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RETHINKING THE SOUTHERN AFRICAN ROCK PAINTINGS

James D. LEWIS-WILLIAMS - Johannesburg

Introduction

The rock paintings with which this paper is concerned were executed by the now-extinct southern San (popularly known as Bushmen). These hunter-gatherers lived in most parts of southern Africa, although the paintings are largely concentrated in the rock shelters of the more mountainous regions. It seems that the last painters died about one hundred years ago. Today there are no surviving members of the formerly numerous southern groups; those San currently living in the region of the Kalahari belong to different linguistic groups and do not paint.

The first person to copy the southern San rock paintings in a systematic way was a geologist, George William Stow. In 1870, three years after the commencement of his task, he wrote in a letter to Professor T. R. Jones:

> During the last three years, I have been making pilgrimages to the various old Bushman caves among the mountains in this part of the Colony and Kaffraria; and as their paintings are becoming obliterated very fast, it struck me that it would be as well to make copies of them... This gave rise to the idea in my mind of collecting material enough to compile a history of the manners and customs of the Bushmen, as depicted by themselves. I have, fortunately, been able to procure many facsimile copies of hunting scenes, dances, fightings, etc., showing the modes of warfare, the chase, weapons, disguises, etc. This promises to be a collection of very great interest (Young 1908: 27-28).

Most of Stow's copies were not published until 1930 when, with an introduction and commentary by Dorothea Bleek, they ap-

peared as *Rock-Paintings in South Africa* (Bleek 1930a). They still remain « a collection of very great interest», but Stow unwittingly started a trend that has lasted until the present day: the paintings have been widely regarded as an ethnographic source. If treated with caution, certain valuable information may indeed be inferred from the art (see, for instance, Maggs 1971), but Stow's explicit intention so influenced his collection that he unfortunately gave a distorted impression of the art; thus, whatever ethnographic data may be derived from the art, it is impossible to draw from such a selective collection any conclusions regarding motivation. In addition to distortion entering the record through the selection of the paintings that illustrate the « manners and customs » of the Bushmen, there is in Stow's work another source of error: he frequently places on one plate paintings from different parts of a shelter and so creates a false impression of grouping. Many of the false groupings were noted by Bleek when she revisited the sites and she draws attention to them in her commentary.

In her introduction to Stow's collection, Bleek (1930a: xxiv) discounted the possibility of sympathetic magic being important in the production of the art. She was taken to task for this judgement by the Abbé Breuil (1931) who believed that many of the seventy-two plates could bear that interpretation. In replying to the Abbé, Bleek (1940: xiii-xiv) explained how this false impression arose:

> The Abbé did not realise that the proportion was a result of the white man's selection, first in copying, then in publishing. In a huge cave full of paintings Stow would leave unnoticed hundreds of figures of animals and men engaged in ordinary pursuits — walking, running, jumping, fighting, hunting, eating — to copy some little bit that seemed to portray a ceremony or rite, possibly a magic one. Likewise in settling which of his copies were to be included in the book, these were chosen first, hence the false proportion. Had it been possible to publish copies of whole caves, it would have been clear to the public that the majority of the paintings could hardly have served a magic purpose.

But Bleek's warning went unheeded, as had van Riet Lowe's (1931: 51) salutary remarks: « It is often fatal to work on copies that do not reflect all the work in a cave, and equally fatal to work on copies that are not exact. »

Highly selective publications have continued to appear. There

is doubtless a place for works which present a broad survey of the art, but the basis for such a survey should be intensive studies of limited areas. Rudner (1973: 58), on the other hand, has written: « Some workers have made a wide study of all the rock art, for understanding of the whole is vital to understanding the particular »; but it is difficult to see how a reliable picture of the whole can be achieved without detailed and accurate knowledge of the parts. The general survey should follow, not precede, the intensive study, but rock art workers are constantly tempted to be on the move; the lure of better preserved and more interesting paintings in distant parts can be overwhelming. Willcox's pioneering volumes (1956 and 1963) were excellent and have not been surpassed, but to attempt, at the present time, similar surveys without the basis of intensive and localised studies is anachronistic.

