

Beyond Shamanism: Dissecting the Painting from Snake Rock in Namibia

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ABSTRAKT:

Thanks to Harald Pager's (1993) sustained effort, most of the rock art stations in Brandberg, Namibia, were visited and carefully recorded. The collection of rock art from Brandberg published by the Heinrich Barth Institute of the University of Cologne is an unparalleled working tool. Building on previous attempts to explain and interpret the paintings from Snake Rock shelter, this paper revisits these and peels the different layers of images, motifs, and compositions represented. There are numerous

superimpositions; the initial ones are predominantly a 'black and white' painting tradition. The images in 'color tradition' are painted on top of the previous ones, sometimes with a clear intent to obliterate them. The long and sinuous red motif in the East section of the painting is the representation of a river. Humans, animals, trees, rivers, dug-outs, are choreographed in a meaningful and contested landscape. It is that complex web of ideas displayed on Snake rock shelter's wall that is explored in this paper.

INTRODUCTION

Harald Pager (1993) spend many years recording the paintings from Dâures – also known as Brandberg. It is an impressive circular granite intrusion located near the coast in the Namib desert at 21°08'57" S – 14°34'39" E and 21°14'91" S – 14° 57'75" E, peaking at 2500 meters above sea level, and extended over 650 square kilometers. Dâures is in itself a natural wonderland, with an overwhelming biodiversity. Therefore, it is not surprising that it has one of the highest density of painted rock shelters in the world, testifying to the special and long-term relationships with Ancestral San hunter-gatherers and livestock herders. The painting from Snake rock shelter, located in the Hungorob ravine, has attracted significant scholarly interest during the last three decades, with interpretations ranging widely, from shamanism to the display of social issues and gender relations (Eastwood & Fish 1996, Jacobsen 1997, Kinahan 1986, 1996, Lenssen-Erz 1994a, b, 1997, 2004). This paper devises a new approach to these intricate rock paintings, one of peeling layers, dissecting images, in attempt to bring to light the contorted narratives involved in the collective creation of large visual art compositions.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

The recent vigorous and spectacular development in Southern Africa rock art research (Holl 2006, Kinahan 1986, Lequellec 1993, Lenssen-Erz 1994a, Lewis-Williams 2006, 2015, Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2009) has resulted in the emergence of a new paradigmatic posture aptly summarized by Lenssen-Erz: "Among scholars doing research in Southern African rock art, it has become widely accepted that it is essentially or even totally associated

with the shamanism that was prevalent in the recent hunter-gatherers societies of the sub-continent" (1994: 171). Thanks to the 19th century ethno-historical record, southern African rock is now considered to be exclusively shamanistic and nothing else. The debate on the relevance of shamanism in the explanation and understanding of prehistoric image-making traditions is extremely interesting. Firstly, on epistemological grounds, as it emphasizes the use of multiple strands of evidence in the building of a plausible explanation of past behavioral features. Secondly, it develops a more focused scale for what can qualify as representations of "shaman's acts" and asserts that all images are not shamanistic but some are. Thirdly, the chronological background of the shamanistic argument is left in the vague. And fourthly, words' definitions debates have never clarified a research problem, what is important is a working definition (Holl 2006).

Therefore, the interesting research problem is not 'shamanism or not shamanism'. J. D. Lewis-Williams and his colleagues have made a significant breakthrough in the understanding of Southern African Ancestral San image-making (Lewis-Williams 2006, 2015, Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2009). The shamanistic interpretation of the Upper Palaeolithic Cave art is strongly predicated on the status of prehistoric hunter-gatherers. The number of authors who appear to have endorsed a shamanistic approach to the Upper Palaeolithic cave painting is significant but this does not mean that the argument is decisive.

Beside the questionable position of attributing complete and extensive 'cultural knowledge' of an entire group of people to a single person – the informant, one

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of the most interesting issues of the shamanism debate revolves around the very core of historical science, in this case, the choice of evidence and the time dimension. The most striking aspect one has to deal with is the selective use of images. It is well understood that all images are not shamanistic, some are and others are not. In the currently dominant approach, what do we know about the non-shamanistic images? One can build an intricate web of arguments around this simple idea. The number of images per site varies considerably. Having dismissed the possibility of “compositions”, the proponents of “shamanism” are left with no room for a renewed study of what may be called “image complexes”. Having trumpeted the non-narrative character of ancestral San image-making, one is left without any falsifiable way of looking at the “iconographic syntax” developed on the walls of prehistoric caves. As Ucko and Rosenfeld (1967) argued long time ago in their refutation of Leroi-Gourhan/Laming-Empeaire structural approach to Southwestern France caves’ paintings, what is the relevance of differential size? Why choose different colors? What about the species selection? What is the relevance of gender-specific attributes? All these attributes contribute to the formation of images and generate image-making traditions.

Prehistoric painters have to be taken seriously, they may have had conflicting views on their own societies, their own interpretations of specific images may have shifted through time and space. Contemporary researchers and students of the past, are fundamentally outsiders. They rely on a range of theories, research methods, and techniques to decipher the contents, themes, and meanings of prehistoric images. Scientific research is an endless process, geared towards a better understanding of all kinds of phenomena in the world we live in.

