preparation of the paint and the actual painting was done by the medicine men.<sup>1</sup>

A variety of tools for the application of paint has been mentioned in literature which includes the following: crayons, feathers, brushes of feathers, brushes of hair, tendons, bones, sticks, grass, burnt sticks and fingers;<sup>2</sup> none of which have been totally substantiated. The more likely tools to have been used are feathers, fingers and brushes of hair all of which could be used successfully for large areas and fine detail.

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1. Jolly, P. A First Generation Descendant of the Transkei San, pp. 6-9.

2. Rudner. op. cit., pp. 47-48.

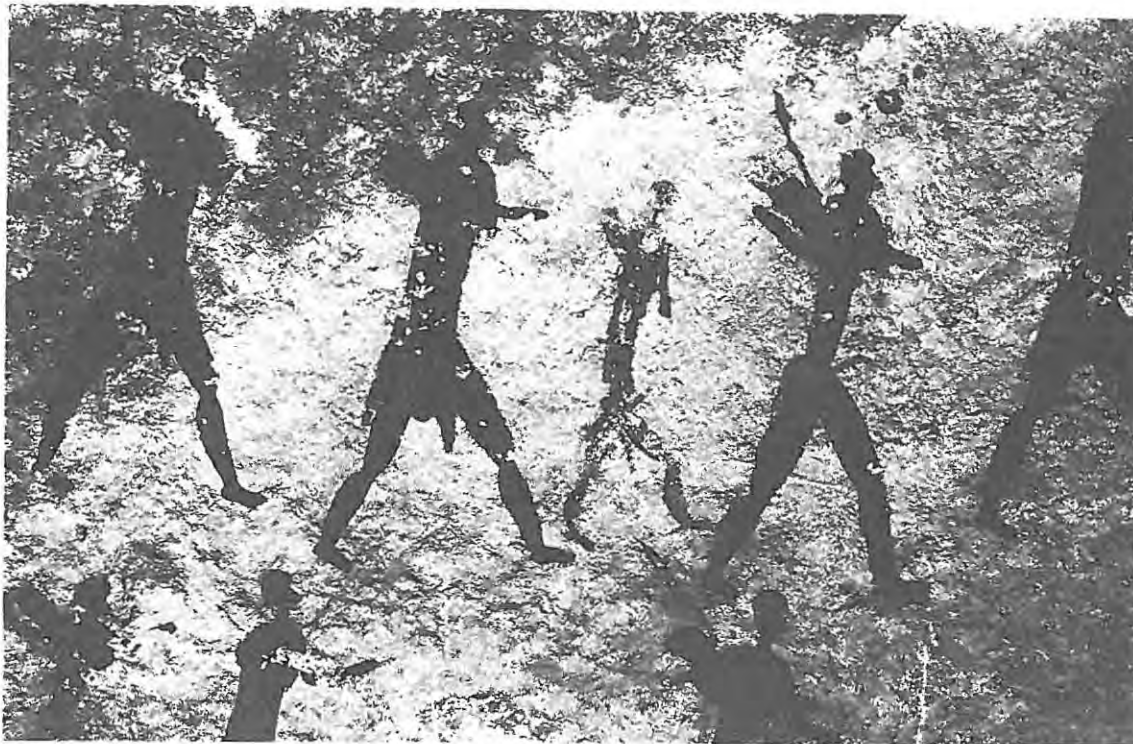


Fig. 15. The figure in the centre, which has only been sketched in, possibly indicates the use of a crayon.

Fanciful theories on the subject of media and pigments should be discarded, and, until controlled chemical tests are performed, we will have to rely on the evidence of ethnographic parallels and limited substantiated historical evidence.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Rudner. Paints of the Khoisan Rock Artists., p. 20.

THE SITESGENERAL INTRODUCTION TO THE SITES

In this survey area I had the privilege of visiting eighty-eight sites comprising some five thousand individual paintings. The exact location of the painted sites is classified information, and therefore I am not at liberty to provide a more detailed map. These sites are all situated in a rugged terrain, where one has to trudge many arduous kilometers to reach them. In order to reach sites on the Sandleni river, the forester at Garden Castle kindly provided horses. We went up the Mlahlangubo river to Wilsons Cave, at which point the horses were returned to the forestry station, as the Sandleni Valley is too steep to negotiate on horseback. Using the cave as a base, I would go out to the sites during the day and return at night. The five hour walk back to home base allowed me to visit sites along the Sandleni river.

Six months was spent recording the sites photographically on slide film, KMI35 ASA 25/15 DIN. I encountered many technical problems such as uneven distribution of light on the craggy painted surfaces and the paintings always tended to be in the most awkward positions. At times I made use of a flash which had the disadvantage of giving a blue haze to the final result.

Many misconceptions exist in the mind of the average person, regarding the paintings. This is possibly best explained by the fact that the art is seldom portable. A false impression of the contents of the paintings has been created by the white man's selectivity in reproducing their art. In a panel of paintings the clearest and the best preserved paintings were reproduced leaving out the less clear ones, thus biasing the whole context of the painting. Detail which formed an integral part of the meaning of the painting, was often omitted, thereby seriously affecting the interpretation. Besides trekking to the actual site, one has to rely on a few reproductions which hardly gives one a truly representational view of San art. For example, it would be ridiculous to attempt an aesthetic evaluation of a Goya or a Picasso from a tracing or a print.

Their art is essentially associated with trance rituals and depictions of social scenes rather than mere animal representations. Research has increasingly suggested that the art is concerned in one way or another with the work of the medicine man.<sup>1</sup> The recent interview with a first generation San descendant is yet more evidence, as she was emphatic that the preparation of the paint and the actual paintings were done by the medicine men.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Lewis-Williams. Empiricist Impasse in Southern African Rock Art Studies, pp. 58-66.

2. Jolly, P. op. cit., p. 6.

## HUMAN DEPICTIONS

I noted a predominance of human depictions and human activity rather than animals, which is borne out by Vinnicombe's (1976) quantitative studies.<sup>1</sup> This would indicate that painting formed an integral part of their culture.<sup>2</sup> When the black and white farmers and traders entered the area, greater detail in the portrayal of humans was necessary in order to make a distinction between them. Early paintings of humans were less detailed suggesting that only one race lived in this area at that time.<sup>3</sup>

Most human depictions are painted in monochrome, either in red, which predominates, or black. Figures are generally small ranging from fifteen centimeters and less. Figures are depicted in stylized elongation, executed by means of a flat application of paint. Outline was rarely used. The majority of human figures in this survey area are depicted naked, although generally more attention was paid to the depiction of kaross-clad figures which are painted larger in size.

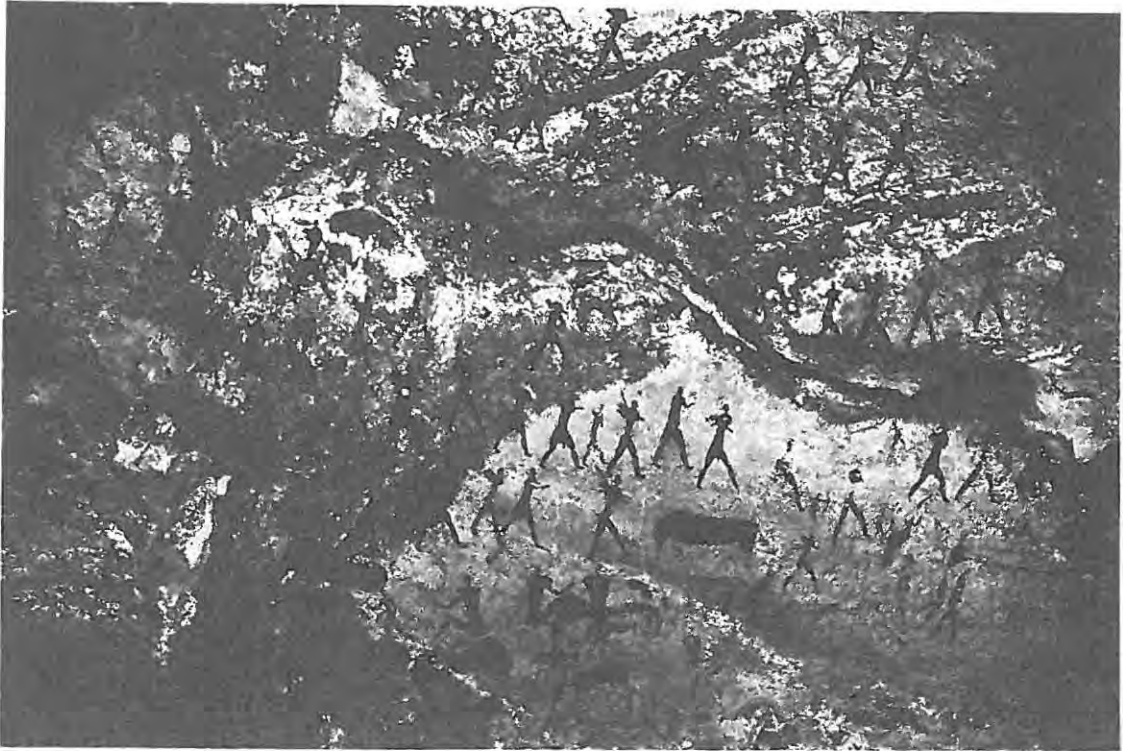
Naked figures often appear with beadwork between the knee and calf, around the wrist and calf, around the wrist and ankle, around the upper arm as well as the neck. Decorative adornment

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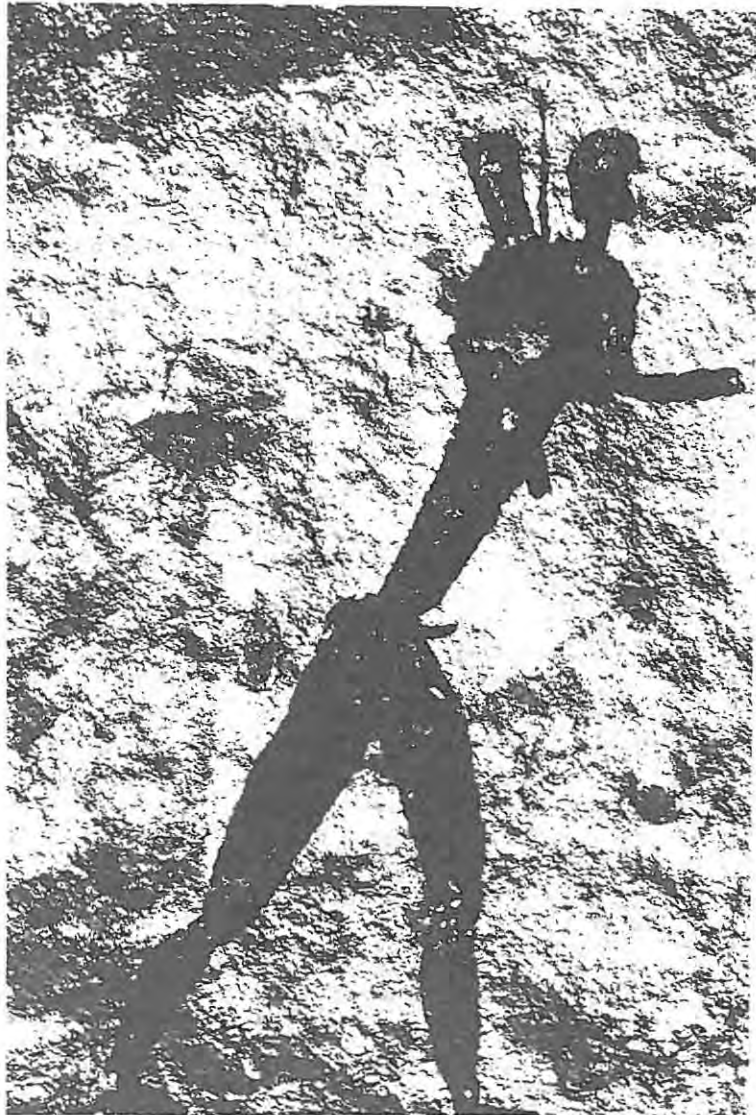
1. Vinnicombe. op. cit., p. 362.

2. Vinnicombe. Ibid., p. 245.

3. Bleek, D.F. and Stow, G.W. Rock-Painting in South Africa, p. XI.



**Fig. 16.** On the move towards the escarpment, a view of marching figures on Ikanti Mountain. The large number of male representations may suggest a seasonal aggregation of people at which times ritual activity was intensified. Most figures carry equipment in the form of hunting bags, quivers, arrows, bows and sticks. Some are naked while others wear karosses. This painting is remarkably well preserved and shows little deterioration. Recently this site has been included in the local hotel itinerary and is now threatened by vandalism.



**Fig. 17.** Detail of a figure on the march from Ikanti Mountain. The man carries a quiver with a bow and arrows. The detailed beadwork below the knee and on the upper arm is executed in white.



Fig. 18. A kaross-clad woman with collecting bag and digging stick, possesses a concaved face, referred to as a 'hook head'.



Fig. 19. Horseman with a brimmed hat. Both the horse and brimmed hat was introduced by the European settlers.

may be interpreted as literally representing ornamentation. However, Vinnicombe is of the opinion that in certain scenes '...features are almost certainly symbolic representations of abstract ideas.'<sup>1</sup> She does not, however, offer an explanation of what these ideas might be.

Featureless faces are often painted in white. In many instances the white paint has deteriorated, leaving the face concaved; this phenomenon is now referred to as 'hook heads'. Head gear appears in the form of a cap either peaked or closely fitted against the skull, (see Fig. 20) frequently with thongs hanging down at the back of the neck. Depictions of brimmed hats, of which there are fine examples in this survey area, became fashionable after the arrival of the European.

#### MALE DEPICTIONS

There is a distinct male bias in human depictions. Male figures are identifiable by highly exaggerated genitals and specifically male equipment such as bows, quivers and arrows.

A large number of male figures are depicted with so-called penis attachments or additaments. The attachment is depicted as a rigid bar at right angles to the penis a little distance back from the tip. It appears either as a single or double bar,

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1. Vinnicombe. op. cit., p. 260.

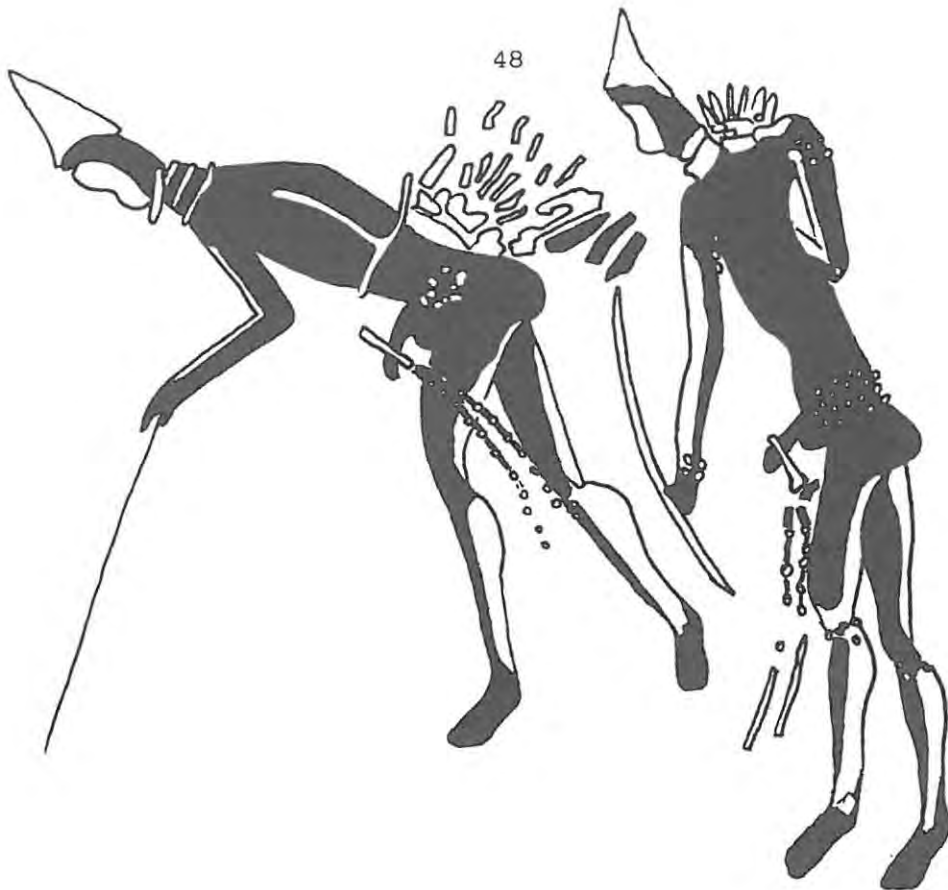


Fig. 20. Two figures depicted with peaked skull caps and beadwork on various parts of their bodies. Note the rigid bar across the penis with two tassels which seem to have beads attached to a cord.

occasionally with tassels or beads hanging from a cord. Various authors have suggested the bar to be a porcupine quill<sup>1</sup> or a pointed piece of bone<sup>2</sup>, actually piercing the penis. However, such speculations are completely outside ethnographic and historical observations. There are no recorded observations of this item being worn and some have suggested it may be symbolic.