The degree of distortion introduced by eclectic sampling is shown by a quantitative comparison of Stow's copies, Helen Tongue's (1909) selective copies and a non-selective sample of my own from Barkly East; the areas from which these three samples were collected overlap partially (see fig. 1). The extent of the copyists' overall selectivity is indicated in Table 1. In this and in all other numerical statements a « painting » is a single representation, not a group or scene.

Table 1

DEGREE OF COPYISTS' SELECTIVITY

	Total No. of paintings	No. of sites	Avg. per site
Stow	1074	69	±15
Tongue	497	30-40	±14
Lewis-Williams	2361	38	±62

It should be borne in mind that the thirty-eight sites in my sample range from small sites with only one painting to large sites with over two hundred paintings; the copyists, on the other hand, tended to draw their material chiefly from large, well-known sites. An analysis of the content of Stow's copies suggests that 78% of the paintings are of human beings and 22% of animals. Tongue's selectivity produces a different bias: 59% human, 41% animal. This is closer

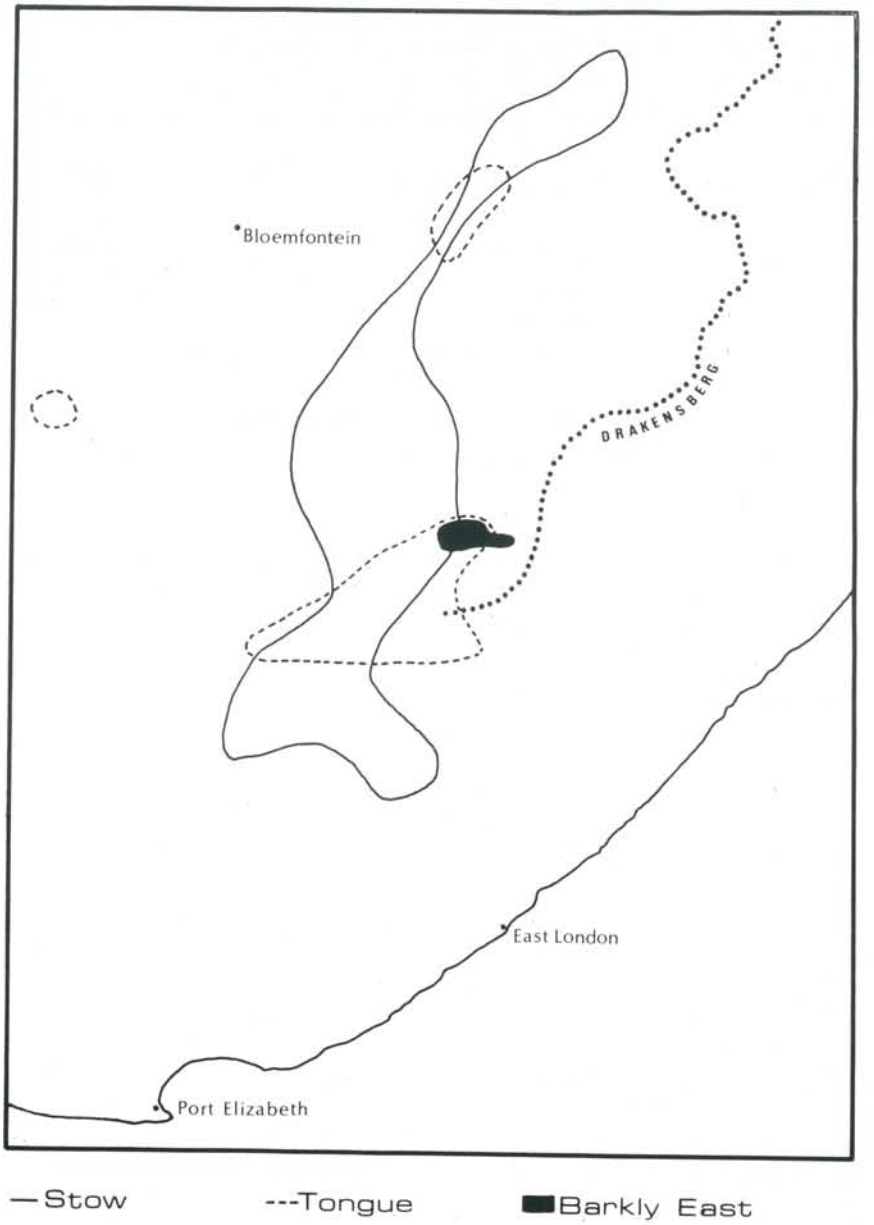

Figure 1 - Map showing the areas in which Stow and Tongue copied paintings and the intensive study area of Barkly East.

to my inclusive and non-selective sample from Barkly East: 55% are human beings and 45% animals. An even more striking difference appears in the proportion of antelope to other types of animal. Stow's work suggests that only 36% of the animals are antelope and Tongue's gives 48% antelope; my sample shows that 90% of the animal paintings are of antelope. The interest of the early copyists in the unusual paintings is further illustrated by the proportion of felines: Stow shows 2% of all animals in his copies to be felines and Tongue 3% in hers, but my Barkly East sample gives a figure of only 0.8%.

The tendentious approach of selecting the most unusual, interesting or beautiful paintings and ignoring the rest has unfortunately been the basis on which most comments regarding motivation have been made. Until recently, writers on this difficult matter have been divided between two theories, although most have acknowledged a probable range of motive: sympathetic magic (e.g. Balfour 1909; Obermaier and Kühn 1930; Frobenius 1931; Holm 1961; Brentjes 1969) and art for art's sake (e.g. Burkitt 1928; Willcox 1963 and 1973; Cooke 1969; Lee and Woodhouse 1970; Rudner 1970). Both these « classic » theories have been imported from western Europe (where they have been used to explain the palaeolithic paintings) without due consideration being given to the very marked differences in context and content between the two arts. I now examine the applicability of these theories to the southern African rock paintings before giving a brief review of an alternative approach based on quantitative analysis.