In fact, after a few years of triumphant orthodoxy and the interesting 2006 shamanism forum featured in the journal *Before Farming* (Holl 2006), the position taken by Lewis-Williams and his collaborators (Lewis-Williams 2006, 2015, Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2009) began to shift. It is now accepted that “overall, the situation is more complex than some researchers have allowed” (Lewis-Williams 2015: 60). The most significant change in perspective is to be found in a 2009 paper that takes issue with the dominant shamanistic orthodoxy, first with a warning: “the danger now is that researchers could easily leave the matter there” (Lewis-Williams

& Pearce 2009: 42). A few lines below we read that: “Each of the thousands of panels that have come down to us is therefore simultaneously unique and cumulatively meaningful. Each warrants detailed study” (Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2009: 43).

Theoretically, when dealing with long-term social change, one has to delve into the difficult and vexing issue of chronology. The “Rosetta – stone equivalent”, the 19th century extensive ethnographic accounts – the Bleek and Lloyd collection, that has allowed an unprecedented entry into the meanings of some Ancestral San images also generates problems of its own. These problems cannot simply be tossed aside as “vexing nuisance”. How far back in time can the 19th century ethnographic species specific meanings assigned to images be pushed? Where and when do we have the earliest evidence for the practice of shamanism in Southern African and southwestern European rock art? Clearly they have developed independently. The earliest cave paintings from Europe [Chauvet Cave] are dated to ca. 33,000–35,000 BP; the oldest sub-Saharan Africa case from Apollo 11 cave in Namibia is dated to 27,000 BP. Were these paintings expressions of shamanistic practices right from the beginning or did such practices develop later to cope with the hazards and vagaries of life?

Even if it is not surprising, direct dating of painted images including elands shows that “Southern African hunter-gatherers were creating paintings on rock-shelters walls as long ago as 5723–4429 Cal BP in south eastern Botswana” (Bonneau et al. 2017: 322). Were these images shamanistic?

In fact, besides their shared status of hunter-gatherers, there are strong commonalities between the Upper Palaeolithic and the Ancestral San contexts: During the Late Glacial Maximum, the deeply dissected hilly landscape of the Franco-Cantabrian zone in southwestern Europe was very likely tough to handle. In Southern Africa, the Ancestral San started losing ground first to the expanding Bantu farmers, then herders, and from the 18th century onwards, to Europeans settlers. They were confined to the most inhospitable parts of the landscape. One can expect a shift in cultural practices, geared toward the “construction of new meanings”. The representation of horses, chariots, and guns in later South African rock art is a case in point. It points to the permeability of the image mode of expression to the actual and current crises of social life.

THE ICONOGRAPHIC DISSECTION

Rock art research went through a long protracted period of endless typologies and morphological taxonomies. The works highlighting the importance of shamanism is part of the interesting movement away from what Lewis-Williams called empiricism. However, one has to keep a solid grounding in the empirical world for the suggested explanations to be more than convenient accommodation to fashion or simple fads. Whole “compositions” analyses show the way.

When available, ethnographic and ethno-historical records provide important and interesting clues useful in the construction of frames of references (Binford 2001). Despite persistent claims, they can hardly be used alone as exclusive explanations for past situations. The iconographic dissection advocated in this paper is a simple and pragmatic method without prior claim to what the answers are. A rock shelter wall painting has a complex and intricate history. Depending on its thematic richness, it may have been created by many contemporary and successive artists, for a short or a long time span. “Each of [...] the panels that have come down to us is therefore simultaneously unique and cumulatively meaningful” (Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2009).

The approach adopted in the paper is a methodological “bricolage”, involving the peeling of the successive layers to be recorded in rock-shelter paintings, as well as their composition in terms of motifs’ representation, distribution and aggregation. The patterned arrangements of motifs that may be unique or re-iterated, can be used to formulate plausible explanations based on well informed social anthropology of hunter-gatherers, herders, or farmers’ worldviews. Visual art representations are rooted in and derived from the cultural heritage of the societies under consideration. It is accordingly expected from hunter-gatherers to emphasize particular and strong bonds between humans, wildlife, and places, through constant and renewable transformation loops. Humans are one element of the great cycle of nature, harnessing nature’s potential as key driving force.

SNAKE ROCK IN CONTEXT

Snake Rock shelter is located in the Hungorob ravine, one of the 13 episodic streams that flow from the Brandberg in Namibia. The Hungorob drainage extends over some 56 square kilometers and contains more than 150 archaeological sites mostly clustered around

water holes and dated to the last 4 millennia (Kinahan 1986). Falls Rock and Snake Rock, both located in the Upper Hungorob, are rock-shelters, each part of a distinct site cluster. They were excavated by Kinahan (1986) and appear to have a similar occupation sequence with 3 successive phases:

Phase 0, a pre-ceramic phase that ends around 2040+/-50 BP (Pta 2930).