Lewis-Williams<sup>3</sup> indicates that the penis attachment is most probably symbolic, in many instances of certain prohibitions. Vinnicombe<sup>4</sup> suggests it to be part of a hunting ritual and urination as possibly what was symbolically prohibited. In a published account by Bleek and Lloyd, 1911, appears an interview with Dia!Kwain,<sup>5</sup> a San convict, who explained that the /Xam<sup>6</sup> hunter was instructed not to urinate after shooting an eland as it would weaken the poison. Dia!Kwain explained further:

If he acted so, then the poison would hold and kill the eland, for the poison would hold its bladder shut and it would not open to pass water.<sup>7</sup>

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1. Woodhouse. op. cit., p. 107.
  2. Willcox. The Rock Art of Africa., p. 261.
  3. Lewis-Williams. Believing and Seeing, p. 53.
  4. Vinnicombe. op. cit., p. 258.
  5. Dia!Kwain: A San convict sent to Cape Town to help construct the new breakwaters at the harbour.
  6. /Xam: A San group from the Cape Province South of the Orange River.
  7. Bleek and Lloyd. Specimens of Bushman Folklore, p. 235.

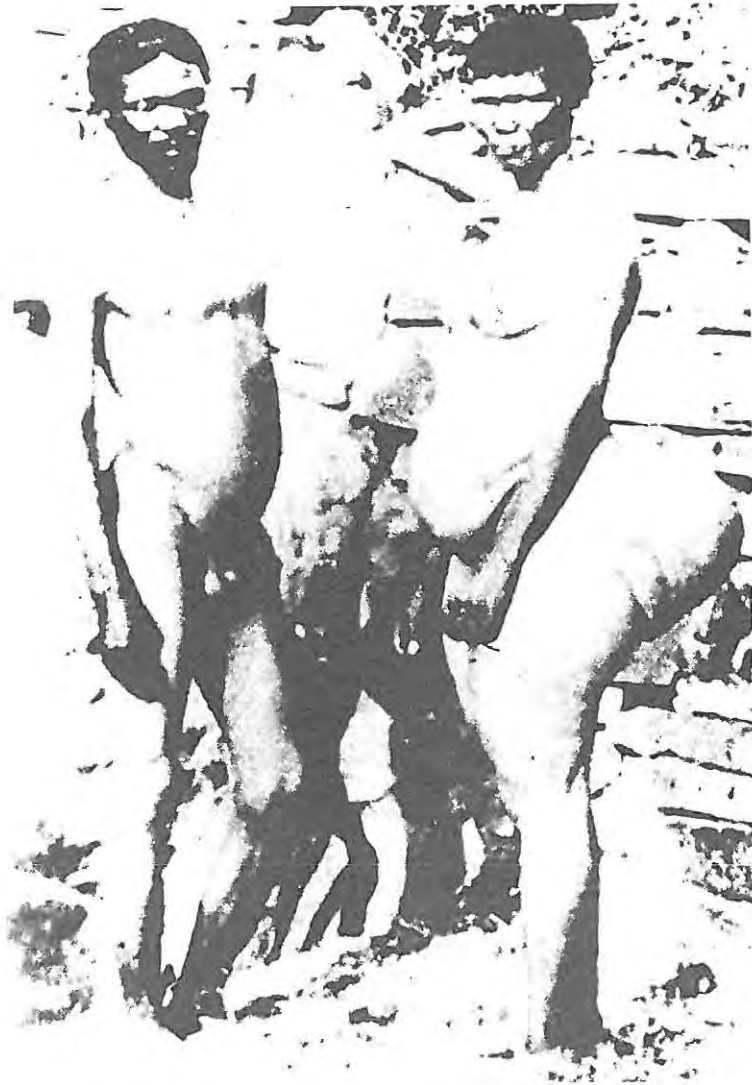


Fig. 21. A photograph of a San husband and wife. She shows a marked degree of steatopygia. (Illustration from a book 'The Bushmen' edited by Phillip V. Tobias.)

The speculation on the penis attachment is a fine illustration of the use of ethnography versus a literal means of explanation.

#### FEMALE DEPICTIONS

Women are identifiable by their typical steatopygous<sup>1</sup> features, breasts and female accessories, such as bags and digging sticks. These digging sticks are known as 'kibi'. They are made of a hard wood sharpened at one end, and are frequently weighted with a stone. Digging sticks were used in the collection of bulbs and roots. The stone weights are slightly larger than a fist and have been found along the Drakensberg and other areas. A hole was laboriously bored through the centre of the stone which was then fitted to the stick with a wedge to secure the stone weight. The stone weight gave added momentum when digging into hard ground. In the paintings, the digging stick is depicted more symbolic of food-gathering than a practical instrument for digging.<sup>2</sup> Women are seldom depicted in the role of motherhood but are rather associated with music making and digging sticks.

The surprising exiguity of female depictions is explained by the respective roles played by men and women in the domestic production of a band. Foods collected by women such as fruit,

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1. Steatopygous: Excessive accumulation of fat on the buttocks and thighs.

2. Vinnicombe. op. cit., p. 277.



Fig. 22. A kaross-clad figure with a raised arm stands in front of a collecting bag with tassels and a weighted digging stick.

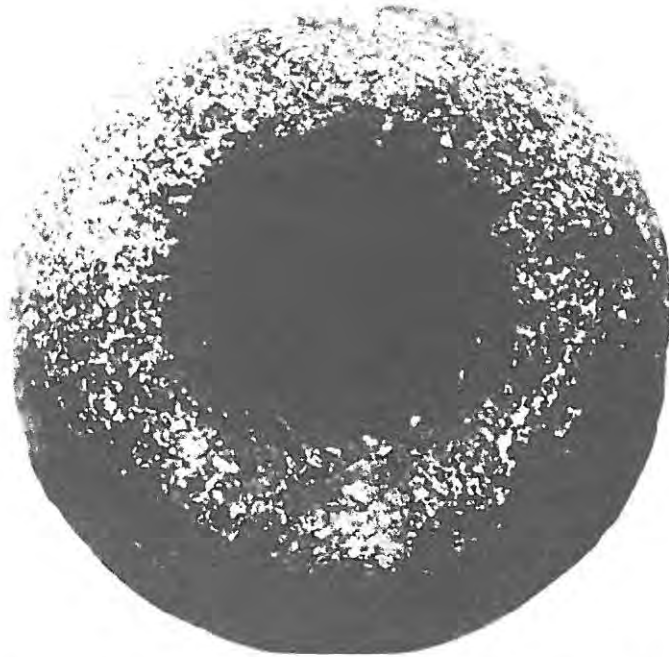


Fig. 23. A bored stone weight which was attached to a digging stick.



Fig. 24. Women with collecting bags and weighted digging sticks. Note the wedge inserted on the underside of the bored stone weight in order to keep them secure while digging.

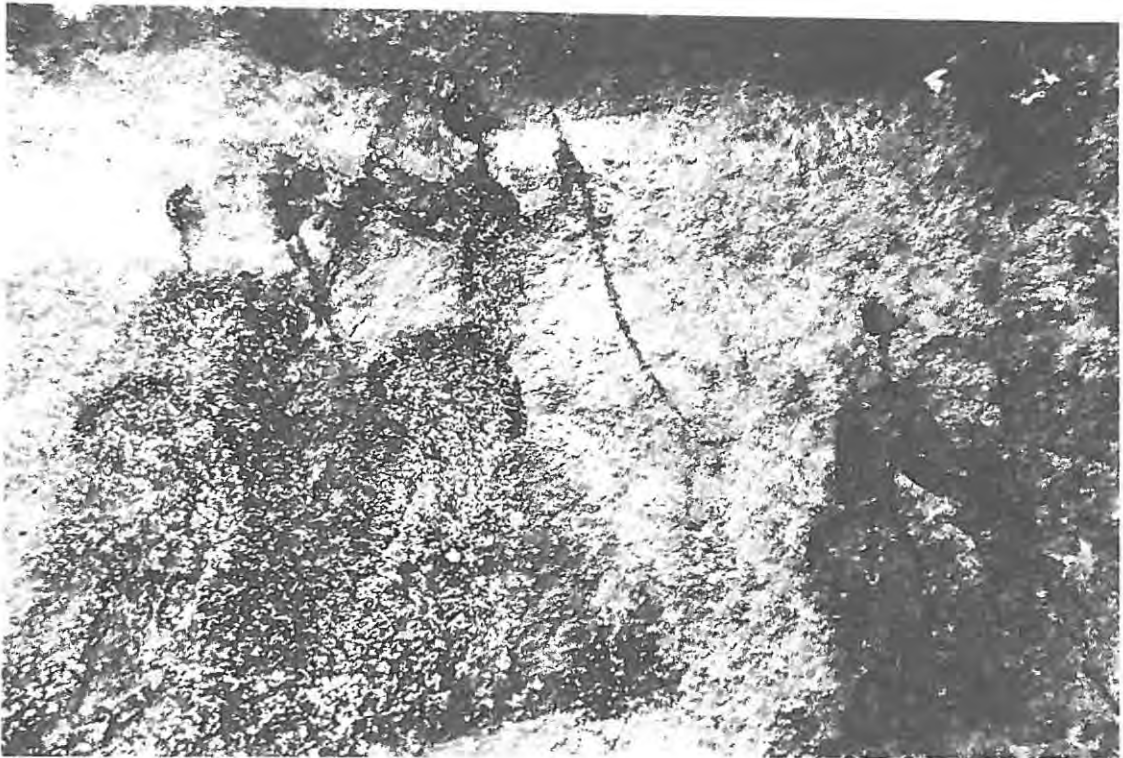


Fig. 25. Three steatopygous women wearing front and back aprons carry long sticks curved at the lower end. Although many authors have suggested these sticks to be digging sticks, they are more likely dancing sticks. The central woman holds two sticks, probably symbolising eland horns.

bulbs, tortoises, etc. are ritually low in status. They provide the everyday subsistence base for the band, and this food is not shared outside the immediate family. However, the men's role is to hunt and provide meat which is ritually high in status and is shared amongst the whole band. This is not an everyday occurrence. These roles are manifested in the paintings which show ritual trance scenes. Women provide the base for the trance dance by clapping and singing. Men provide the more important ritual focus of the dance. Men do the dancing and for the most part, the trancing as well. Therefore, the trance ritual depicted in the paintings supports and emphasizes the division of labour values in food production. Thus painting played an important role in maintaining the social order of the band (see Fig. 31.).

#### DANCES

Among human activities, dances played an important role. Dances were actually witnessed by early travellers and many are recorded in the paintings. Among the large variety of different dances depicted, all are distinctly ritualistic in character.<sup>1</sup> Many of the spontaneous category of dances relate to events in the lives of animals.

It is now well established that many illiterate people express their thoughts metaphorically through representing the animal world in terms of social relations; they see

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1. Schapera, I. The Khoisan People of South Africa, p. 202.

in animal behaviour oppositions and correlations, exclusions and inclusions, compatibilities and incompatibilities relative to their own set of values.<sup>1</sup>

These dances are instrumental to the re-affirmation of their social cohesion.

A fine example of a 'baboon dance' is depicted in a sandstone shelter situated high on Mpongweni mountain. The central figure in this dance scene is represented as a baboon who mimes the 'actions and droll grimaces of rival baboons, springing, gambolling and grimacing like a troop of excited simiadae.'<sup>2</sup> Many of the figures surrounding the central baboon figure carry sticks and wear feathers or horns on their heads. At the lower left a woman with a baby on her back stands clapping as she watches a group of three women on the far left which appear to be involved in a de-lousing mime. The woman on the far left has dots of orange and white painted on her body, possibly signifying the sweat of trance. On the upper right, another woman carries a baby on her back; she has a knobbed headdress and carries a small bag in her hand. A San informant from Gemsbok Park helps to clarify the significance of this dance:

This dance is carried out in the usual circular style, the dancers following one another around forming an ellipse rather than a circle in the sand... . As the dance warms up, one of the women...will from time to time

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1. Vinnicombe. op. cit., p. 307.

2. Stow. The Native Races of South Africa, p. 117.



Fig. 26. The central figure in this 'Baboon Dance' appears to represent a baboon-like creature with a bent tail. The creature performs in the centre while others dance around.



Fig. 27. In the same shelter as 'Baboon Dance' on Mpongweni Mountain, this acrobatic dance is found. Steatopygous figures appear, painted in orange and black. The steatopygous figure at the right holds a bow in outstretched hands. The bow is far more curved than a normal hunting bow which is only slightly arched. Although not certain, this may be a depiction of a musical instrument, due to the way it is held and the curve. To the left and right, steatopygous women clap while all the dancers, who are male, wear feathers in their hair, carry sticks and indulge in energetic dance movements. The figures hunched over are on the verge of entering a trance. The feathers, possibly symbolically, represent departing spirits, while the sticks, symbols for eland (horns), thereby compounding the potency of the animal for trance.

leave the group of clappers, cross the ring and approach the principal baboon dancer with obvious sexual movements, to which the man...responds with contortions in imitation of the baboon. On returning to the group of women and girls clapping, the women will go through the usual process of looking for vermin in their heads, on their bodies and as she gets worked up, even on their aprons. All this goes on while the rest are dancing with various contortions in imitation of the baboons.<sup>1</sup>

One of the more important ceremonial dances is that of the medicine men which involves trance performances. These dances are associated with protective medicine in which the curing of both 'psychological and physical'<sup>2</sup> ailments are performed. At this stage it is imperative to provide some ethnographic background information, pertaining to the medicine man in the role of curing, as this provides the key for understanding the rock art.

To accomplish their ends /Xam medicine-men went into trance, in which state they manipulated a supernatural potency...a supernatural power or energy which was possessed by such diverse things as eland, hartebeest, locusts, rain and girls at puberty. This power was also used by medicine men in the curing rituals and was further supposed to enable them to perform out-of-body travel. This southern San concept of power used by the medicine men and encountered in certain "strong" things is very similar to that of N/um among the !Kung... . N/um is a "supernatural potency" used by medicine men in curing. It exists in the medicine songs and plants but also in a variety of things including eland, the sun, falling stars, rain, bees, honey, blood, giraffes and fires made in certain circumstances...Medicine men

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1. Doke, C.M. Games, Plays and Dances of the Khomani Bushmen, p. 469.
  2. Vinnicombe, op. cit., p. 310.

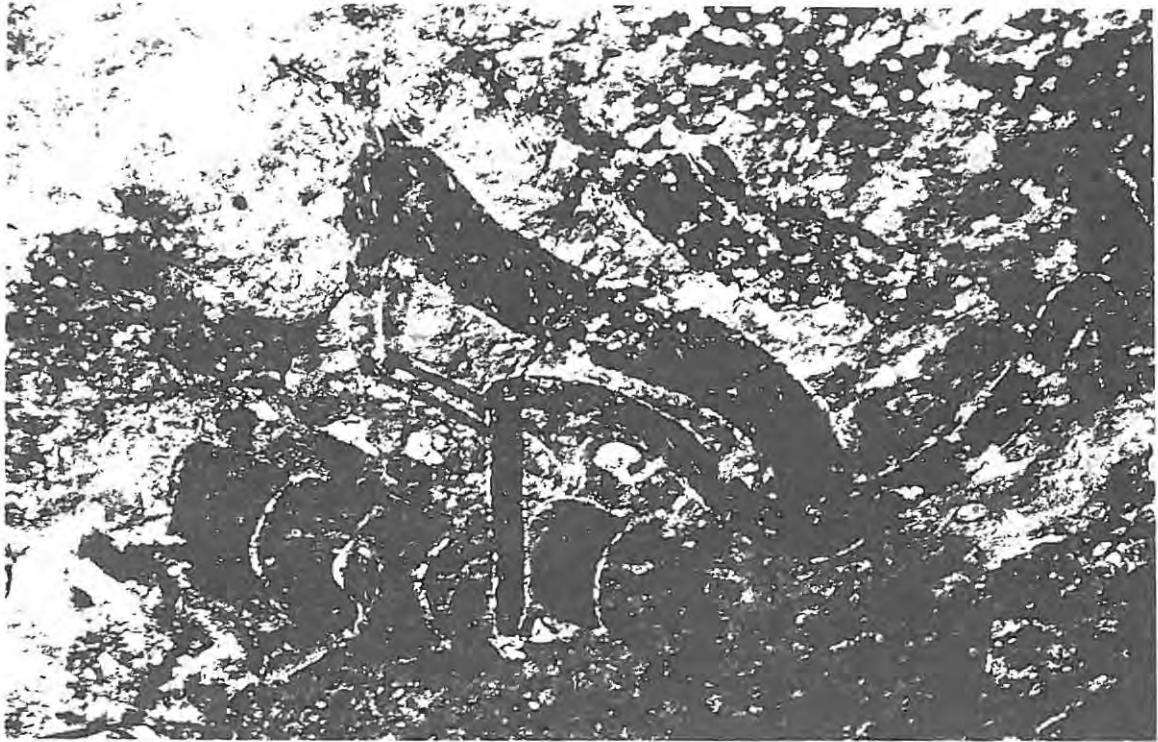


Fig. 28. This painting is executed on the very pitted surface of a large boulder in the upper Pholela Valley. The large figure with lines on the body, possibly indicating the sweat of trance, sits with legs spread-eagle. The arms of the figure are reminiscent of the forelegs of an antelope; while both legs and arms appear to have hooves in lieu of feet. Above, is a smaller figure also with hooves, lying in a foetal position. These figures represent medicine men who have taken on the characteristics of their most powerful medium, the eland, in order to go about their healing work. The kaross-clad figures with white faces have hair or ligatures hanging down the nape of their necks. They kneel on one knee while they clap and sing. Note the way they clap with their fingers apart, as they still do today in the Kalahari.

activate their N/um in order to go into trance and to cure; in the process of activation the N/um is said to be heated until it boils and appears on the body in the form of sweat.<sup>1</sup>

In the curing dance the women sit in a circle around a fire while the men dance in a line around them. Their bodies lean forward as they stamp with small steps moving clockwise and then anti-clockwise. Women provide the base for the dance by clapping the rhythm while additional rhythm is created by the male dancers who wear rattles, made from seed pods, attached to their arms and legs. The medicine dance is extremely active and tiring both 'physically and emotionally' and continues throughout the night.