Sympathetic magic

The « sympathetic magic » theory appears in two main forms, both of which have been proposed in Europe as well as in southern Africa (for a discussion of the supposed use of rock art in rain-making rituals see Lewis-Williams 1977a). One version suggests that the artists used the paintings to gain magical control over the animals they hunted and so secure an adequate food supply; the other expression of this theory proposes the use of the paintings in rituals intended to ensure the fertility of the animals depicted. The many contradictions involved in these theories have been adequately discussed by Vinnicombe (1972a) in her review of some of the books cited above and I shall not pursue them further here. Instead I examine briefly the argu-

ments advanced by Obermaier (Obermaier and Kühn 1930: 57) who is a rare instance of a writer consciously effecting the transfer of the theory from Europe to southern Africa.

In a brief discussion of the European art Obermaier advances five points which he believes demonstrate the existence of magic, but, before he does this, he indicates that he has already prejudged the case on quite different grounds. He claims that « similarity of style presupposes similarity of mental outlook » and therefore « the meaning of the art must be essentially the same for the Bushmen as for the men of the glacial epoch». The whole problem of « style » in prehistoric art is a vexed one, but, however we interpret the word, few would concede much similarity between the Franco-Cantabrian palaeolithic art and the southern African art. Similarities have frequently been noted between the art of the Spanish Levant and southern Africa, but it is not this to which Obermaier specifically refers. The association of « meaning » with « style » is surely unacceptable; it suggests that with every fashionable change in style there is an accompanying change in meaning. This, we know, is not necessarily the case. Obermaier then proceeds to the five points which, he believes, indicate the existence of magic. They are: the drawings of arrows; the custom of shooting at the pictures and images; the situation of the pictures; the occurrence of masked dancers; the representation of the magic itself.