Phase H, the first ceramic occupation, stratigraphically different, with however the same microliths assemblage.

Phase R with a different microliths assemblage, dated to 730+/-70 BP (Wits 1100)

Unfortunately, “the surface of the Snake rock deposit is badly eroded by rain water and the early phase R component may have been removed, at least in the area covered by the excavation” (Kinahan 1986: 76).

More recent research brings to light new evidence that was overlooked in the animal bones assemblages from Falls rock shelter and Snake Rock (Kinahan 2016). Sheep remains are part of the food waste from these sites from the early 1st millennium CE. Similar evidence was reported from other Namib Desert sites. It is the case at Mirabid shelter where sheep remains are dated to 1550+/-40 BP, Geduld (1790+/-80 BP), Leopard Cave (2270+/-40 BP), and Oruwanje (1306+/-36 BP). More interesting, and well beyond strict subsistence requirements, “assemblages of bone artifacts dating to the same period at Snake Rock includes slivers from the long bones of sheep – (found in a stone lined pit), perforated and strung together and used for symbolic purposes by Namib desert pastoralists” (Kinahan 2016).

Phase R thus signaled a significant change in settlement patterns. Large rock shelters are abandoned. The occupations sites, spread out in the ravine around water holes, point to the emergence of pastoral-nomadism.

Ancestral San from the Brandberg area adopted new livestock husbandry lifeways. Late Stone Age microlithic tools assemblages remained in use in the Brandberg and other parts of Namibia up to 200 years ago (Jacobsen 1997). Nonetheless, these ancestral San communities maintained the fundamentals of their deep cultural scripts from their past. This is reflected in the patterns of mobility and in the use of landscape as well as in their image drafting techniques (Kinahan 1984, 1986, Lensen-Erz 1994, 2004).

THE PAINTING FROM SNAKE ROCK SHELTER

Paintings and engravings are prominent features of the Brandberg ancestral San cultural landscapes. They are found predominantly in rock-shelters for the former and open air localities flat surfaces for the latter. The paintings from Snake Rock are such an instance of a painted rock shelter wall. It is an intricate palimpsest of multiple painting episodes, without a simple unified explanation. The rock shelter is part of a dome-shaped rock formation, open to the south and oriented east-west. There are multiple layers of superimposition of painted images, particularly in the central part of the main painted wall. In general, there seems to be an earlier initial phase of black and white painting tradition followed later by color painting tradition. However, the resulting painting is much

more intricate than that. A careful scrutiny of the central part of the central panel shows that it was a highly contested portion of the painting. The initial central elements were two dark red ochre elephants, an adult walking from the right to the left, and an infant oriented in the opposite direction. A hippopotamus and two large antelopes were drafted on the front elephant. These early set of images was partly obliterated and replaced by groups of humans. Two giraffes, one white and the other checkered, were partly superimposed of the central elephant.

A massive white feature, with two smaller versions, considered by Pager (1993) to represent the granite dome containing the rock-shelter, was drafted to obliterate the elephants. Two small antelopes – springboks – and an upward walking human were finally superimposed to the previous images. There are at least six levels of image superimposition in this part of the painting, the portion with the highest density of images of the whole rock-shelter.

A global look at the whole painting is particularly revealing and provides a different but complementary entry to the analysis of Snake Rock painting. A combination of rock-shelter wall characteristics and partition and the horizontal structures of the painting point to a quadri-partite horizontal organization of the images groups. For analytical purposes and proceeding from left to right – West to East, they will be termed Segment A, B, C, and D. Unfortunately, lack of space precludes any extensive presentation of supporting images.



View of Snake rock painting showing from left to right Segment A, B, and C. © Harald Pager, 1993.



The components of Snake Rock painting: Segment A, B, and C. © Harald Pager, 1993.

SEGMENT A: THE WEST END

Segment A is located at the west end of the rock-shelter wall. It is organized into two distinct parts. Part 1, in the west, is made of 12 images combining humans and animals. An elephant with a tiny tusk walking westward is the largest representation. A hippopotamus is painted on top of the elephant upper body and a medium size antelope on its legs. The latter is also superimposed on two filiform humans below the elephant's belly. Large male and female antelopes are drafted in the central bottom portion of the painting bracketed by human representations. The left human couple is walking westward in long strides. The shape of their bodies suggests they are male and female. The two remaining human representations, set in the diagonal line of the composition are walking in the opposite east direction. The male is drafted next to the front right leg of the elephant. The female is in the bottom right, behind the male antelope. A worn-out image, possibly representing another human, could have been drafted in front of the woman. And finally, a dark feature drafted next to the elephant right front leg cannot be identified.

Beside the large size elephant, the pairing of comparable size creatures is the dominant characteristic of Segment A part 1. The hippopotamus is paired with an antelope of equal size, both facing west. Large male and female antelopes are paired in the bottom center. And finally, depending on the readings, all humans are arranged in three pairs.