The performers give everything that is in them, losing themselves completely in the unity of the group and at the end of the night's dancing are emotionally and physically drained. There is a marked feeling of peace and well being...<sup>2</sup>

Singing and dancing is believed by the San to activate a supernatural potency which makes men tremble, sweat, experience a rising sensation, bleed from the nose and finally succumb to a trance. In the paintings, figures bleeding from the nose, are indicated by vertical red lines from the nose. Nasal haemorrhaging is possibly explained by the considerable energy and stress employed in the dance performance. Depictions of nasal haemorrhaging are powerful symbols of trance and the most

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1. Lewis-Williams. op. cit., p. 77.

2. Silberbauer, G.B. Bushman Survey, p. 98.

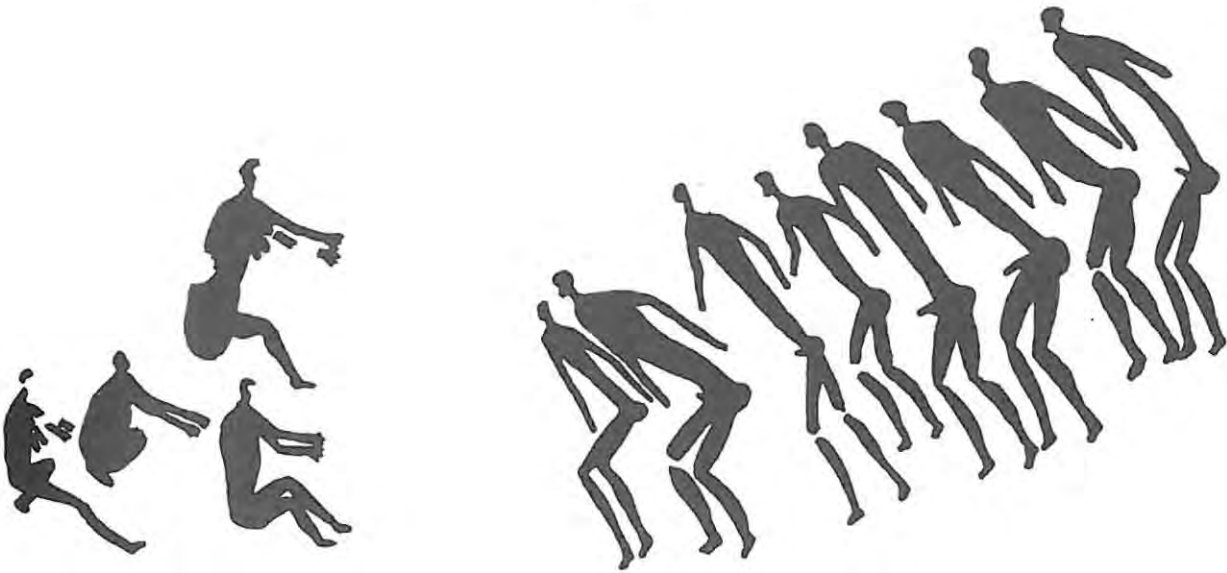


Fig. 29. A group of seated women on the left clap the rhythm of the dance. The line of male dancers lean forward as they stamp with small steps towards the group. This dance is similar to the medicine dances performed by the extant San of the Kalahari.

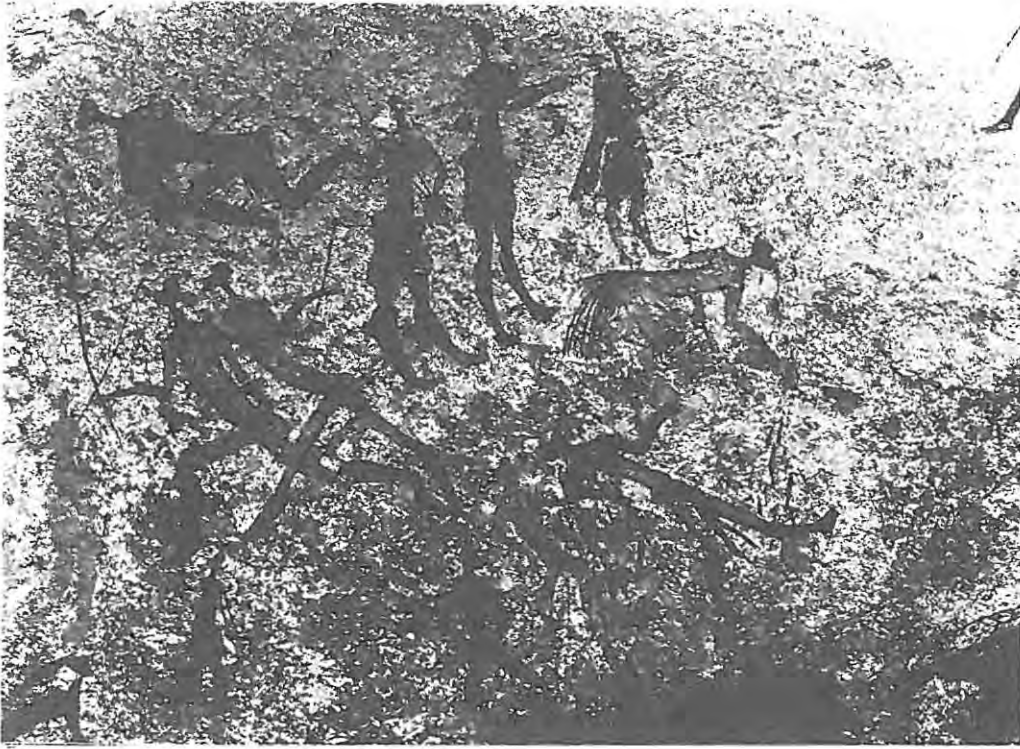


Fig. 30. The figure leaning forward as well as the reclining figure depict nasal haemorrhaging.

diagnostic feature of the medicine man in the paintings. Similar medicine dances and trances are shared by San groups throughout southern Africa. This is evident when one compares the paintings in this survey area depicting such scenes with the early written accounts of Bleek and Orpen or the modern day !Kung informants of the Kalahari. These ethnographic records provide the interpretive base upon which the recognition of the trance can be done. The painting and the ethnography are complementary expressions of a single belief system.<sup>1</sup>

Present day medicine men of the Kalahari !Kung group acquire and use their potency to dissipate social tensions and cure diseases<sup>2</sup>. About half the !Kung men and a third of the women become trancers.<sup>3</sup> The !Kung see sickness as social in origin and they accept that social tensions manifest themselves in physical disorders which have economic consequences such as non-co-operation in hunting or a threat to the practice of meat-sharing.<sup>4</sup> A nineteenth century San informant by the name of Qing from Qacha's Nek district in eastern Lesotho, described the mountain San's version of the 'medicine dance':

Kaggen<sup>5</sup> gave us the song of this dance, and

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1. Lewis-Williams. op. cit., p. 34.
  2. Marshall, L. The Medicine Dance of the !Kung Bushmen, pp. 347-381.
  3. Lee, R.B. !Kung Bushman Trance Performances, p. 36.
  4. Bieseke, M. Folklore and Ritual of !Kung Hunter Gatherers, pp. 11-12.
  5. Kaggen: The creator God of the Southern San.



Fig. 31. Medicine dance at a site on Ndhloveni Mountain. Men with bows dance towards a group of clapping women who have left their weighted digging sticks outside their shelters. The figure in the foreground holds two sticks possibly symbols for eland horns.

told us to dance it, and people would die 1. from it, and he would give charms to raise them again. It is a circular dance of men and women following each other, and it is danced all night. Some fall down, some become as if mad and sick; blood runs from the nose of others whose charms are weak, and they eat charm medicine, in which there is snake powder. When a man is sick, this dance is danced round him, and the dancers put both hands under their armpits and press their hands on him, and when he coughs, the initiated put out their hands and receive what has injured him - secret things.<sup>2.</sup>

During the curing process, medicine men take nasal blood and sweat from the head and armpits and rub this on those in attendance, whether or not they are sick. The strength of the performance is important to the whole group attending the dance. This act is believed to absorb illness which is then expelled from the back of the patient's head. The smell of the blood and sweat would keep evil things away.<sup>3.</sup>

Dancing to the Bushman,...,was not only a source of pleasure and a channel for the release of tensions and pressures; dancing could influence the forces of good and evil, thus humans, animals and natural phenomena were inextricably involved. Through the medium of dance, the Bushman passed the deepest secrets and beliefs concerning the universe, from one member of the band to another, and from one generation to the next.<sup>4.</sup>

Therefore, rock paintings of dances should not be regarded

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1. The word "die" is a metaphor for trance.
  2. Orpen, J.M. A Glimpse into the Mythology of the Maluti Bushmen, pp. 139-156.
  3. Bleek. Rainmaking, p. 379.
  4. Vinnicombe. op. cit., p. 319.



Fig. 32. This site on the Mkhomazana river is aptly named 'Bottoms Up'. To the left seated women clap while the men, who bend forward from the waist, are involved in a trance dance. This scene is painted upon tall trance figures of an earlier period.

as 'illustrations' of ritual events, but as depictions of 'values dramatised in all dances of this kind.'<sup>1</sup> Neither is their art a narrative illustration of their folklore, it is merely illuminated by it. Thus dancing and painting are both an integral part of the San's lifestyle in which they communicated their values and beliefs.

Another category of dance involves the 'medicine man of the rain' and the concept of the 'rain animal'. Man and certain animals were linked with weather and weather control. The well-being of the hunter-gatherer San was directly linked with adequate rainfall, therefore they sought to gain control over the elements. The San equated the rain with an animal, referring to the cloud as the 'body' which moves across the land on 'legs' being the columns of descending rain.<sup>2</sup> The artists' keen observation can be observed in an isolated storm on the horizon with its separate columns of descending rain which the San referred to as 'legs'. They were, however, well aware that the 'legs' they referred to were merely columns of rain. As Lewis-Williams points out:

...statements show clearly that all the elaborations of the basic analogy were and still are recognized by the San as metaphorical: they are simply ways of speaking about a natural phenomenon.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Lewis-Williams. op. cit., p. 10.
  2. Bleek. op. cit., p. 309.
  3. Lewis-Williams. op. cit., p. 104.

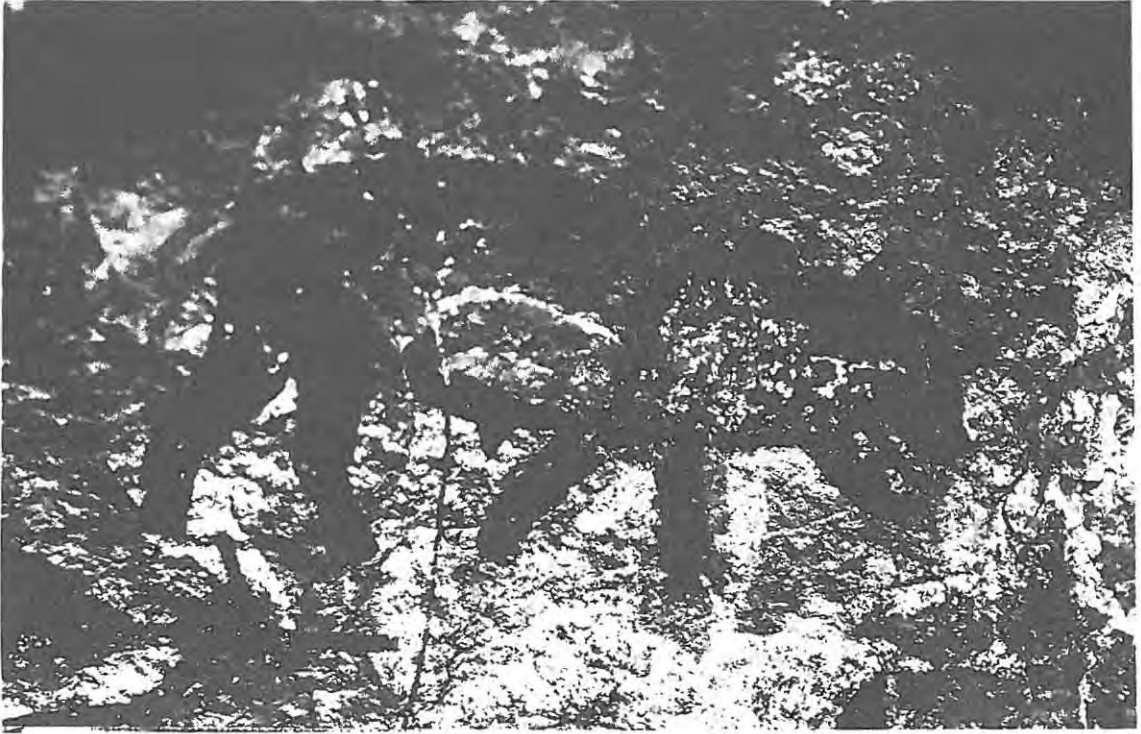


Fig. 33. 'Rain-animals' take on many different forms, varying from a hippo-like to an eland-like animal.

And that the San did not

...suppose that a rain cloud "is" an animal; on the contrary at this level, they perceive an analogical relationship.<sup>1</sup>

In the same way, a metaphorical distinction is made between male and female rain. The 'he rain' being destructive with wind, hail and lightning, while the 'she rain' was preferable, a soft soaking rain.<sup>2</sup> This concept of a 'rain animal' is based on a natural phenomenon of rainfall which is projected into a ritual sphere:

The "rain-animal" concept...took its origin in metaphors of a meteorological phenomenon and became the "object" of what may in some circumstances have been an acted out ritual, was further employed at another analogical level, the painted symbol.<sup>3</sup>

The rainmaking ritual involved the supposed capture of the 'rain-animal' by a medicine man who possessed specific powers of control over the rain. He would lasso the 'rain-animal' with a leather thong, then with the thong he would lead the 'rain-animal' across the veld to the place where the rain was required and there it would be killed.<sup>4</sup>

The finest example in this survey area comes from a site situated high on Bamboo Mountain in the Underberg district. This

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1. Lewis-Williams. op. cit., p. 104.

2. Bleek. op. cit., p. 309.

3. Lewis-Williams. op. cit., p. 108.

4. Bleek. op. cit., p. 375.



Fig. 34. This 'rain-animal' has a bird-like head and a beak with its tongue protruding. The body displays a hump on the back which is characteristic of the eland form.



Fig. 35. At the lower centre a hippo-like 'rain-animal', which is male, has its mouth open exposing its tongue. This 'rain-animal' is superimposed on human figures. To the left an eland painted in orange and yellow ochre is superimposed on human figures in dark red. This is a fine example of superimposing where the white paint has deteriorated and the underlying paintings show through. Below the 'rain-animal' is a so-called split-bodied figure (see Fig. 40) in a striding position with several small antelope to the left.