In his consideration of the first point, the depiction of arrows, Obermaier does not appear to differentiate between the Franco-Cantabrian and the Eastern Spanish art; it seems certain, however, that students are correct in regarding these as having been executed in different periods, the palaeolithic and the mesolithic respectively. As Leroi-Gourhan (1968) has shown, the identification of some of the « signs » in the French palaeolithic art as arrows (in any case, a later invention) is open to question; some do not appear near animals and some are shown clearly missing animals, a circumstance hardly calculated to ensure success in the chase. Obermaier is on safer ground when he refers to the paintings of eastern Spain and southern Africa. Here, indubitably, arrows and other weapons are found in abundance. There is, nonetheless, no reason to suppose that the painting of an arrow necessarily implies a magical function: it could just as easily be part of an historical narrative or even a scene to be admired for its aesthetic qualities. Bleek (1930b: 15), in a review of Obermaier's book, also rejects this view of painted arrows.

The second point is similarly unconvincing: as evidence for the custom of shooting at the pictures and images, Obermaier refers to the inevitable Montespan bear, but, as Ucko and Rosenfeld (1967: 188-189) have shown, many of the details of this remarkable object are obscure. Turning to southern Africa, Obermaier finds that « it cannot be proved that the Bushmen used to shoot at the painted or engraved pictures », but he quotes the Frobenius report of a pygmy shooting at a picture drawn in the sand. There does not, however, seem to be reliable evidence for arrows having been shot at any of the San paintings whatever pygmies might have done.

Furthermore, Obermaier's assumption, that the palaeolithic art is located in remote underground chambers, is not entirely accurate: some of it is situated in open shelters and some not far from cave entrances. In applying this dubious criterion to the situation in southern Africa, he writes, « Here, too, the pictures are situated in curious places, frequently in caves, and often quite hidden ». Certainly some of the southern African sites are « curious », as in the case of The Meads and Balloch, two shelters described below, but it would be quite wrong to assume any similarity between the context of the Franco-Cantabrian palaeolithic art and that of southern Africa. Even if a number of the situations indicate that there was more to some of the paintings than art-for-art's-sake, they do not suggest a specifically magical motive; there are other possibilities.

In considering the occurrence of « masked » dancers, his fourth point, Obermaier refers to the well-known figure at Les Trois Freres. Such depictions are by no means common in western Europe, a false impression having been given by the publicity accorded to the celebrated figures from Les Trois Freres and Le Gabillou. In southern Africa they occur more frequently, but they are a very complex feature of the paintings and do not necessarily imply a magical intention. Bleek (1930b: 15), in commenting on Obermaier's argument, offers a wise caveat:

> Some South African rock paintings lack a plain interpretation, it is impossible to be certain what is meant by them; in such cases the surmise that magic was intended is as good as any other, but should not be stated as a proven fact. Moreover, the delineation of a group of masked dancers, who may have been engaged in some ceremonial action, is no proof of the intention of the artist to work magic by his picture.

Strangest of all is Obermaier's handling of his fifth point: the representation of magic itself. He describes a picture from the Saharan art and claims, somewhat unexpectedly, that similar examples are not to be found in southern Africa. Such a statement can only be the result of unfamiliarity with much of the art. Anyone looking for paintings that could be interpreted as representing magic in action need not, as we have seen in the case of Stow, be disappointed. The so-called « flying buck » (Lee and Woodhouse 1964 and 1968) and the therianthropic figures (Pager 1971: 340-344), for example, would fulfil Obermaier's requirements.

Most of Obermaier's arguments depend as much upon what is omitted as upon what is said; like so many other writers he considers only selected examples and not a valid sample of paintings. One striking difference between the European and the southern African art, of which Obermaier was not aware, is the differing proportions betwen human and animal representations. In Europe the art is largely zoomorphic, 96% being of animals (Leroi-Gourhan 1968). In southern Africa the situation is quite different. The percentage of animal paintings in four southern African areas is as follows: Giant's Castle 37% (Lewis-Williams 1972); Barlky East 45% (Lewis-Williams 1977b); Ndedema Gorge 36.9% (Pager 1971); Western Province 22.7% (Maggs 1967). This marked difference in subject matter alone deprecates the incautious transference of theories from Europe to southern Africa. Obermaier's theory was, in any case, first imported by Reinach from Australia, and he was simply putting the process of drawing ethnographic parallels into reverse by ascribing supposed palaeolithic motives to the San. The logic employed by Reinach in initially effecting the transfer from the antipodes to the palaeolithic art of western Europe has been exposed by Lévi-Strauss (1958: 18) who sums up with this warning: « " primitive " art is as far removed from Magdalenian and Aurignacian art as from contemporary European art. »