Segment A part 2 is situated on the left, behind the elephant. It is predominantly made of human representations arranged vertically in distinct image-series. Proceeding from

bottom to top, image-series 1 is a single human with stretched arms moving westward – right direction. Image-series 2 consists of a group of three women and a line of worn out images. They have feather-like headgears and are walking eastward – left direction. There is a re-iteration of an individual with stretched arms in a relatively static position above the women frieze in image-series 3. A sitting person, oriented east, is represented in image-series 4. Image-series 5 is a line of 4 male archers walking westward in long stride. Each individual is unique. Their lower legs are painted in white. The fourth and last individual in the line is drafted on top of a taller individual and a group of 3 small size men walking eastward. He is holding his bow and arrow in his left hand, his upper body painted in white. The next image-series 6 has 4 motifs: two humans face to face, and two animal heads in the intervening space. The left individual, oriented eastward, is in a tightly forward bent position with stretched arms, his chest resting of the animal horns. The right individual, oriented westward, is slightly bent with arms along the torso. As is the case for humans, one of the animal is oriented west, and the other east. And finally, image-series 7, at the top, consists of three women walking eastward. They are well dressed, wearing feather-like headgears. Each individual is drafted with specific combination of traits, body posture, arms movements, and gait.

In summary, segment A part 2 is constituted of 7 parallel image-series. Image-series 1 to 4 are more or less equidistant. Image-series 7 can be seen as a re-iteration of image-series 3, with 3 women, wearing featherlike headgears and walking eastward. Image-series 6 can be

either a “wrestling” contest or a dance. And finally, image-series 5, appears to be an extension of the image series from another, neighboring segment, as will be shown later.

SEGMENT B: THE MIDDLE-WEST

Segment B is found in the middle-west part of the painting. It is the densest and most intricate of all the paintings segments with the highest frequency of superimpositions. It is clearly the ideal area of contestation used by different ancestral San painters. The analysis will rely on the investigation of the layered spatial distribution of motifs' cohorts. Humans, and a series of animal species will be extracted from the painting and used to raise questions.

A general description of the segment is nonetheless useful as a starting point. Large images of animals and undetermined white features are located in the top-east of the segment where the intensity of superimposition is maximal. A detailed observation of that part of the painting allows for the reconstitution of the successive painting episodes involved in the creation of that part of segment B.

1. The first and initial images include a large tree, a large size eland, and a group of humans holding long walking-staffs along the elephant's left side – top.
2. A large size elephant oriented westward was drafted on the eland with its head superimposed on the humans' legs.
3. A series of 4 giraffes was painted partially or totally on the elephant. The rear legs of the white giraffes are superimposed on the elephant's head. The checkered specimen abuts the elephant's front legs, and the smaller giraffes are drafted respectively on the ele-

phant's right front leg and the rear part of the abdomen.

4. Two medium size animals, an antelope oriented eastward and a zebra oriented westward, were drafted afterwards. The former on the elephant left front leg, and the latter on the lower abdomen.

5. A large feature painted in white, difficult to identify but interpreted as Snake-rock shelter granitic dome by Pager (1993), was superimposed on the elephant, the smaller giraffes, and the small size antelope oriented east in the top east.

6. And finally, two small antelopes of the springbok size oriented west, and a human in special attire with a feather-like hairdo walking upward were drafted on the white feature.

As suggested by the dissection exercise above, there are at least six successive episodes of image drafting in this portion of Segment B. Were these episodes synchronized all over segment B whole painting or were they incremental and discrete? A discussion of the different images-series will help addressing this question.

HUMAN CHOREOGRAPHIES

Approximately 71 human representations are recorded in Segment B. They are partitioned in three distinct drafting styles, two major ones: an earlier shadowy-filiform and a later relatively more realistic, and a third minor "fuzzy" one.

The shadowy-filiform images are organized in distinct groups distributed all over Segment B, sometimes combined or synchronized with animal images. Proceeding from the top to the bottom, image-series 1 consists of a group of 4 women in the top west, standing on and surrounded by a long-necked creature. Each is drafted with a unique combination of attributes. Their arm gestures, with the easternmost one clapping her hands, suggest the performance of a dance. They are facing and/or interacting with a group of five presumably male individuals in image-series 2. The one, at the east end of the line either holds long sticks or has unusually long arms. An eland, with the superimposed special long-necked creature, are drafted in the intermediate space.

There is an iteration of the same pattern with an animal difficult to identify at the species level, oriented westward, painted east of the 5 men line, just above a therianthrope – animal-human creature – with a long neck, and a group of two individuals, under the elephant head, walking west in long strides, one holding a walking staff in image-series 3. The logic of that earlier drafting style stages three

distinct human groups connected by a couple of animals, one simple, and the other special.

Two image-series are drafted in the central part of segment B painting. Image-series 4 is located in the center-west. It is comprised of 14 humans in a more or less circular arrangement with a woman at the circle center. A relatively tall individual is drafted moving out the circle and walking west.

Image-series 5 is in the east, contiguous to the previous one. It is made of 8 individuals standing in a west-east line. The westernmost one, relatively taller and larger, is a woman oriented east. The rest of the group is facing west.