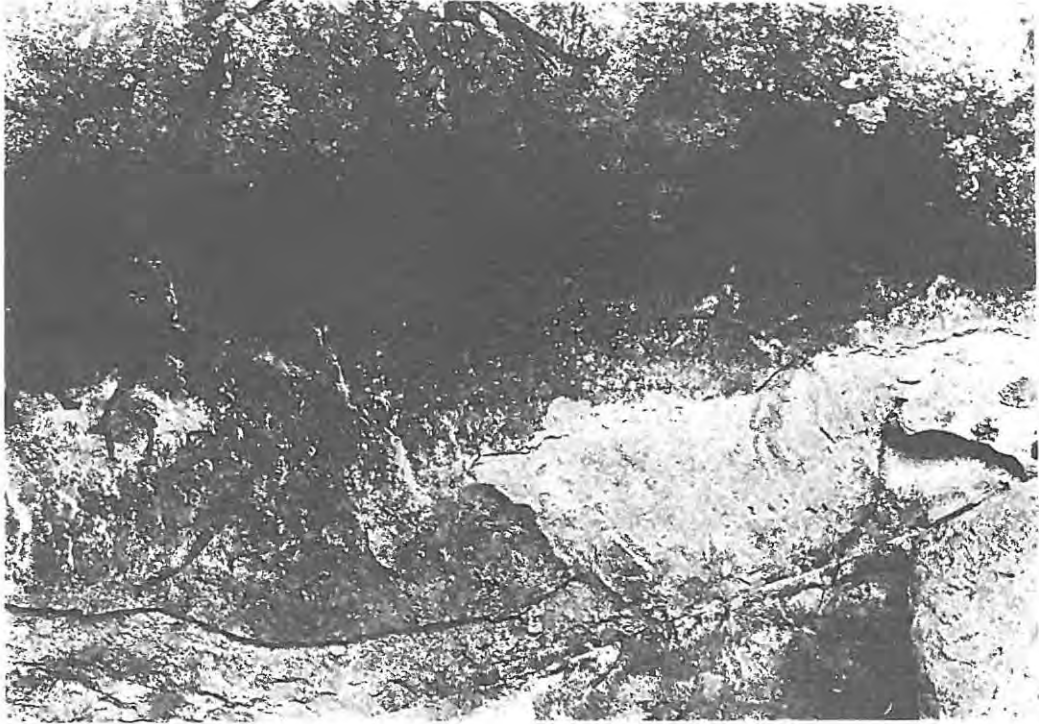


Fig. 36. A section of a trance scene where two eland-like 'rain-animals' have thongs attached to their noses and are being led. Red strokes of pigment indicating rain surround the two 'rain-animals' who are encircled by a line.

panel was removed in 1910 and is now housed in the Natal Museum. In the scene a male animal resembling a hippopotamus is led by the nose with a ligature. Red strokes around the scene suggest falling rain. The medicine men with sticks lead the 'rain animal' towards their encampment where tasseled skin bags hang on the shelter wall. One man holds out a tufted stick towards the 'rain animal's' nose, possibly buchu<sup>1</sup> or a charm to entice the animal to follow.<sup>2</sup> To the left are two additional medicine men in trance, spotted with decorative paint, indicating the sweat of trance. They bend forward bleeding from the nose, a characteristic trance posture of a medicine man asking "God" to place potency into him through the backbone.<sup>3</sup> In this scene the association of the trancing medicine men and the 'rain animal' with a stock raid of domestic animals indicates that this is not

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1. Buchu: A medicinal herb used by the San and other African tribes. Buchu has a distinctive aroma.
  2. Medicine men acquired a power over an animal by pointing at it with an arrow or stick. Pointing, it seems, was a means of hypnotic or magical control. Bleek's /Xam informant //Kabbo described a springbok hunt in which pointing was used to control game: 'He quickly burnt a stick; he pointed at the springbok with it, the springbok were coming. He said 'My SH-/OA (a charm) here I point at the springbok that are coming that they may run gently...' (See Fig. 47).  
Bleek, 1936. Beliefs and Customs of the /Xam Bushmen, part VIII, pp. 131-162.
  3. Lewis-Williams. op. cit., p. 81.



Fig. 37. This site from Bamboo Mountain was quarried in 1910 and is now housed in the Natal Museum. The length of the scene is 244 centimetres. To the left, two medicine men lean forward bleeding from the nose, while a bull-like 'rain-animal' is being led by two medicine men towards an encampment where women and children are sitting. To the right, a herd of stolen cattle and horses are herded by horsemen. Behind the horsemen, two horses are being led, laden with meat. (Photograph from Natal Museum.)

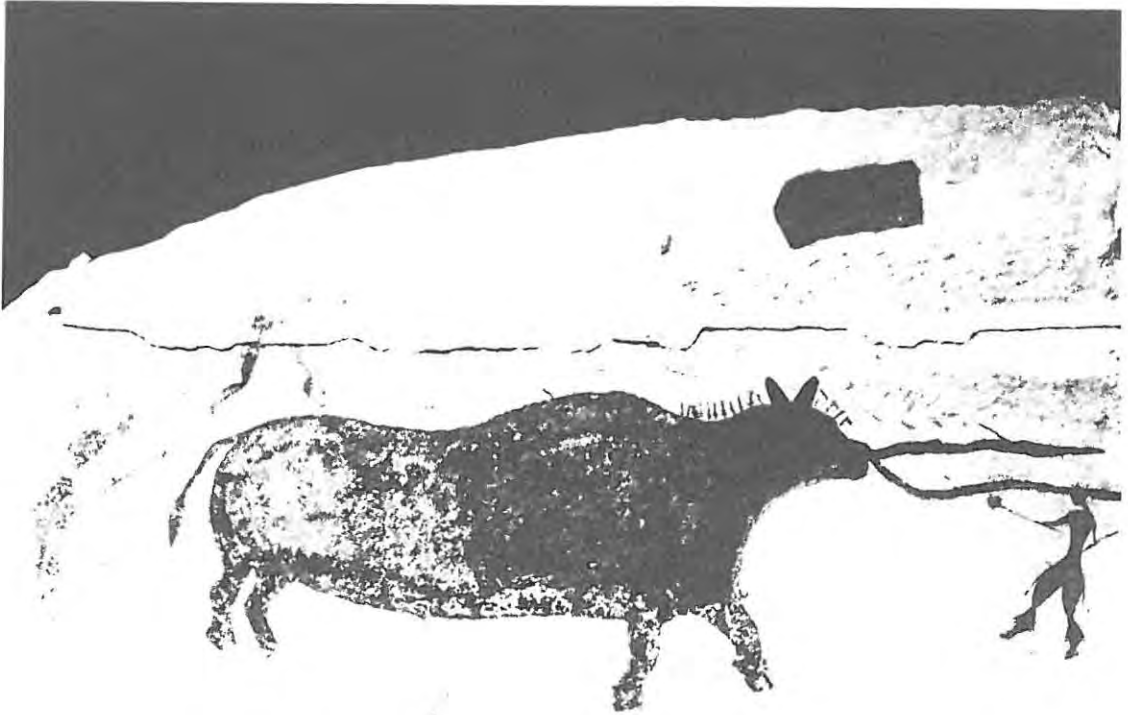


Fig. 38. Detail of the bull-like 'rain-animal'. To the left two medicine men lean forwards bleeding from the nose. Red strokes around the 'rain-animal' indicate falling rain. A medicine-man holds out a tufted stick towards the 'rain-animal'.



Fig. 39. Detail of the encampment, a domestic scene where women, some with babies, are seated. Collecting bags hang on the walls. Three cows are attached by the front leg to stakes in the ground.



Fig. 40. An example of a 'split-bodied' figure. These figures have a vertical stripe of white paint bisecting the torso. It is probable that the artist was attempting to depict the white belly of an eland viewed from the front; a conflated medicine man (eland-medicine man).<sup>1</sup> The figure is outlined in white and has a broad waistband from which an apron is suspended. A skin cloak hangs from the shoulder. There is no indication of genitalia or buttocks. This theatrical character in a highly exaggerated position, has long thin legs ending in pointed cloven hooves. The face is painted in a fugitive light-coloured pigment and has a wild fuzzy headdress which is painted in black. These out of the ordinary figures and scenes, although few in number, are wide-spread along the Drakensberg, thus demonstrating a widely held mythological concept.

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1. Lewis-Williams. *op. cit.*, p. 91.

a purely narrative scene. Lewis-Williams states that the representation of events were '...painted not simply to show how a certain occasion appeared to those who witnessed it, but to proclaim the values associated with the activity depicted and so function as symbols.'<sup>1</sup>.

#### ELAND DEPICTIONS

Among the animal depictions, antelope are most numerous; of the antelope, the eland outnumbers all the rest put together.<sup>2</sup> Animal representations tend to be more majestically portrayed; felines and smaller buck tend to be depicted in extended leaping positions.

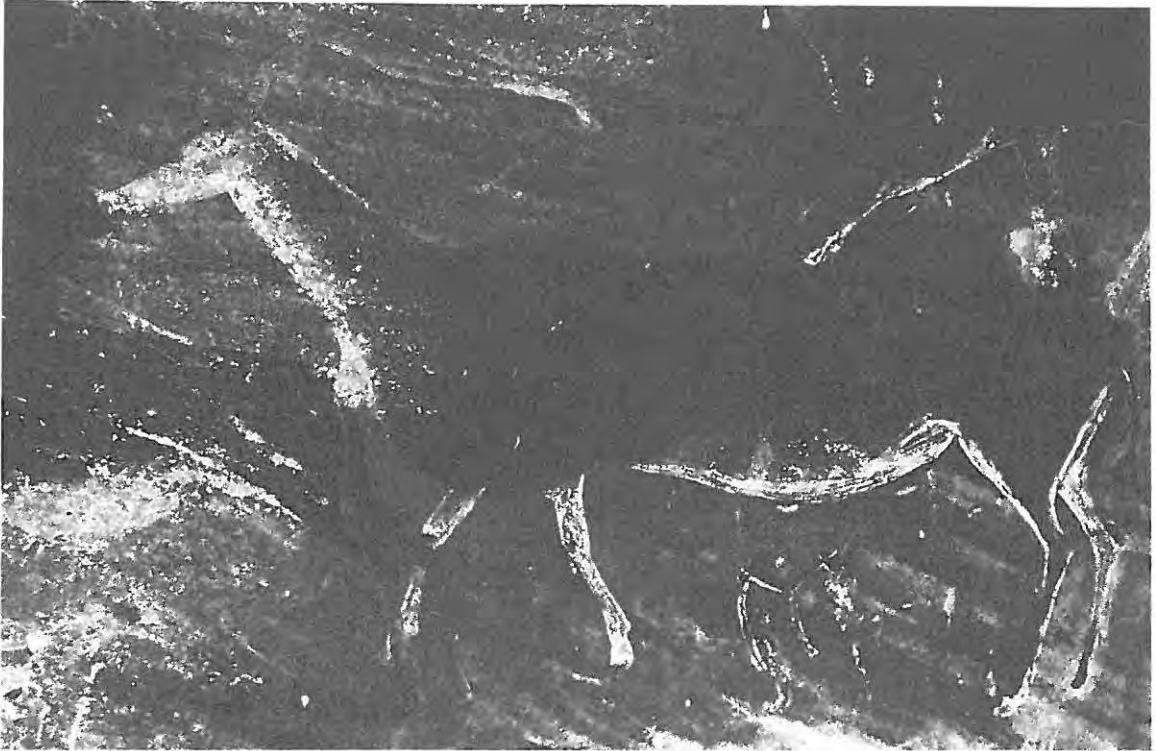
Eland are often painted in groups, with poses varying from walking, standing and lying down to running, in that order of preference.<sup>3</sup> The proportions and colours used in the portrayal of the eland are not true to life. There is a general tendency towards elongation of the neck and body. Attention was paid to detail, emphasizing features such as the mouth, eyes, ears, tail-tufts, cloven hoofs and tufts of hair on their forehead. These details were as a rule painted in black. The San display a

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1. Lewis-Williams. Ibid., p. 10.

2. Vinnicombe. op. cit., Table 3, p. 364.

3. Ibid. p. 164



**Fig. 41.** This is one of a group of very well preserved shaded polychrome eland from Mpongweni shelter which has been declared a national monument. These paintings date from about 1850.

thorough knowledge and understanding of their subject. In the paintings of eland they make use of illusionary devices such as foreshortening, perspective and different viewpoints to emphasize features and character. Illusionary devices are an essential ingredient of art in which they do not merely aim at depiction but attempt to characterize. The size of the eland tends to be exaggerated. For example an eland would appear larger than a horse and rider in the same scene. The western concept of perspective does not apply to San art as it was totally irrelevant. Early accounts of wild animal numbers in the Drakensberg mention large herds of eland and despite reports of large herds of wildebeest and hartebeest, depictions of these animals account for a fraction of recorded paintings.<sup>1</sup>

The eland in this survey area is often painted in polychrome in which they achieve a remarkably sophisticated modelled effect. Polychrome paintings of eland are regarded as the climax of San rock art. The range of colour combinations in the polychrome paintings includes red, yellow, orange, white and black. The most remarkable feature in the paintings of eland is the use of foreshortening. Such draftsmanship does not appear to have been achieved anywhere else in preliterate art. Eland are depicted from the front, back and even from above. There is a fine example depicting all of the above poses in one scene at a site called The Meads (see Fig. 42.) in the Matatiele district. This panel

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1. Vinnicombe. op. cit., p. 210.

has been removed as it was becoming obliterated by water seepage and is now safely housed in the Natal Museum, Pietermaritzburg.

It is highly probable that the San of this survey area equated their bands to that of the eland. The 'Mountain San' were known to be people 'of the eland'.<sup>1</sup> There is a similarity of movement, concentration and structure in the San bands and eland herds. For instance, after the first summer rains had come and food was plentiful, family groups of San would aggregate for a particular purpose, as do the eland (see Fig. 44). By doing this the cohesion of both human and eland societies are reassured.<sup>2</sup> In this survey area I witnessed the herding of approximately three hundred eland at the beginning of summer. The San possibly saw in the eland herd a comparison or a similarity to that of their own band survival structure, which provides some information on the seasonality of San bands. During spring and summer bands would tend to gather in the seasonally viable sourveld, which was a ritually important time. Possibly most painting was undertaken in summer.<sup>3</sup> Trancing and painting were not only important at this time of the year because the land was "fat" but also because the effect of social tension upon larger groups needed to be controlled and released. Due to the multitude of eland representations and time expended upon their execution,

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1. How, M.W. The Mountain Bushmen of Basutoland, p. 38.

2. Silberbauer. Bushman Survey, pp. 62-94.

3. Carter, P.L. Late Stone Age Exploitation Patterns, p. 57.

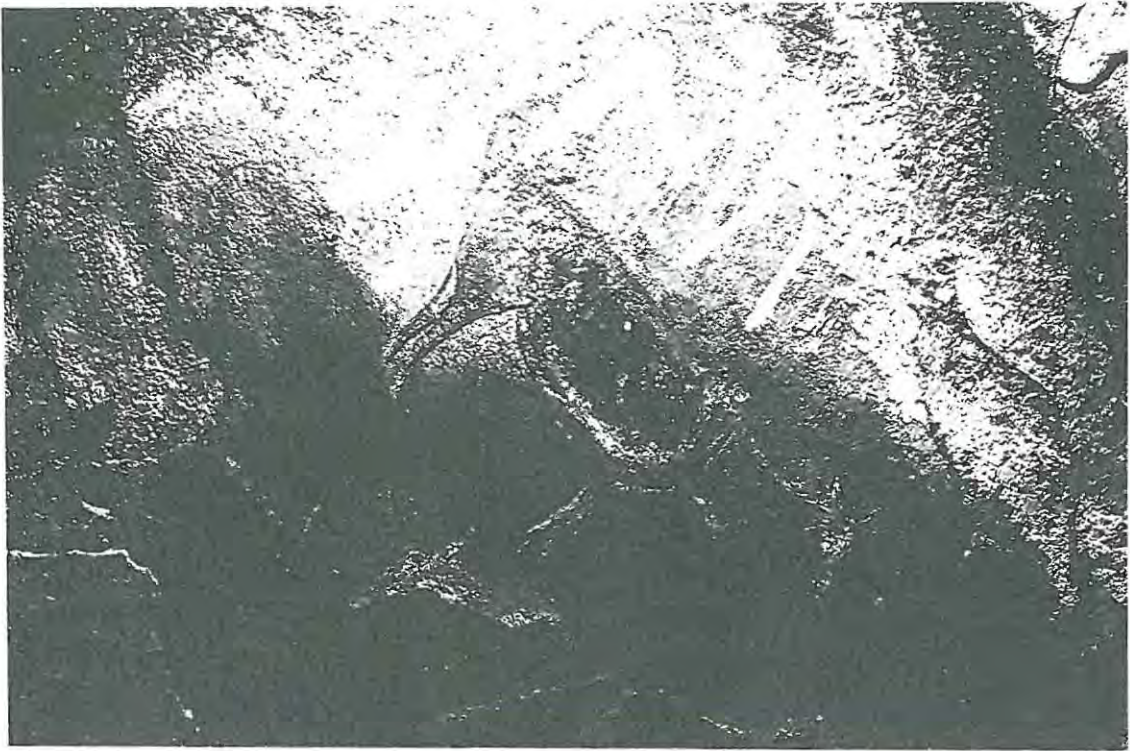


Fig. 42. This panel is from 'The Meads', a site which falls just outside the boundary of this survey area. The shelter in which it occurred is small, not large enough to shelter one person. This group of shaded polychrome eland in various postures was painted on the ceiling of an overhanging slab of rock. Note the use of foreshortening in the depictions of front and back views. In the centre an eland is viewed from above as it lies down. Magnificent modelling is applied to the eland viewed in profile.