We should not, however, be too severe on writers like Obermaier because accurate quantitative data were not available in 1930. Furthermore, like Stow and other writers, it was not his primary intention to give detailed attention to the factors which motivated the artists, but rather to place before the public interesting examples of San art; in all such chiefly illustrative works the information is imprecise and the reasoning less than rigorous. Ideas about the European art have in fact so coloured the situation in South Africa that many have found it difficult to examine the problem objectively. A popular book on

African mythology, for instance, includes a copy of a complex panel from a Rhodesian shelter. The caption, which suggests a magical intention, describes the panel as « crowded » with animals (Parrinder 1967: 105). A count reveals that there are just over thirty animals but over a hundred human figures. If the word « crowded » is to be used at all, it must surely refer to the human figures and not the animals. The illustration gives little support to the verdict of the caption — an example of the confusion that characterises so much of the literature. A great deal of the thought concerning motivation is so vague that no purpose will be served in discussing the ideas of writers who have given even less consideration to the matter than Obermaier.

An important contribution was, however, published by Maggs in 1967. This was the first reliable and well-documented approach to southern African art to appear: Maggs catalogued all the paintings in an area five miles by five miles in the Cedarberg. Two very significant points emerged: first, he found that only 22.6% of the representations were of animals, and, secondly, the animals depicted do not bear any relation to the San diet as known from excavations and from the contemporary San of the Kalahari. It appears that, although the San certainly ate antelope, their main source of meat was, and still is, smaller animals such as hares and tortoises (Parkington 1971; Hendey and Singer, 1965; Lee 1968; Silberbauer 1972). Maggs concluded that, if hunting magic played any part at all in the production of the art, it could account for only a small proportion.

In addition to Magg's work other quantitative studies have been undertaken: Pager (1971) in the Ndedema Gorge; Lewis-Williams (1972) in the Giant's Castle area; Smits (1971) in Lesotho; Vinnicombe (1976) in the Underberg district; and Lewis-Williams (1977b) in the Barkly East area. The areas where these samples were collected are indicated in fig. 2. The data from some of these areas and from others given by Rudner (1970) have been compared by Vinnicombe (1972b: Table 1) who draws attention to the way in which « the artists selected certain animals for particular emphasis, while others, equally important to their economy and physical well-being, were almost totally ignored » (id. 195). She goes on to suggest that evidence for « the religious significance of selectivity in the art can be found in the concepts of *n/um*, *n!ow*, and *soxa* » (id. 199; for details of these concepts see below and Marshall 1957 and 1969, Thomas 1959, and Fourie 1928). Vinnicombe's suggestions are far more in keeping with