Image-series 6 in the bottom east is comprised of 8 human representations in a linear west – east arrangement. Five of the represented individuals are walking westward in long strides. The remaining three, at the eastern end of the line are standing shadows.

The relatively more realistic style images are all superimposed on the previous shadowy-filiform ones. They are distributed over most of the segment B paintings in two distinct patterns: single and clustered representations.

Single images located in the southeastern half of the painting are almost equidistant. They include from the bottom southeast to the center northwest: 1. a woman carrying a back-load and walking westward; 2. an individual, probably male, sitting facing east, wrapped in an animal skin cloak, wearing a two-feathered head-gear and white shoes, and holding a short stick-like object in his left hand; 3. another individual, very likely a male too, in upright position and walking westward. He is probably a re-iteration of the previous individual, dressed the same way, with the same hair style, the same long skin cloak, the same white shoes, with in addition a bow in the right hand and a L-shape stick in the left hand; and finally, 4. a tall man wearing a twin feathered head-gear and white shoes, holding a stick-like object in his right hand and a bow and arrow in the left one, facing southwest. He has white arm-bands with short lollipop-like extensions at shoulders level.

The image sequence described above is particularly interesting. It features passages from one step to the next and as such can be viewed as sequences of a rite of passage. In step 1, Individual 2 in a ceremonial out-fit is seated, oriented east in direct face to face contact with an eland. In step 2, sanctioning the successful passage to the next social level, Individual 3 allowed to carry hunting weapons and still in his ceremonial gown, displays his stick, bow and arrow. And finally, in step 3, the

new adult hunter, with signs of his achieved status, is ready and about to join the parade of hunters.

A fifth single individual (Individual 5) is drafted in horizontal position, walking along an upward oriented path in the top east of Segment B. He is wearing a twin feathered head-gear. The images featuring the passage from one social status to the next are arranged into two intersecting diagonal lines: the Southeast-Northwest with Individual 2 --- Individual 3 ---- Individual 4 on the one hand, and the South – North with Individual 2 ---- Individual 5, Individual 2 being the intersection point.

The hunter (Individual 4) is drafted before another steatopygic one, also walking westward and holding a bow and arrow in his left hand. Both are partially superimposed on the line of 4 running individuals to be described later.

Clustered image-series, made of 2 to 4 representations, are found in the center and top of Segment B. Image-series 1 is located in the top center. It consists of 2 human representations, one with a quiver is walking westward in great stride, and the other wearing a cloak and a skirt has the knees slightly flexed, and the right arm at the neck.

Image-series 2 at the very top includes 3 humans, almost equidistant. Each is unique. The westernmost individual is headless and oriented east. The central one is a shadowy headless representation in front or back view. And finally, the third and easternmost one, clearly a male, is oriented east, and bent forward with down stretched arms.

Image-series 3, below the previous one is also made of 3 human representations. They are standing still, in line next to each other, in front or back view.

Image-series 4 is made of 2 human representations located east of the previous series. They are both standing still next to each other, holding a long staff and carrying quivers.

Finally, image-series 5, in the center-top of Segment B is a diagonal northeast – southwest frieze of 5 very likely male running individuals. As suggested above in the discussion of Segment A part 2, the drafted group of four archers is very likely a re-iteration of these four running men, with their weapons this time.

The third "fuzzy" drafting style is found in four images-series located in the bottom east of Segment B. The drafted individuals are generally short with more or less headless fuzzy contours. They are arranged in three more or less equidistant human couples with the

easternmost one featuring intense shaking. The fourth and last image-series is drafted between the seated and the standing tall individual. It consists of 3 very likely female individuals walking northwestward. Both lateral persons, in relatively intense shaking attitude, are dressed alike, wearing a short skirt, and probably noise-making devices on lower legs. The middle person is surprisingly wearing what looks like a long dress. The scenery thus appears to feature a dance performance including some trance.

LARGE ANTELOPES CHOREOGRAPHIES

Large antelopes are drafted in all segments of Snake Rock shelter paintings with the highest concentration in Segment C – below. In Segment Large Antelopes amounting to 10 representations are located in the center-bottom and west. They are generally arranged in pairs, with a few relatively isolated specimens. The

episode. The remaining 9 representations, featuring springbok size animals as well as sexual dimorphism and coat color, are organized in clearly explicit male-female couples. Two of the pairs, one at top and the other at bottom, are oriented westward. The pair at the center is oriented eastward. And the pair at the bottom is made of specimen drafted face to face. The last small antelope specimens at the very bottom of the painting belong to an earlier drafting episode.