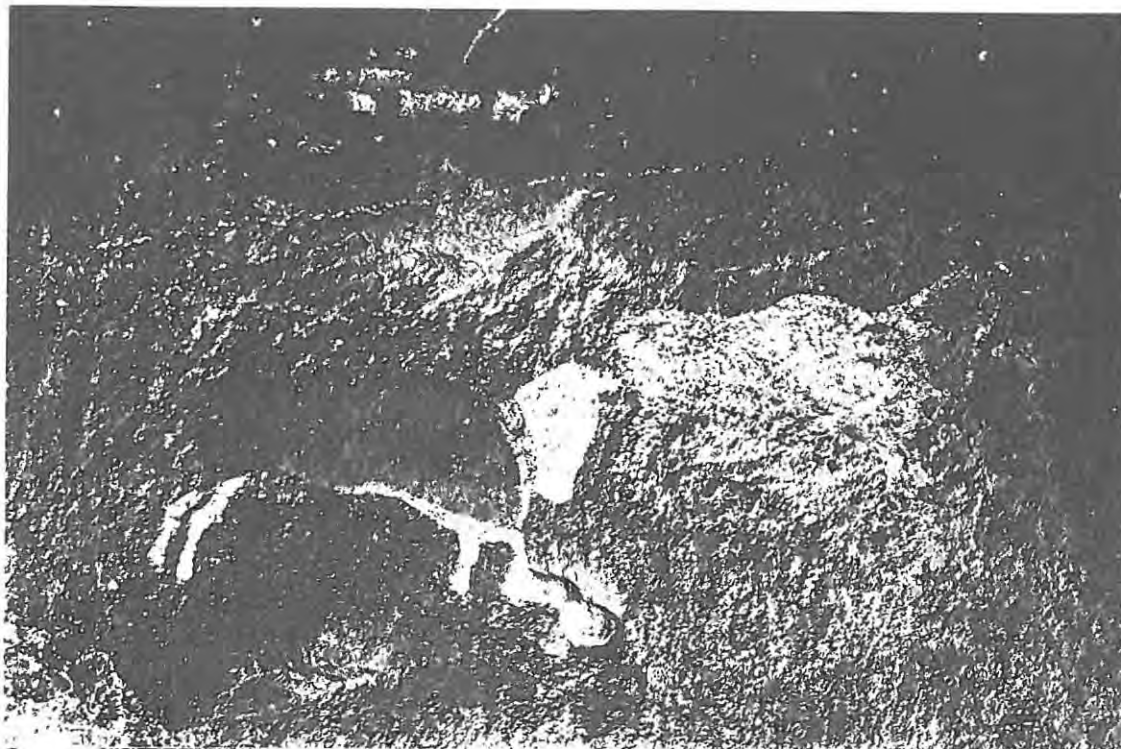
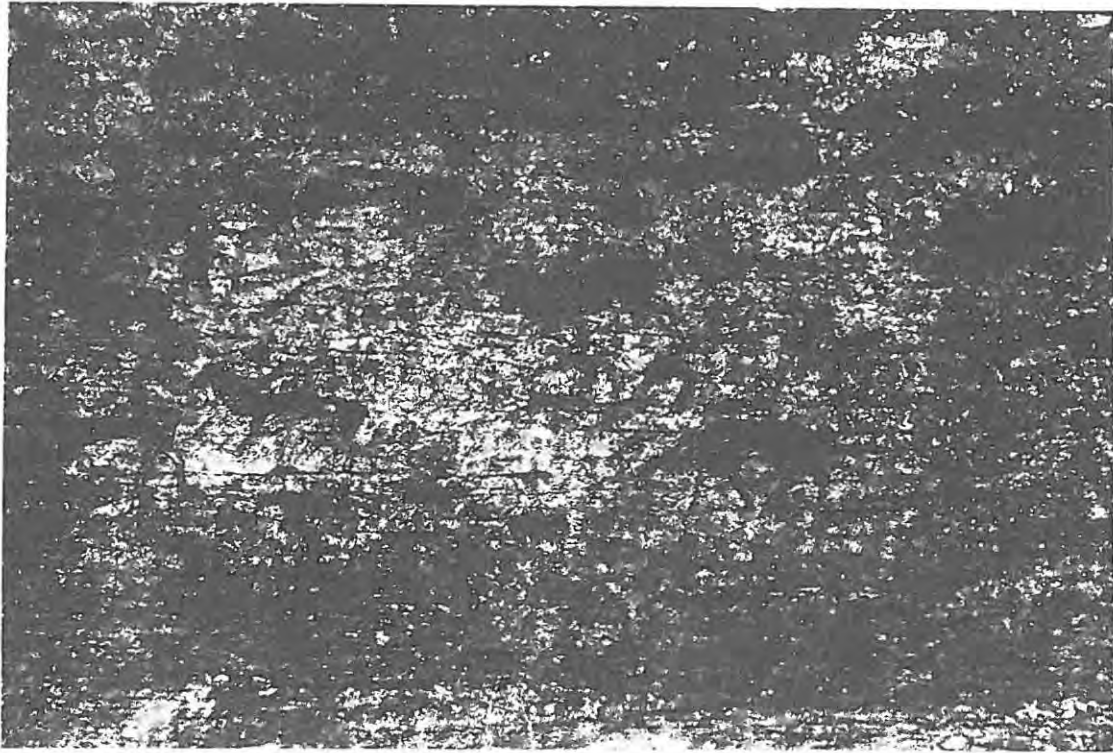


Fig. 43. This out of the ordinary scene on Bamboo Mountain depicts the eland on the left in the usual stylised colour division of orange and white. The other eland is painted in a flat greyish colour with the hump of the back and horns outlined in black. This could possibly be an incomplete eland which would back up Vinnicombe's suggestion that in some instances white paint was used as a primer. However, it is more likely deliberately painted greyish in order to represent a senior male eland with some symbolic significance.



**Fig. 44.** This site is situated close to the upper reaches of the Mzimkulu river. In the centre of the herd is an eland cow with her tail raised in the air. This is a normal behavioural pattern of the eland cow during mating season, which begins in November. At the bottom centre, an eland is depicted from the front, in which the artist makes use of a foreshortened perspective.

one must conclude that the eland played a vital role providing a ritual base around which the economy functioned.<sup>1. 2.</sup> The eland is an eminent theme throughout the Mountain San's mythology and rock paintings. An important role was played by the eland in the religious belief of the artist.

Through the eland, the Bushman established and maintained communication with his god. Through the eland, the eternal cycle of sacrificing life in order to conserve and promote life was ritually expressed.<sup>3.</sup>

The eland acquired a social value and the San maintained a ritual attitude towards this antelope. In various ritual contexts the eland acted 'as the representative of the group',<sup>4.</sup> a symbol of cohesion and permanence of the San society. Through Orpen's written accounts we learn of the close association between the eland and Kaggen, the creator god of the Southern San. Qing, a San informant, was asked as to Kaggen's whereabouts. The reply came, where he is, 'elande are in droves like cattle'.<sup>5.</sup> The function and meaning of the eland symbol:

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1. Vinnicombe. op. cit., p. 164.
  2. Excavations in some Natal shelters show that Eland bones are not common at all, thus indicating that eland did not constitute a vital foodstuff.
  3. Vinnicombe. op. cit., p. 181.
  4. Radcliffe-Brown, A.R. Structure and Function in Primitive Society, pp. 123-130.
  5. Orpen, J.M. A Glimpse into the Mythology of the Maluti Bushmen, p. 142.

...is designed to bring a cluster of values to the people's consciousness by association of ideas. The eland has diverse associations having to do with the well-being of the group; the menarche, rain, fertility, the hunter's success, eland fat, fatness of the people, plenty, social cohesion, the values of the curing rite and trance. In the "complex web of San thought and belief"...The meaning of the symbol lies in the awareness that all the contexts are related.<sup>1</sup>

Eland are also painted upside down, but these depictions account for a small percentage of the overall number of eland depictions. It is not clear whether this position is intended to represent death, as no eland seem to be clearly wounded. However, it seems as though they were intentionally painted upside down for an unknown reason.<sup>2</sup>

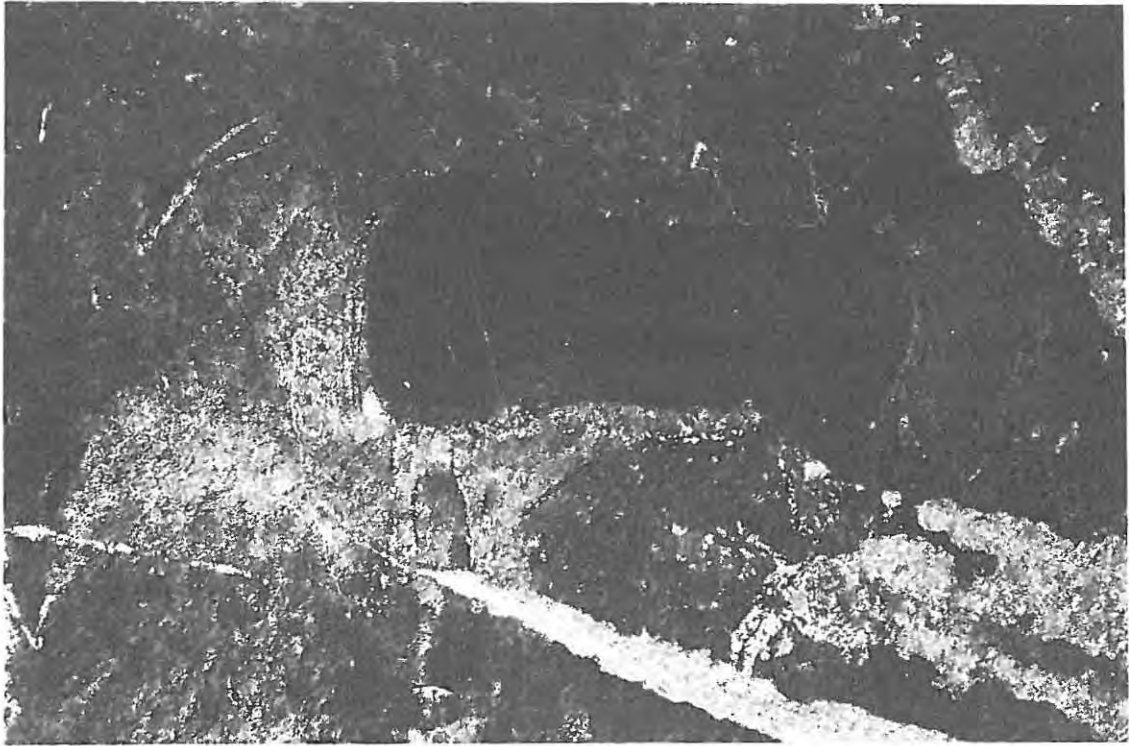
Another peculiar aspect of eland painting is that of one eland being superpositioned upon another. As much as five or six layers of superpositioning occur in southern African San paintings, while sixteen layers have been identified in one site at Tassilili, North Africa.<sup>3</sup> Often the superpositioned eland is brighter in colour: orange or vermilion. Through weathering, parts of the original older painting underneath, done in the traditional dark red pigment, are exposed. One often comes across a scene where the eland appears to have two heads or an

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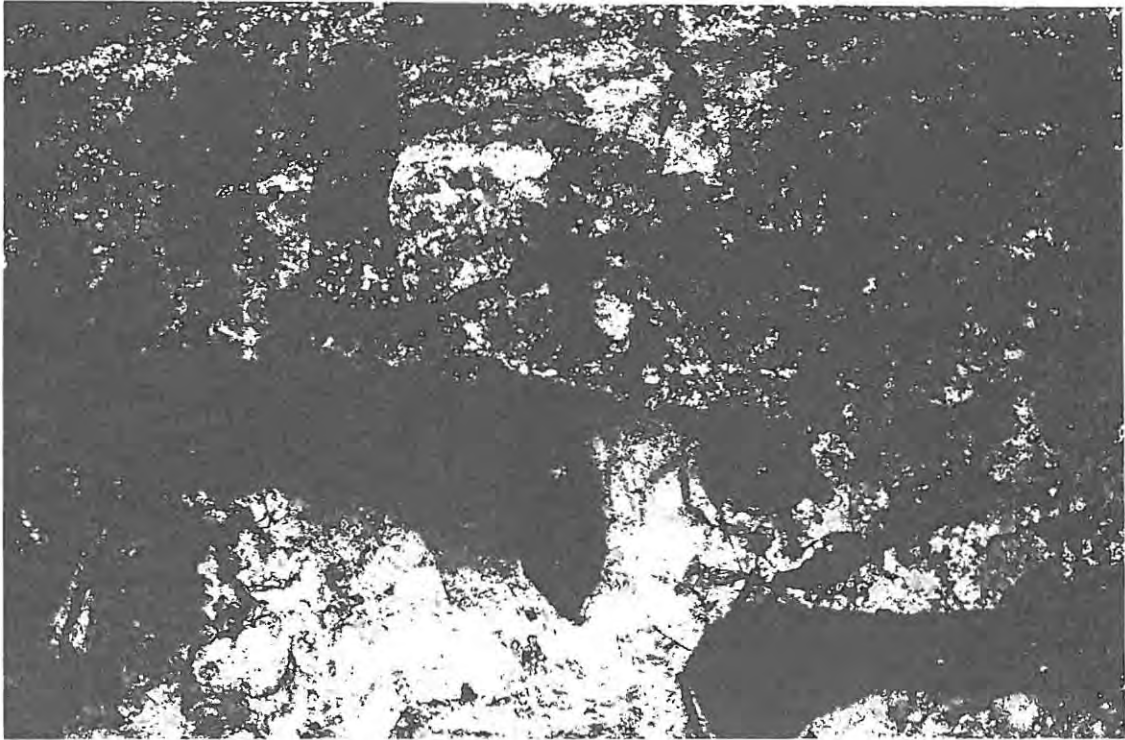
1. Marshall, L. Foreword to Believing and Seeing, p. VIII.

2. Lewis-Williams. Syntax and Function, p. 52.

3. Willcox. The Rock Art of Africa, p. 48.



**Fig. 45.** Example of superpositioning. The earlier painting of an eland is larger in size than the more recent, which is painted in a brighter pigment.



**Fig. 46.** An eland is superimposed on human figures in this site on Ikanti Mountain. To the right there is evidence of many layers of overpainting.

extra tail or legs, this being due to the practice of superpositioning. One aspect of superpositioning is that obviously not all the elements within one panel were painted at the same time, which suggests that the panel continually grew in meaning through time, as more trance experiences were added. Lewis-Williams<sup>1</sup> suggests that the panel as a whole made statements on various levels to produce a complex reaction in the original San viewers. The eland is normally the animal connected with superpositioning, although in isolated instances rhebuck have been noted.<sup>2</sup> The superposition generally consists of eland on eland or an eland on a human figure.<sup>3</sup>

Many theories exist as to the reason for the superpositioning phenomenon. In 1905 Stow<sup>4</sup> was of the opinion that the artist's painting was respected by his contemporaries and that no one would attempt to deface the painting. Only after the memory of the original artist had faded would an aspirant artist attempt to display his own talents by unceremoniously painting upon that of his predecessor. The possibility does however remain that the artist painted over his own painting of which Stow makes no mention. Vinnicombe's investigations along the Natal Drakensberg found the superpositioned paintings to be

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1. Lewis-Williams. op. cit, p. 58.

2. Ibid, op. cit, p. 58.

3. Ibid, Superpositioning in a Sample of Rock Paintings from Barkly East District, p. 94.

4. Stow. op. cit, p. 26.

inconsistent in relationship to the subject matter, size and colour. She indicates in her findings '...that the superpositions are roughly contemporaneous within the area surveyed, and does not argue for a development of various painting styles and techniques in succession over a lengthy period.'<sup>1</sup> Wilcox, in his findings, points out that the superpositioned paintings are quite random and only constitute 8.8 per cent of the total known paintings in southern Africa.<sup>2</sup>

Lewis-Williams states that superpositioning was undertaken with deliberate associations in mind. He raises the questions as to whether superpositioning was deliberate and, if so, what influence did the earlier painting have on the artists' choice. His response was affirmative, after studying numerous instances of superpositioning in the Giants Castle and Barkly East areas of the Drakensberg. At Barkly East 20.6 per cent of the total number of eland are involved in superpositioning.<sup>3</sup> He informs us that:

From the apparent random painting of one representation upon another there has emerged a clear pattern, a form of syntax. This suggests that there is far more in the art than the simple admiration of beauty for its

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1. Vinnicombe. The Recording of Rock Paintings, p. 284.
  2. Willcox. op. cit, p. 260.
  3. Lewis-Williams. Believing and Seeing, p. 21.

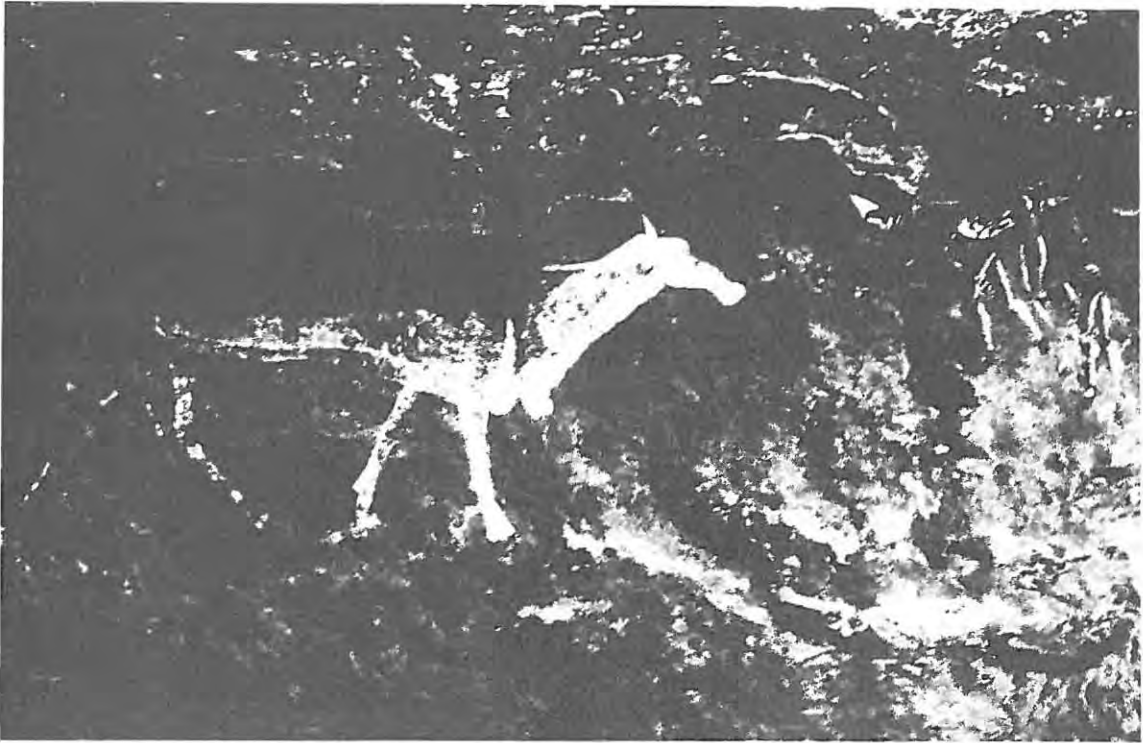


Fig. 47. This scene is possibly explained as a medicine man in a trance who possesses an intense concentration of eland potency. In trance his spirit leaves his body and the spirit then performs the task undertaken by the medicine man in controlling the eland potency. The medicine man holds an object to the eland's nose, possibly buchu, which is expressing an aspect of San beliefs about 'control' of antelope.

own sake. The technique was used by the painter to place his symbols in a relationship that is not the same as the more familiar scenic combinations.<sup>1</sup>

One of the more interesting explanations relating to superpositions which could possibly be related to San painting is found in an interview with an Australian aborigine. When posed with the question as to why they paint one painting upon another, he explained that it was 'a strong place to paint!'<sup>2</sup>.

#### 'FLYING BUCK'

A small proportion of paintings depict scenes of "fantasy" figures. In the Underberg district samples of over eight thousand paintings, there are twenty so-called 'flying buck' or 'ales'<sup>3</sup> and one hundred and fifty-five human figures with animal attributes.<sup>4</sup>

These depictions do not resemble any actual existing creature: the elements of one icon are combined with the elements of another to produce a symbol.<sup>5</sup>

These creatures include human-like forms with antelope hoofs and heads in a crouching position with arms flung backwards, in a wing-like position simulating flying. Then there are antelope

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1. Lewis-Williams. Syntax and Function, p. 59.

2. Related by H.C. Woodhouse in a recent radio interview.

3. Ales: Latin for (adjective) winged or (noun) a fowl or a bird.

4. Vinnicombe. People of the Eland, p. 239 and p. 323.

5. Lewis-Williams. Believing and Seeing, pp. 11-13.

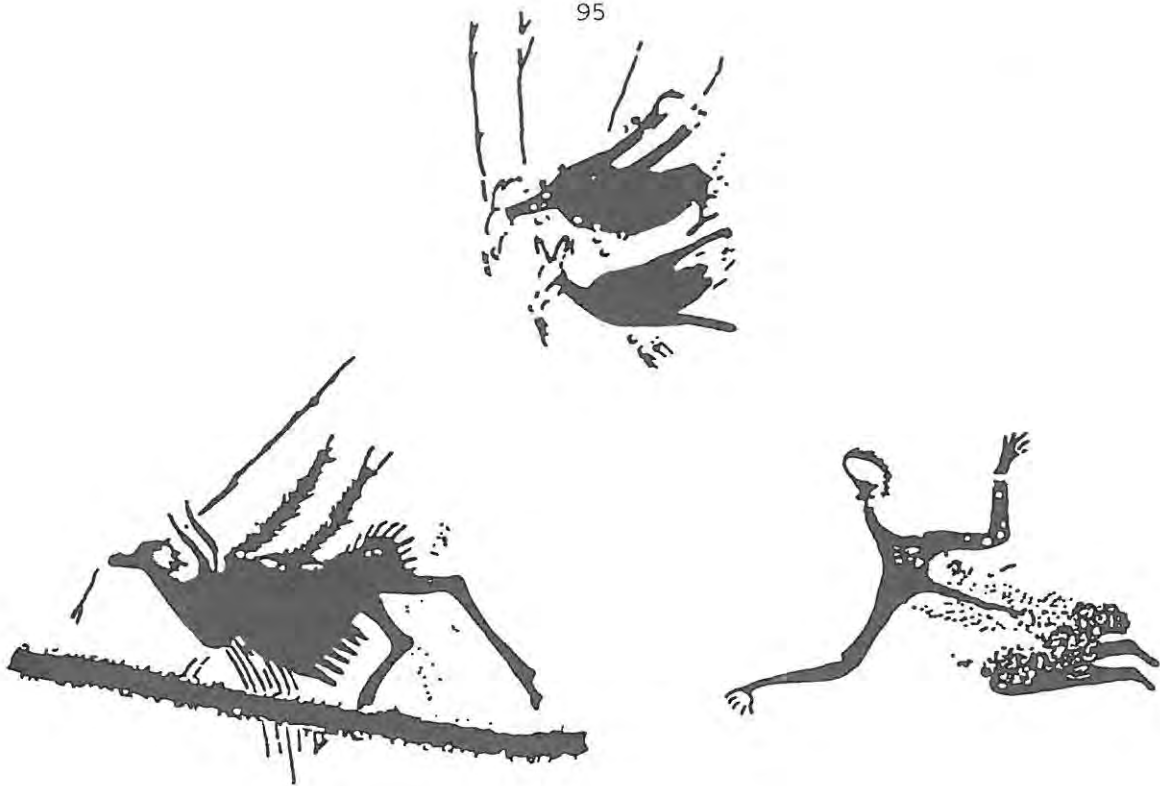


Fig. 48. Examples of 'Flying Buck'.

forms with streamers and bird-like forms with bird-like tails, with or without legs, which display a variety of wing shapes. San folklore is filled with legends of human to animal transformations and vice versa. Antelope-headed winged creatures are occasionally linked to hunters or to dead and dying figures.<sup>1</sup>

According to legend a special wind was created when a person died or when an animal was killed.

The wind was formerly a man. He became a bird (therefore he is tied up in stuff. The skin is that which we call stuff) and he was flying, while he no longer walked, as he used to do!<sup>2</sup>

Vinnicombe indicates that there is a connection between spirit, wind and birds which are symbolically connected with death in both human and animal. She suggests further that these representations are:-

...the thought process of man in general not only of the Bushman in particular, birds occupy an intermediary position between the supreme spirit (sky) and human beings (earth). That winged creatures should be used as a symbol of mediation between life and death, between the physical and the spiritual, would seem to be an inherent tendency of the human mind.<sup>3. 4.</sup>

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1. Lee, D.N. and Woodhouse, H.C. Art on the Rocks of Southern Africa, p. 135.
  2. Bleek and Lloyd. op. cit, p. 107.
  3. Vinnicombe. op. cit, pp. 241-242.
  4. Levi-Strauss: Totemism, pp. 152-153.



Fig. 49. Therianthropes, depicting the conflation of human form and eland. These are medicine men in trance, possessing eland potency.

Paintings of humans with animal attributes are referred to as therianthropic figures. This conflation is generally recognizable as a human form but is painted with animal legs, hooves and head. A !Kung informant mentioned that '...the so-called "antelope-men" are in fact "eland-men".'<sup>1</sup> Vinnicombe has suggested that the way the paintings relate medicine men to animals by conflation suggests that these therianthropes may represent the spirits of the medicine men.<sup>2</sup>

...if it is accepted that...therianthropic figures represent game sorcerers...the ethnographic evidence makes it clear that the role of the game sorcerer was to exert power over game through close identification with game.<sup>3</sup>

#### SMALL ANTELOPE

Small antelope constitute a modest percentage of animal depictions, being second in numerical importance to the eland.<sup>4</sup> Due to the elongation of the proportions, the lack of horns and the arbitrary use of colour, accurate identification is not always possible. The most common antelope encountered in the Drakensberg today is the Vaal Rhebuck or Mountain Reedbuck. Small antelope are depicted in pairs or family groups usually painted in red and

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1. Lewis-Williams. op. cit, p. 65.
  2. Vinnicombe. op. cit, pp. 332-334.
  3. Ibid, p. 334.
  4. Ibid. op. cit, Table 3, p. 364.

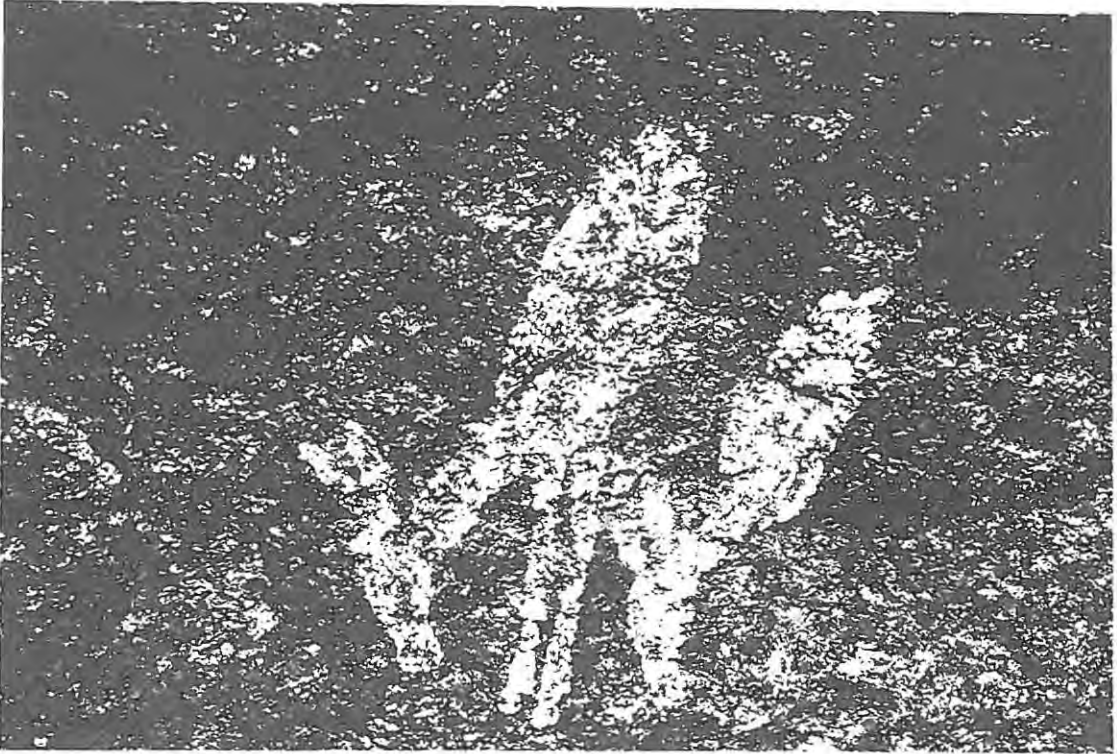


Fig. 50. A pair of rhebuck executed in a flat white pigment. No attempt has been made to indicate the hind legs, possibly similar to 'flying' or trance buck.

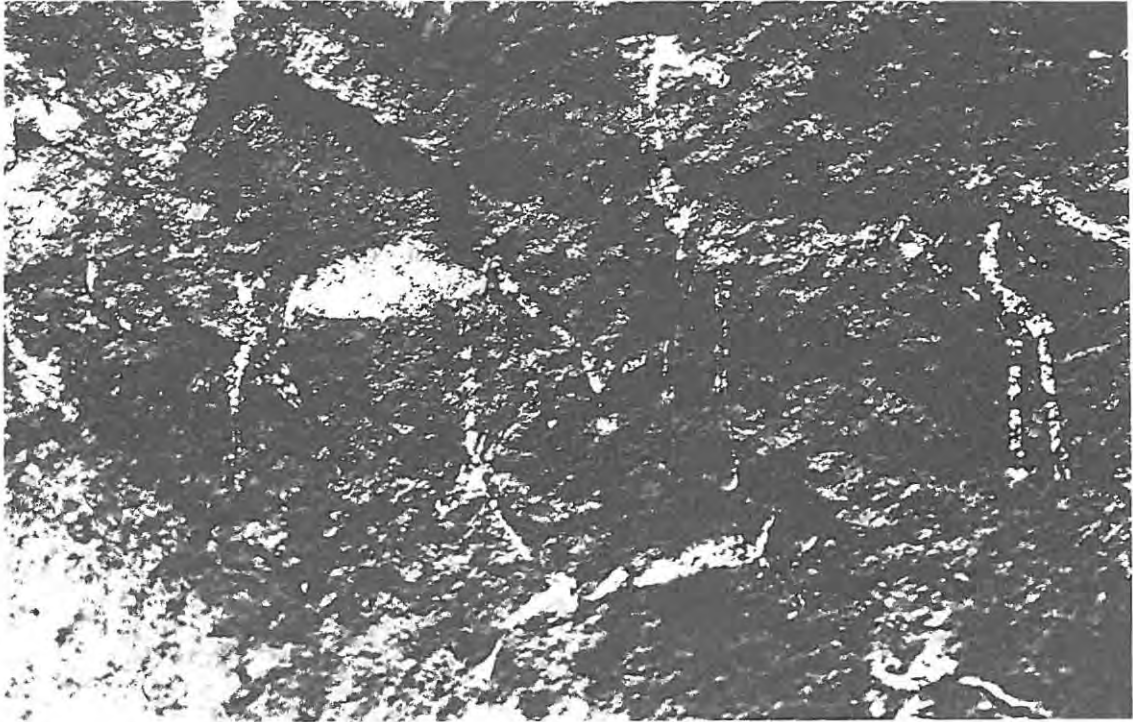


Fig. 51. Delicately painted mountain reedbuck in various attitudes executed in white and red.

white. White is used for the belly, neck, legs and ears, while red is used for the head, shoulders, back and rump. Occasionally these antelope are executed in a flat white pigment. Vinnicombe suggests that if the eland symbolised the San band then the rhebuck represents the family unit.

...rhebuck and eland paintings are expressing different but complementary aspects of Bushman social life... . Eland may have represented the highest moral and social order in the Bushman society, but the rhebuck represented the basic family unit upon which that order was dependent.<sup>1</sup>

#### SERPENTS

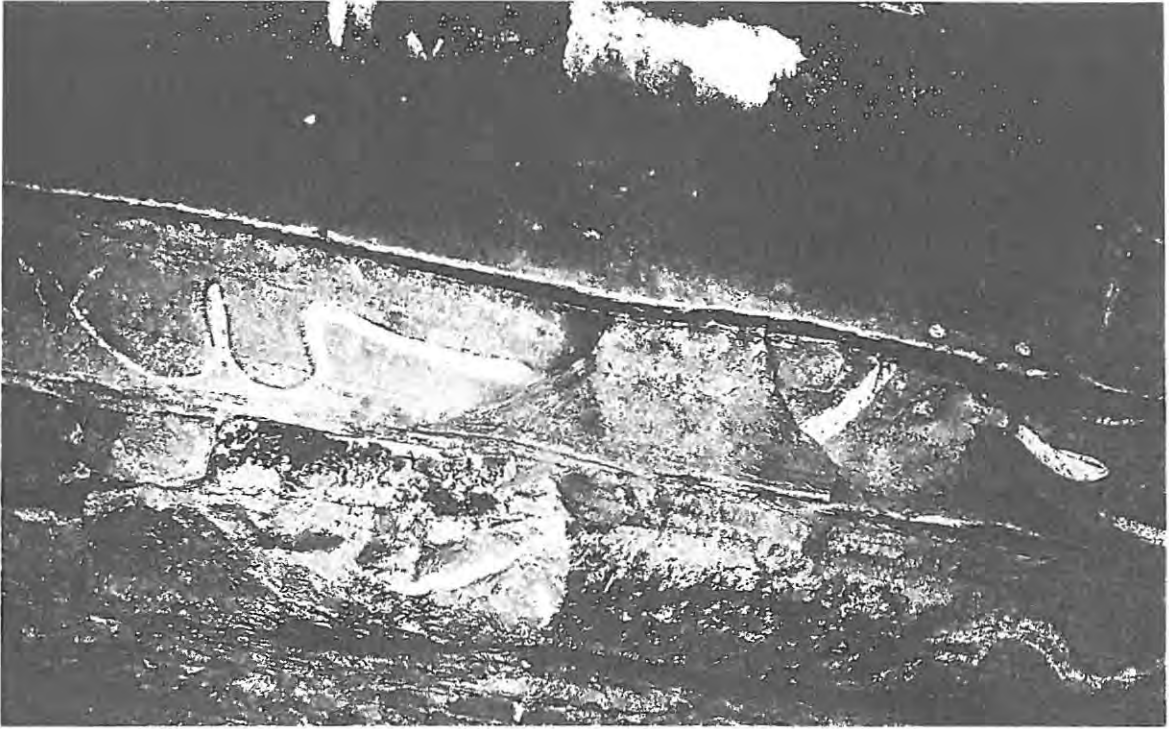
In this survey area I came across three sites with serpent-like creatures. These creatures may be connected with rainmaking rituals or possibly the practice of milking snakes for venom, although these beliefs remain imperfectly understood. A legend narrated by Qing, a San informant from eastern Lesotho, may throw some light on the significance of serpent-like creatures:

And the snake came out of the water and raised his head, and looked warily and suspiciously around, and then he glided out of the snake's skin and walked...<sup>2</sup>.