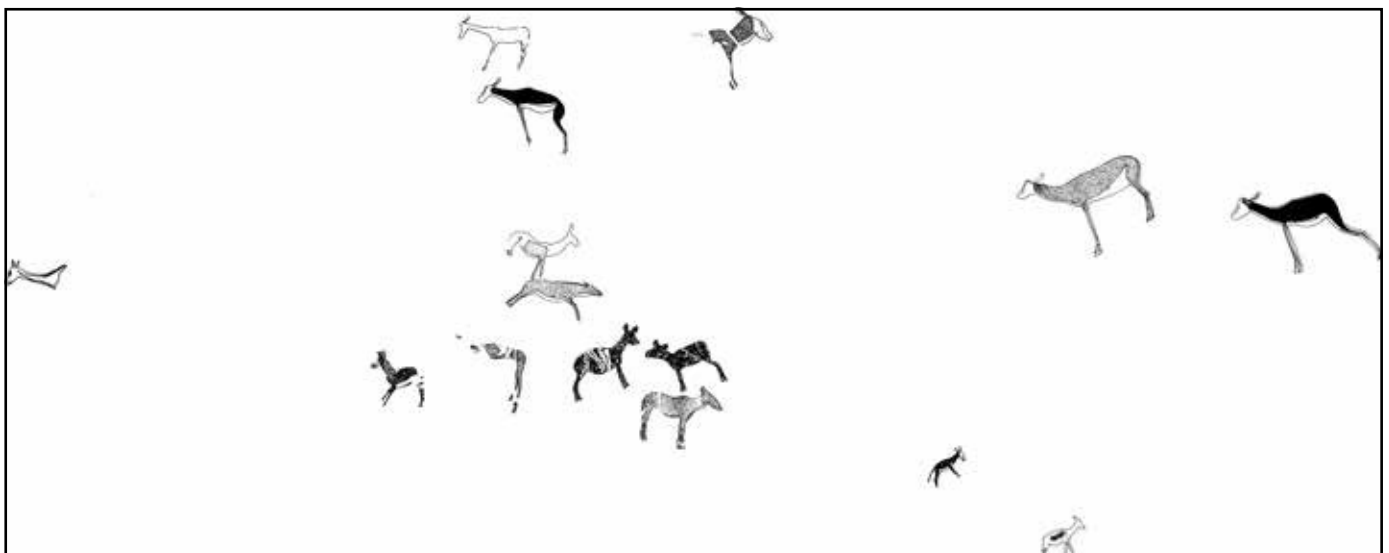
As is the case for large antelopes, the arrangement of smaller ones also re-iterates community ecology sustainability.

GIRAFFES, ZEBRAS, ELEPHANTS, AND OSTRICH REPRESENTATIONS

Giraffes, zebras, elephants, hippopotamus, and an ostrich are the other animal species represented in Snake rock painting. Most are concentrated in Segment B, with a few specimens

in segment A and C. There are two zebras, moving in opposite direction in Segment C and an elephant and hippopotamus moving westward in Segment A.

The zebras and giraffes from Segment B are surprisingly drafted in two parallel diagonal lines. The lower line includes 4 adult zebras. Three of them are oriented westward and drafted in the same still standing position. The fourth and westernmost specimen is oriented eastward, laying down in a resting position. The upper line is comprised of 6 animal representations, two zebras and 4 giraffes. The baby zebra is drafted on the left side of the adult one – partly worn out, with a young giraffe in between. The 4 giraffes, all oriented west are distributed into two adults – likely male and female, one baby represented by its legs and a young specimen. And finally, the ostrich is located in the interim space between the parallel diagonal lines.



Patterns and distribution of small antelopes' representations in Segment B and C. © Harald Pager, 1993.

central large eland specimen under the elephant is oriented west. The pair in the top west features two animals oriented in opposite directions. The rest of the specimens located in the center-bottom, 2 oryx and 4 elands appear to feature male and female in each the drafted pairs. The patterned arrangement of animals emphasizes male-female pairing, very likely referring to the sustainability of at least that portion of community ecology.

SMALL ANTELOPES CHOREOGRAPHIES

With 10 images recorded, Segment B has the highest concentration of small antelopes. The pairing is more straightforward and obvious in this case. The single specimen in the top east, oriented east, belongs to an earlier drafting



Patterns and distribution of other animals' representations. © Harald Pager, 1993.

The pairing of animals is unmistakable in this case too, forcefully re-iterating the focus on the sustainability of wildlife and community ecology at large.

SEGMENT C: THE MIDDLE-EAST

Segment C is located in the middle-east portion of the painted wall. The boundary with the next segment B is subtle but real. It is marked by a narrow bottom-up plain strip with painted animal specimens oriented in opposite directions. Wildlife is largely predominant with a few scattered human representations. There are many cases of superimpositions but the global choreography of the paintings highlights a dual movement, east – west and west-east.

What looks like a triangular composition appears to have been initially drafted in the central part of Segment C. It includes a baby elephant oriented eastward, facing a human oriented westward at the top angle, a group of 2 or 3 humans in face to face interaction in the central east angle, and finally, a human oriented westward at the south angle.

Large size antelopes were drafted and superimposed on these initial motifs. The choreographed movements are particularly interesting. Four more or less parallel and oblique lines can be detected.

The top line includes three specimens oriented eastward. The westernmost one is a very large eland. The middle one looks like an oryx. And the third and easternmost is a kudu – *Tragelaphus strepsiceros*.

The middle line has 10 animal specimens represented. 2, a zebra and a medium size antelope – below the elephant – are oriented eastward. The remaining 8 animals, predominantly elands of different size, with two large ones, and an oryx, are moving westward. Two interesting cases of superimpositions are found in the northeastern half of the line. One consists of two humans drafted on an eland. And the other, is made of an adult and young antelopes drafted on the other large size eland.

The third and bottom line, is made of 3 almost equidistant eland specimens, oriented eastward. The westernmost represents a particularly bulky animal with eland rear but fuzzy front half partially superimposed on a human. The easternmost animal is under another larger eland representation.

Another reading based on the pairing of animal specimens within and between lines is also possible. “Within line” suggests coherent movements of the same species cohorts in one direction and the other, in that case east-west

and then west-east. While “between line” simply points to the general similarity of species cohorts involved in the movements across the landscape.

The bottom part of Segment C has a series of six images: a large antelope oriented eastward drafted on a worn out motif that may have represented a human being, a pair of small antelopes of springbok size moving eastward, and finally, a couple of male and female humans walking westward with big strides.

Two relatively large white features were finally drafted on the large eland and baby elephant in the top-west part of Segment C. The nature of these features is difficult to identify. They look like oversized hippopotamus heads.

Segment C appears to emphasize seasonal movements of wildlife: east – west move in one season, and the opposite west – east in the other season.

SEGMENT D: THE EAST END

Segment D is located in the eastern part of the painting. It features a broad range of activities along a river flowing from the northeast to the southwest. The river is the north bank tributary of larger one represented by crevasses lines on the rock-shelter’s wall.

Four image-series and 3 relatively isolated individuals are depicted on the east bank. Image series 1 at the south end consists of a group of 3 gemsbok – *Oryx gazelle* – moving to the river shore. Each specimen is drafted in a specific body motion. Two individuals are represented in the center, on the river shore in image-series 2. One with a bow and arrow is walking to the river. The other is standing still, arms raised, holding a hammer-like object in each hand. Image-series 3 is extensively worn-out. It is located at the north end, almost immediately on the river shore. It features 3 individuals with identical hairdo, oriented south and rowing a dug-out. Image-series 4 in the east end also features 3 individuals with identical hair-styles rowing dug-out, but eastward this time. This series is “surrounded” by representations of single individuals: a woman with swinging arms walking eastward in the top; a man with a bow and arrow swinging arms and walking westward in the middle; and finally, a non-gendered person in ‘a difficult’ to identify position at the bottom. The last identifiable image is that a small antelope, very likely a springbok, walking northward in the south-central part of segment D.

Remarkably, there is no single case of image superimposition on the river’s east bank. The situation is different for the river and west bank. There are two instances of people cross-

ing the river, very likely from east to the west bank. One, with two small filiform individuals with stretched arms, is at the south end of the river, near the confluence. The other, at some distance north, features a couple. The male is taller and elongated, and the woman is smaller and seems to have water up to her knees.

The imagery is denser, with possibly tree distinct and successive drafting episodes, on the west bank. The earlier and first one is represented by 6 humans drafted in two distinct sets. One is located at the level of the big tree. It consists of small-size representations of 5 males in line on the river shore, moving south-westward, the first one holding his bow and arrow. The other consists of a single individual, west of the previous one, not far from the tree, slightly bent forward.

The second drafting episode is the most extensive. It features a relatively large tree and an eland – *Taurotragus oryx* – herd walking along the tributary river shore from the northeast to the southwest. The herd is comprised of 11 animals arranged in two more or less parallel lines. The east line includes two specimens bracketing the humans’ space (fig.2). The west line is made of 9 animals walking behind the big tree. The northernmost specimen, of slighter built is oriented in the opposite northeastern direction. The pairing of elands, both in the front and the middle of the herd appears to delineate the stage for humans.

The third drafting episode features two humans’ groups in face to face interaction. Some of the images are superimposed on eland specimens. The northeastern group consists of 6 individuals including the man and woman who crossed the river. They are arranged across the space, from the river to the large tree, in two formats of 3 individuals each. The taller individuals, all probably males, are choreographed with almost similar body postures, moving confidently southwestward. The smaller format individuals, present a comparable arrangement across the landscape, each with a different posture and/or orientation. The westernmost individual with a bow and arrow walks southwestward. The easternmost person, the woman crossing the river, is oriented southwest. And finally, the individual in the center, of unknown gender, is oriented in the opposite northeast direction.

The southwestern group is made of 8 individuals drafted in different size and postures. There are 3 individuals running in opposite directions. 2 located at the center of the group are oriented to the southwest. The easternmost one is running in the opposite northeast

direction. Both northernmost individuals, the taller and the smaller, are walking northeastward in more or less big strides, swinging their arms. The 3 remaining persons, arranged in a southwest-northeast line, have unique characteristics. The taller front individual is either walking slowly or standing with arms slightly parted from the torso. The second and middle person drafted on top of an eland is standing erect and still. And finally, the third and last person, also “stepping” on the eland back, is tightly bend forward. A body posture usually connected to trance (Lewis-Williams 2015).