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1. Vinnicombe. op. cit., p. 198.

2. Orpen. op. cit., p. 146.



**Fig. 52.** This antelope-headed serpent is 1,52 meters long. Natural features of the rock face have been incorporated into the painting of this spotted serpent, making part of the body appear to be behind a rock. The tail seems to curl back on itself. To the right and below are fragments of two other snakes. This site is situated on the upper reaches of the Mlambonje river, a tributary of the Mzimkhulu. Serpents are not accurately portrayed, therefore identification of a particular species is not possible. Snakes are usually painted with spots or stripes and, more often than not, take on imaginary facial features of other animals like an antelope head, occasionally with tusks or a horn.

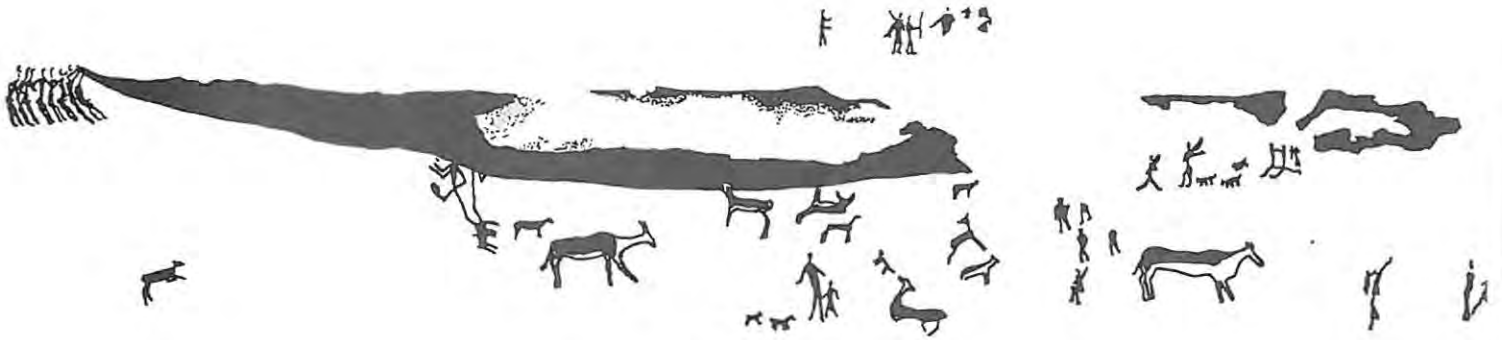


Fig. 53. This tapering object measures 2,75 meters, almost the total length of the overhang in which it occurs. Eight naked men tug at the tail of what appears to be a serpent. This serpent-like creature probably represents a mythical snake. Eland, small antelope and human figures appear above and below the serpent, all of which are painted in dark red and white. On the exfoliated area, hunters with three dogs are painted in yellow ochre. This is of a later period.

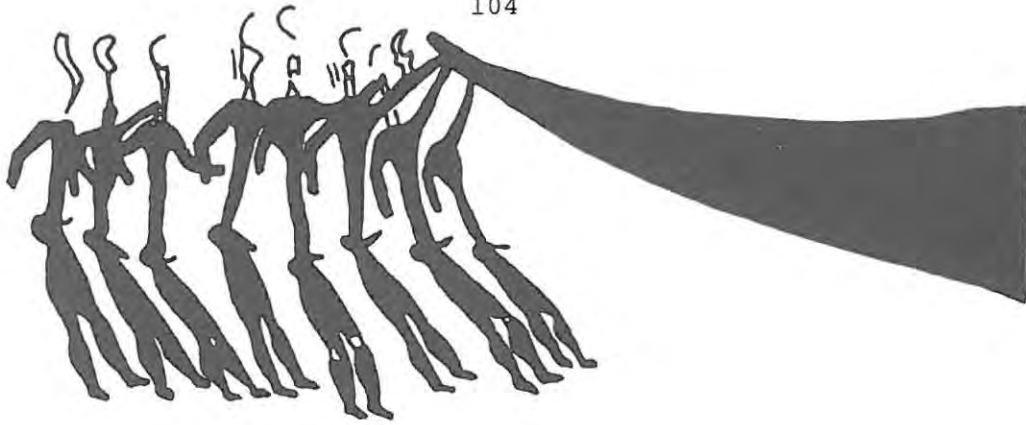


Fig. 54. Detail of the eight men tugging at the serpent-like creature.

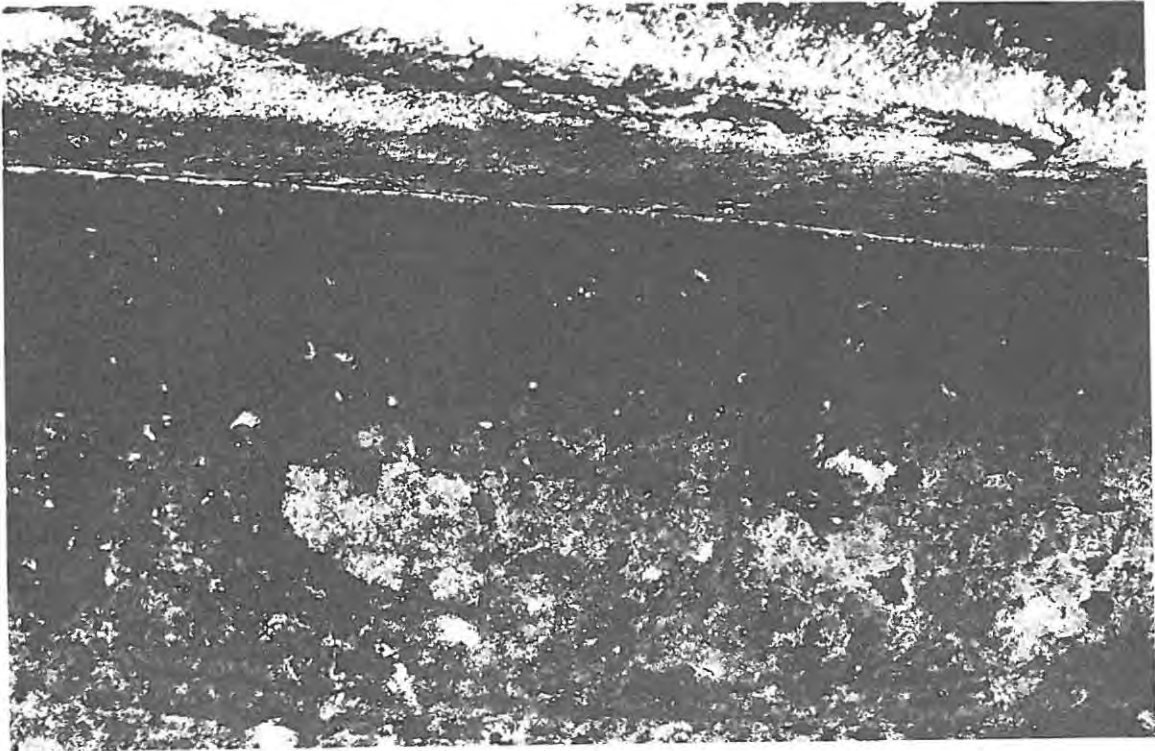


Fig. 54(a). This is a highly complex scene. The eland whose head and neck is no longer visible, is surrounded by curious figures. A horizontal human figure above the eland's back, appears to have eland horns, holds onto a thong which is looped around the eland's neck. The eland has jerked its head and pulled the man holding the thong from his feet, demonstrating the danger of the thong breaking. A strange object with a triangular head is impaled in the neck of a slug-like creature and also in the foreshortened eland below the captured one. Lewis-Williams has suggested that this scene depicts "...the first stage of rain-making ritual sequence, the apprehension of the rain-animal - in this case an eland."<sup>1</sup> If this scene is indeed connected with the rain-making rituals, then the slug-like creature may be one of !Khoa's creatures, the rain's caterpillar, and is associated with the apprehended eland. !Khoa (the rain) was thought to possess an assortment of creatures, including frogs and snakes.

1. Lewis-Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

FELINES

Leopards and lions which once roamed freely along the Drakensberg escarpment, are now locally extinct. They were the only predators of man and game that inhabited this area. Through Bleek and Lloyd's collections of San folklore we learn that felines occupied a position in both their fables and astrological mythology.

Lewis-Williams is of the opinion that these scenes should not be taken at face value. He suggests that:

The lion was the symbol of antisocial possibilities of trance, while the antelope was the symbol of socially beneficial medicine man. ...symbolized by the way he is pursuing and attempting to bite his companions. ...the uncontrollable and dangerous possibilities of trance were symbolized by "angry" lions, members of the antisocial taxon "pawed creatures".<sup>1</sup>

DOMESTIC ANIMALS

From about 1850 onwards domestic animals were depicted on the walls of shelters. Among the domestic animal depictions, horses are the most numerous, then cattle and dogs in that order.<sup>2</sup> Both horses and cattle are painted in orange, white or

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1. Lewis-Williams. op. cit., p. 97.

2. Vinnicombe. op. cit., p. 155.

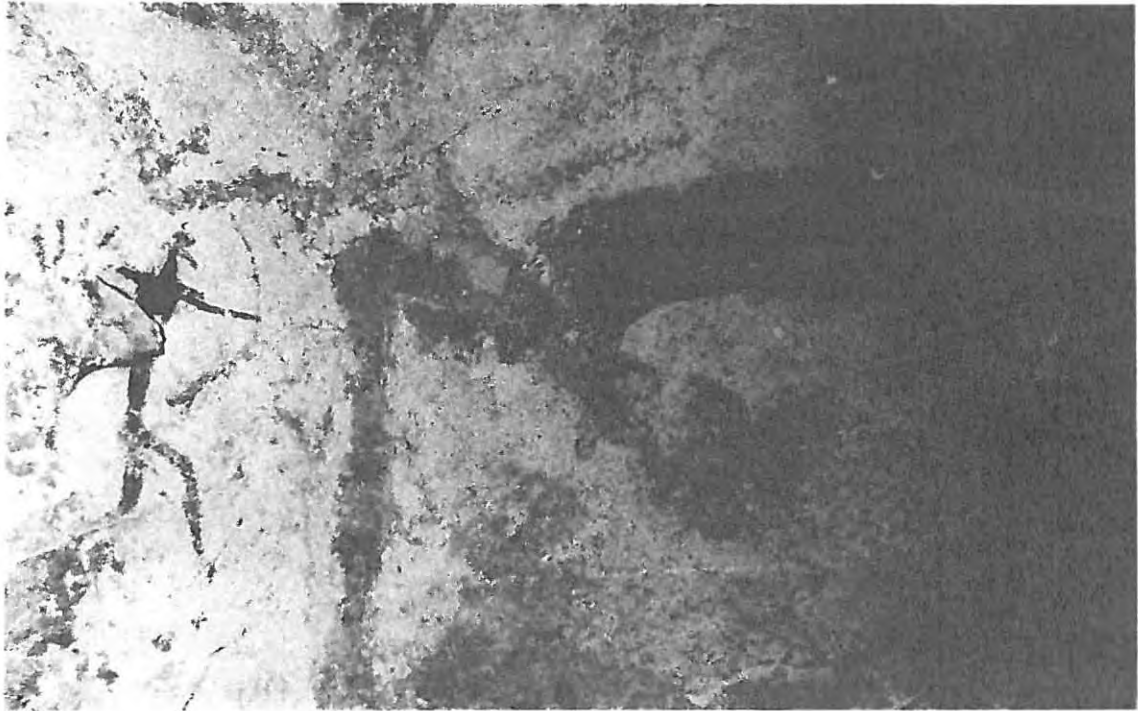


Fig. 55. A man with a bow and arrow confronts a feline.

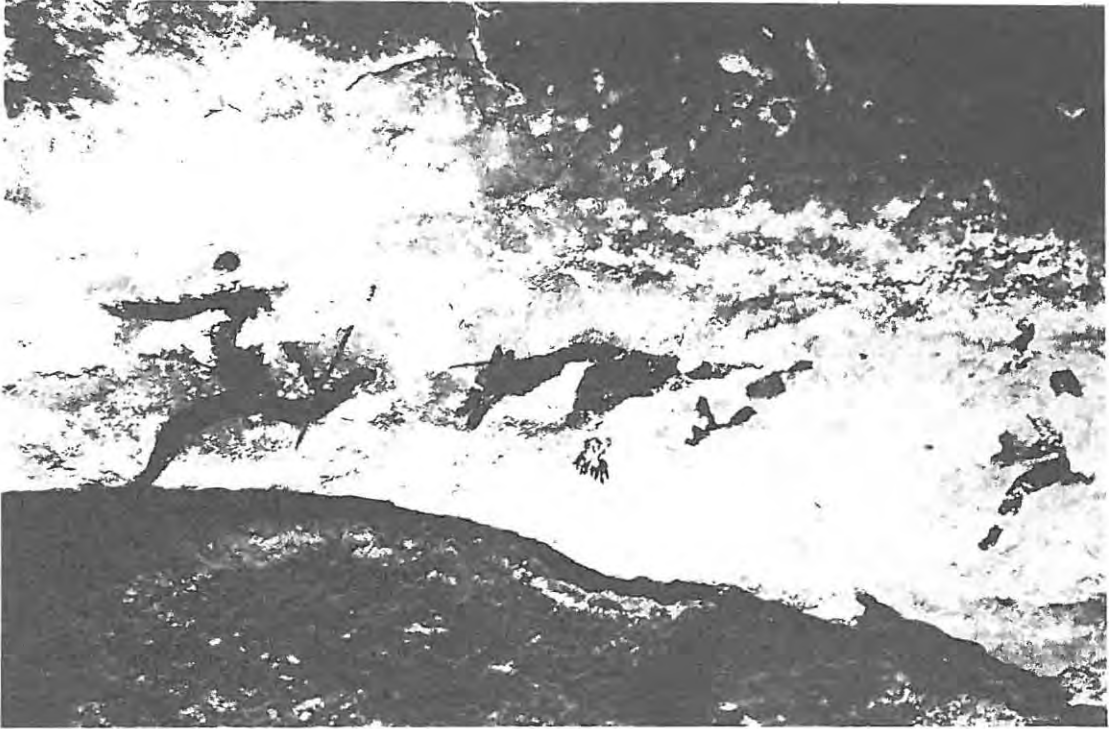


Fig. 56. A pawed animal exposing its claws, chases a man, while another figure runs behind.



**Fig. 57.** The introduction of the horse by the European revolutionised the San's way of life. Items of harness such as bridle and saddle are shown. Not only did the San acquire bridles and saddles from the European, but made their own as well.



**Fig. 58.** Through keen observation they were able to freeze the action of the horse and rider. This painting was executed approximately a hundred years ago and it is interesting to compare horses painted by European artists of the same period.

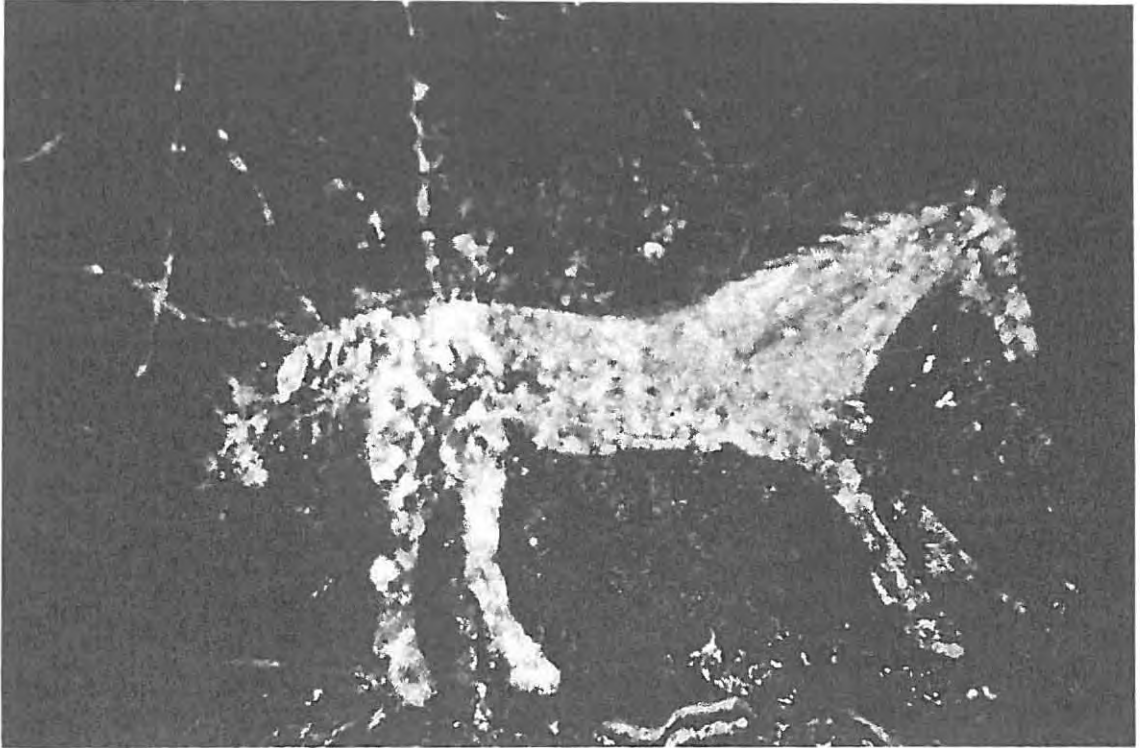


Fig. 59. A horse painted in white, depicted with a halter. Attention is paid to the detail of the mane and tail.

black, which conforms with the general colours used in the later paintings. Details of hooves, horns, mane and tail are usually executed in black. The majority of scenes involving horses and cattle depict the herding of stock raided from farmers in the valleys (see Fig. 60.). The San's preference for the horse is reflected in the paintings and also supported by early written accounts. A report by Col. Collins in 1809 stated that:

They are indeed a much more valuable prize than cattle, as their possession insures them a subsistence, enabling them to overtake the eland, and other wild animals.<sup>1.</sup>

There is no doubt that the horse had a large social and economic impact on the lives of the San. The horse provided both transport and food.