The face to face interaction drafted in this portion of Segment D probably stages the reception ceremony of one group - the northeast group - by another - the southwest group. The drafted choreography emphasizes a global movement along the tributary river course, to the confluence with the main larger river. The main river is signaled by a natural feature of the rock-shelter wall surface. Interestingly, there are strictly similar half human representations in “swimming” posture in both west and east banks. The image from the west bank feature half of a human body, head, torso, leg, and arm, the latter stretched and superimposed on the nearby eland. The image from the east bank consists only of a stretched arm and leg. The connection to water courses - narrow valleys - and oriented choreographed movements of humans and wildlife are the main themes of Segment D.

THE STRUCTURE OF SNAKE ROCK PAINTING

The alternative reading of Snake rock paintings presented above features grand movements of ecological communities, including landscape, rivers, trees, humans, large and small mammals, as well as an ostrich.

Segment D stages activities and movements along a river valley, predominantly from higher to lower lands.

Segment C displays the choreographies of large mammals, predominantly large antelopes, moving in both opposite directions.

Segment B, the core of the painting, is also the most ‘contested’ space. It features the aggregation of all the members of the ecological communities in which ancestral San were integrated, with constant ‘re-writing’ and re-

-casting. A significant transformation that can be equated with the performance of a rite of passage, takes place in this space, possibly an aggregation locale. Very few images, among which the bent male in the top and the “fuzzy” short individuals in the bottom east, are drafted in possibly “shamanistic attitude”.

And finally, Segment A, while featuring a double west-east and east-west movement in its part 2, ends with a final west exit in part 1.

The humans and the animals selected to be represented are very likely polysemic. Some animal species may have conveyed more symbolic meaning than others. The eland and the springbok are singled out by some researchers (Lenssen-Erz 1994a, Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2009)

CONCLUSION: ANIMALS FOR THOUGHT

Animals characters are a constant of human folklore. Animals are used to represent “strength”, “intelligence”, “shrewdness”, “stupidity”, etc. *Kwaku Ananzi*, the smart spider, is a key character of Ashanti people tales. *Leuk*, the skilled hare, and *Bouki*, the greedy and clumsy hyena, are core features of west African - particularly Wolof speaking people - tales used for children education. Therefore, it is not surprising that San and peoples of San-descent had devised their own taxonomy of wildlife, with the eland and/or springbok as the key players. These symbolic constructs are however the products of history. They emerged from the historical experience of different human groups in different parts of the world. The ethical practices of ancestral San hunter-gatherers, part of the global community ecology to which they clearly adhere, did not exist since the “origin of time”. This history is clearly difficult to reconstruct but “essentialism” is not the solution. A genealogical study of the symbolic categories of 19th century San is a necessity (Nietzsche 2006).

As inferred from recent San ethnography and extensively discussed by Lewis-Williams and collaborators, “paintings of eland were not merely pictures. ... they were, like the animal itself, reservoirs, rather than merely symbols, of the supernatural potency that permeated the material and spiritual worlds and enabled San shamans to cure the sick, make rain, travel

to distant places and realms, discern the future, and seek out animals they wished to hunt” (Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2009: 49).

In his analysis, Lenssen-Erz (1994b) attempted a comparative assessment of springbok images in the Brandberg paintings and Bleek and Lloyd collection. Springbok are asserted to be largely predominant in the Brandberg paintings repertoire. They are suggested to represent “wealth”, health, and a happy life. For him, the shamanistic dimension postulated for the Brandberg paintings is not pertinent. It is “rather social issues (gender relations, social cohesion), and to some extent ecological issues [that] seem to be the main concern of the arts’ meaning” (Lenssen-Erz 2004: 133).

The shamanistic interpretation of Snake rock painting was suggested by Kinahan (1986, 1996) in his attempt to integrate rock art in his archaeological sequence (Jacobsen 1997). In his perspective, trance figures are symptomatic of social stress generated by contact situations. They are viewed as shamans “appropriating domestic stock” and as such symbolizing the transition from hunting to a herding society. Such a generic interpretation of a particularly intricate visual art creation is daring but does not explain anything. There is nothing in the paintings that suggests any connection to livestock herding and the number of “shamanistic-like” acts is extremely low.

One can expect shamanistic forms of expression to be an integral part of foragers cultural package and as such translatable in visual art forms enmeshed with other aspects of ordinary life. In the case of Snake rock painting, it is predominantly the seasonal patterns of foragers annual cycles that are being featured. “The similarities between the religious beliefs and rituals of all San groups in southern Africa whose ethnographies have been documented, and certain traits in widely distributed rock art images have led to a widely accepted hypothesis that, although these motifs are polysemic, the art is essentially shamanistic in origin.... However, a simple and direct transposition of this hypothesis to interpret all the [Southern Africa ancient visual] art is not tenable, since a large proportion of the images do not appear to be trance-related” (Eastwood & Fish 1996: 59).

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