If they do not find any game, they eat the horse.<sup>2.</sup>

Cattle are depicted with patterned hides and half-moon shaped horns, typical of the Sanga breed. In the paintings attention is drawn to the cloven hooves of the cattle, possibly due to the preoccupation of the farmers with their method of tracing the spoor of stolen cattle, while at the same time the San were engrossed in confusing the spoor. In the cattle paintings, the sex of the animal is often clearly indicated. This occurs more frequently than in other animal depictions.<sup>3.</sup>

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1. Moodie. The Record, Pt. 1.

2. Callaway. op. cit., p. 353.

3. Vinnicombe. op. cit., p. 157.

Lewis-Williams points out the similarities between the eland and ox:

...the eland, has, despite first impressions, much in common with the ox. The physical similarities between the two creatures is something of which the San themselves are aware. ...hoof print of an eland is remarkably similar to that of an ox...; this similarity...the !Kung considered important enough to draw to my attention. Further similarities between these two animals may be noted. When eland are browsing or resting to ruminate they occasionally "blow" like cattle, although they are normally taciturn. The eland's flesh is, moreover, very similar to good quality beef... . In speaking of eland, the southern San also frequently likened them to oxen. When Qing was discussing the whereabouts of /Kaggen, he spoke of eland being "in droves like cattle".<sup>1</sup>

It is therefore likely that the southern San equated the eland with the ox and it seems probable that the San used oxen in their rain-making rituals.

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1. Lewis-Williams. op. cit., p. 106.

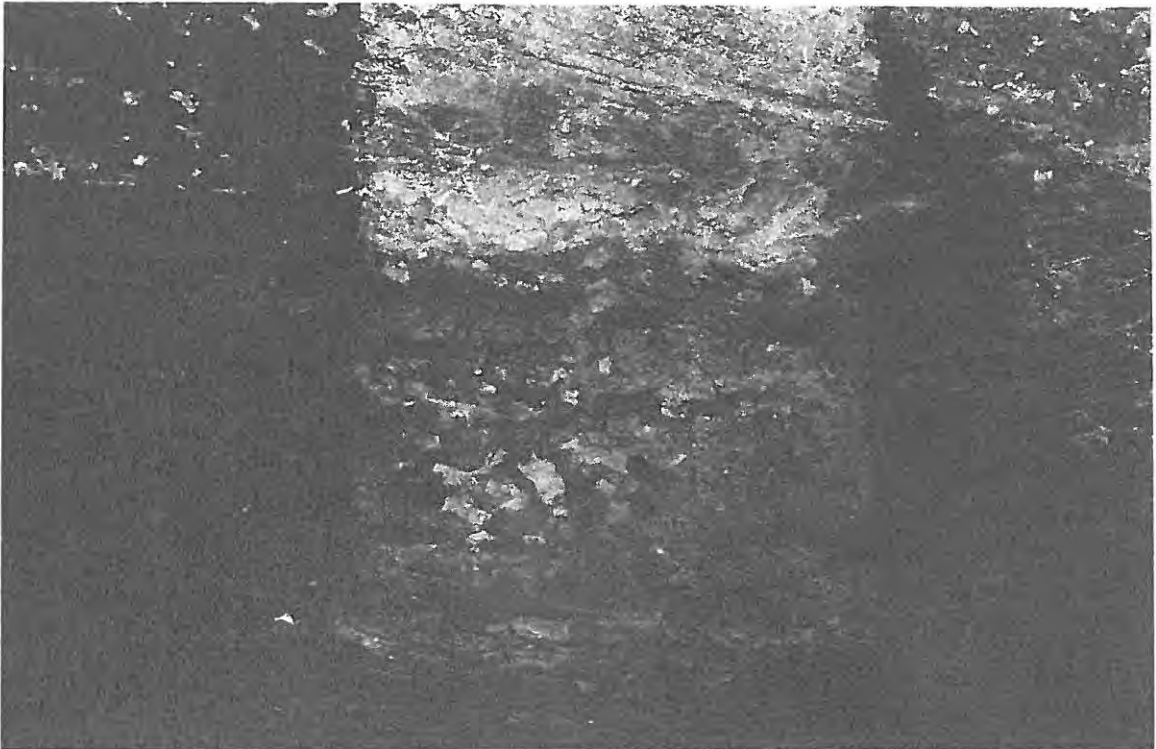
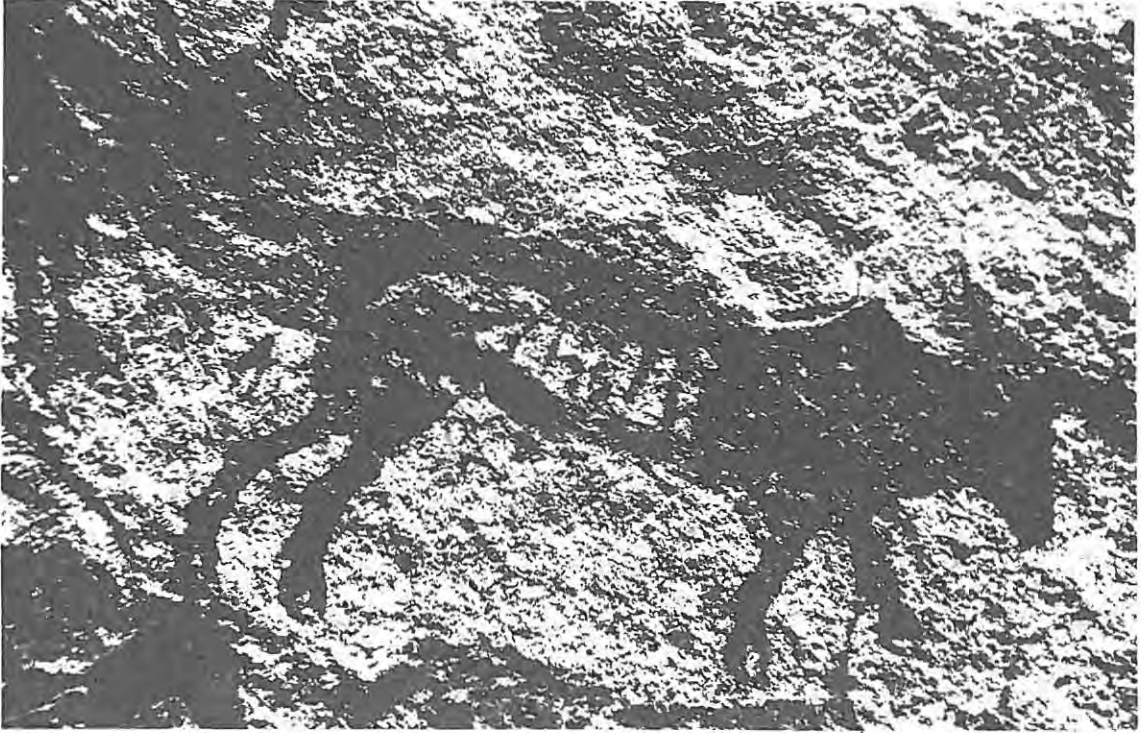


Fig. 60. This painting has received sun for most of the morning for approximately the past one hundred years, and yet the paint remains remarkably fresh. This painting is executed in bright orange, red, brown, black and white. The scene shows horses and cattle being driven towards an encampment. An eland in among the domestic animals is brought back by mounted horsemen. Horses on the left wear halters. To the right a horse carries a load of meat on its back, led by a medicine man who wears a feather headdress. The presence of eland and medicine man suggest that this scene goes far beyond a purely literal interpretation.



**Fig. 61.** Detail of a cow where attention is drawn to the cloven hoofs, as spoor tracing played a vital role in retaliatory raids. Cattle spoor is very similar to that of the eland.



**Fig. 62.** Figures are depicted seated with equipment lying around. No convincing explanation can be found of these fork-like objects of equipment. However, they are more commonly associated with riders on horseback. At the top left, cattle with patterned hides and crescent-shaped horns are being herded towards the seated group. To the right appears a rare scene of cattle mating.



Fig. 63. This site depicts three dogs accompanying hunters carrying bows, arrows, quiver and a fly-switch.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

Art is an essential function of man, indispensable to individuals and communities alike, for which they have found a need ever since the earliest period of prehistory. Art and mankind are indissolubly linked. There can be no art without mankind, and perhaps too, no mankind without art. Through art, man expresses himself more fully and thus understands and fulfils himself better. Through art, the world becomes closer and more comprehensible. Art is the agency for a continual give and take with our surroundings.

Among the graphic arts of preliterate people, San rock paintings rank as some of the best understood primitive art due to the availability and use of ethnographic and historical data for interpretation. With this direct historical and ethnographic link San rock paintings are shown not merely to be 'art pour l'art', made for the pleasure of the artists and beholder, nor are they purely representational but revealed what San knew or believed and not merely what they saw. The concepts of 'art for art's sake' and 'sympathetic magic' in order to explain San art, have been rejected totally by all authoritative sources. The sample of paintings discussed here reinforces this view. San art is essentially an expression of ideas and beliefs central to San thought, and their way of life.<sup>1</sup> In 1874 Bleek was well aware

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1. Lewis-Williams. op. cit., p. 3.

of the importance of ritual and mythology in their paintings:

It gives at once to Bushman art a higher character, and teaches us to look upon its products not as the mere daubing of figures for idle pastime, but as an attempt, however imperfect, at a truly artistic conception of ideas which most deeply moved the Bushman mind and filled it with religious feelings.<sup>1</sup>

The San artists' efforts were not directed at illustration of folklore; the paintings are merely illuminated by their rituals and mythology. If we are to understand San art, it must be approached in the light of San and not from pre-conceived western perceptions of art. Turning out works of art, the San "...painted for purposes of which they were well aware, and, whatever unintended results may have flowed from their art, these purposes are sufficient to explain the practice of painting."<sup>2</sup>

The San's mastery of group composition and the quality of draftsmanship is unequalled in preliterate art anywhere in the world. Although foreshortening and perspective does appear in San art, it does not comply with the set of classical western principles as they were entirely irrelevant in the paintings of preliterate artists. Therefore, one must not assume that things painted smaller are further away from the viewer or in any way inferior to adjacent ones.<sup>3</sup> Scenes were more likely composed according to conventions in which perspective did not play any

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1. Bleek. Mythology of the Maluti Bushmen, p. 13.

2. Lewis-Williams. Economic and Social Content of Southern San Rock Art, p. 430.

3. Ibid. San Artistic Achievements, p. 54.

crucial role. Their art had its own unique structure and obeyed its own laws. The fact that these paintings were not painted from a model but from observation and memory, makes one marvel at the accuracy of animal depictions in the foreshortened attitude and rapid action.

San art not only portrays things from the real world but also symbols, metaphors and hallucinations associated with the trance experience of medicine men.<sup>1</sup> Some hallucination paintings are iconic, depicting items such as bow and arrows and animals from the real world, while others depict human-animal confluents and phosphenes, being produced entirely by the human nervous system, which are non-realistic. Yet other scenes combine and associate iconic and non-iconic forms in ways yet to be unravelled.<sup>2</sup>

Lewis-Williams<sup>3</sup> has pointed out how the San formed metaphors by choosing certain items from their natural world to symbolize specific features of their social world. Therefore Lewis-Williams is of the opinion that metaphors referring to trance is the key to the understanding of San art. For example, the metaphor 'to die' is used to explain a trance. This metaphor is based partly on the association between dying animals and

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1. Lewis-Williams. Cognitive and Optical Illusions, p. 172.

2. Ibid, p. 172.

3. Ibid. Believing and Seeing, p. 81.

trancers, both of which sweat, hyperventilate, bleed from the nose and collapse into unconsciousness.<sup>1</sup>

As research progresses, indications are that many, if not all, scenes are directly connected to the hallucinations of medicine men in trance. San medicine men altered their state of consciousness by entering trance, not as in some cultures, by hallucinogens, but by hyperventilation and the rhythmical and physical exertion of a dance. As a man approaches the onset of a "...trance he experienced a rising sensation, shivered, sweated profusely and finally bled from the nose"<sup>2</sup>, which is a normal pattern followed in a state of trance. The utility of this phenomenon in placing this sample of paintings within the ethnographic context can be seen for example in those panels from Figure 64.

Psychologists have demonstrated that in the early stage of trance "...hallucinations comprise geometric forms known as phosphenes, which are produced by stimulation of the nervous system. Phosphenes include spots, zig-zags and vortexes...frequently depicted in San art. ...In a later stage the sensation of flying or a birds-eye view, and its opposite, a sensation of being underwater."<sup>3</sup> Many of the daubs, lines and

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1. Lewis-Williams. op. cit., p. 91.

2. Ibid. The Thin Red Line, p. 5.

3. Ibid. San Artistic Achievements, pp. 56-58.



Fig. 64. This strange figure is a combination of phosphenes and the human form. The neck and legs of the figure are phosphenic zig-zags. '...men may have identified themselves with phosphenic hallucinations: they actually became what they saw'.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Lewis-Williams. op. cit., p. 58.

grid patterns in San rock art can be positively linked to the initial stages of trance and therefore form part of the wider experience of medicine men. Within an art for art's sake framework, however, they remain bizarre and strange abstract designs, or simply incidental, idle daubs because the framework makes no attempt to contextualise the paintings.

In this survey area the eland remains the central symbol in the rock paintings, and inevitably, also a central thought in the minds of the San. Levi-Strauss points out the importance of symbolic elements through which primitive man, more specifically the hunters and gatherers, perceive reality through the animal:

The animal...ceases to be solely or principally creatures, which are feared, admired or envied: their reality permits the embodiment of ideas and relations conceived by speculative thought on the basis of empirical observations. We can understand, too, that natural species are chosen not because they are "good to eat" but because they are "good to think".<sup>1</sup>

The Mountain San were known to be people 'of the eland'<sup>2</sup> and in sharing the eland's name, they partook of the eland's entity and power.<sup>3. 4.</sup>

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1. Levi-Strauss. op. cit., pp. 161-162.

2. How. op. cit., p. 38.

3. Marshall. The Kin Terminology System of the !Kung Bushmen, p. 22.

4. Vinnicombe. op. cit., p. 353.



Fig. 65. Magnificent draftsmanship is displayed in these highly accurate depictions of eland.

In 1908 Werner commented on the eland in the rock paintings stating:

The prominence given to the eland seems to correspond with the place it occupied in the Bushman imagination. It was to them what the ox is to the pastoral Bantu - not only their principal food provider but in some sense also a sacred animal.<sup>1</sup>

Vinnicombe states that: "...through the eland the San established and maintained communication with his god and the eternal cycle of sacrificing life in order to conserve and promote life was ritually expressed."<sup>2</sup> In paintings the relationship between art and religious sensibility is a difficult question to face. When looking into the past, art and religion emerge hand in hand and in the art of the San, the paintings and society are inextricably bound together to form a cohesive whole.

My study of rock art in the Underberg district has persuaded me that the same key concepts are present here as are known from the ethnography of the southern San and in the rock art of other areas in southern Africa. The ethnographic values concerning trance, the use of metaphors and the importance of the eland in San ritual and religion which are espoused by Lewis-Williams, unequivocally occur in this sample of rock paintings. Some may still persist in viewing these paintings in a literal sense, thereby interpreting panels as the anecdotal narratives of

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1. Werner, A. Bushman Painting, p. 393.

2. Vinnicombe. op. cit., p. 181.

individuals rather than a fundamental set of values and beliefs about the whole social and religious order. The general principles concerning rock art interpretation within an ethnographic framework are well established, but there is no doubt that much symbolic detail remains to be revealed if the sources are themselves detailed enough to allow this. One hopes that they will be, for it is truly rewarding to recover even just a little of this order through the eyes and minds of those that were part of it.

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