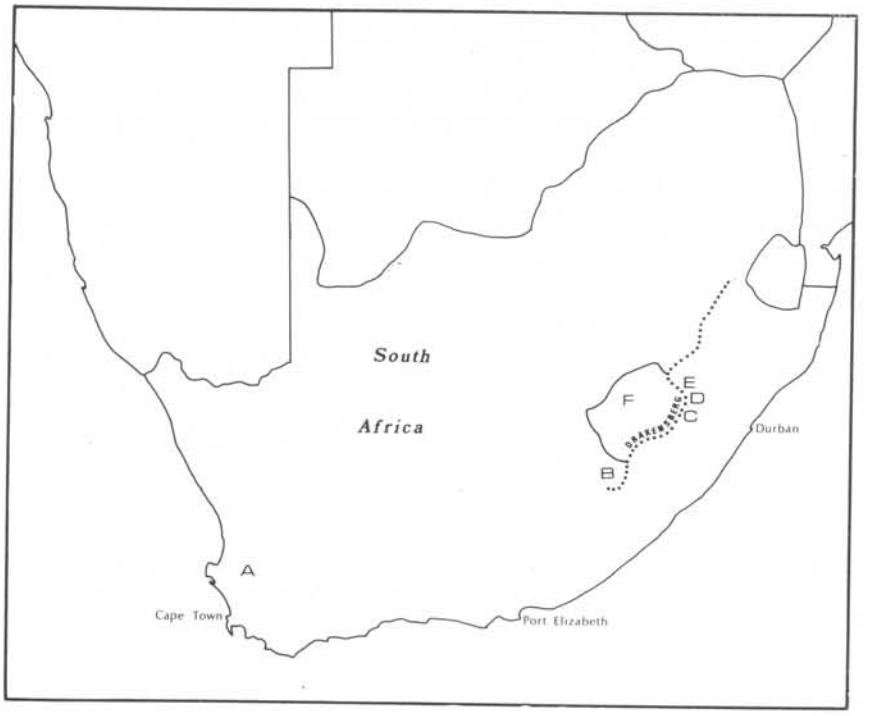

Fig. 2 - Map of South Africa showing areas in which quantitative studies have been conducted A: South Western Cape: Maggs (1967); B: Barkly East: Lewis-Williams (1977); C: Underberg: Vinnicombe (1976); D: Giant's Castle: Lewis-Williams (1972); E: Ndedema Gorge: Pager (1971); F: Lesotho: Smits (1971).

what is known about the San than the idea of simple hunting magic.

The quantitative studies have also shown that hunting scenes are less common than is sometimes supposed; most of the human groups show people walking, running, standing or sitting together. Pager (1971: 335) identified only twenty-nine hunting scenes among the 3,909 paintings of the Ndedema Gorge. An examination of these twenty-nine scenes makes a significant point: eland is the antelope emphasised numerically in the Drakensberg region, yet only four eland hunts are depicted in the Ndedema Gorge, whereas there are sixteen hunts involving small buck (Pager 1971: 336). Very few animals appear in hunting scenes and, curiously, the ones that most frequently do are not the ones that receive numerical emphasis. An analysis of the hunting activities depicted is also significant: of the twenty-nine hunting scenes, only seven show men

actually shooting at the game and only one animal is depicted as having been hit by arrow. Far more scenes (eleven) show men simply running after the game (fig. 3). My Giant's Castle and

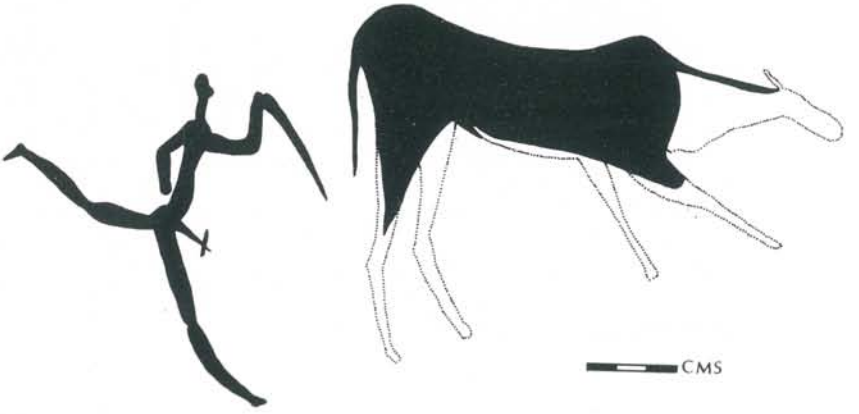

Fig. 3 - Figure pursuing eland. Colours: reddish brown and white. Main Caves, Giant's Castle.

Barkly East studies confirm the analysis presented by Pager for the Ndedema Gorge. In accounting for the numerical emphasis on eland it is, therefore, no longer possible to argue as Lee and Woodhouse (1970: 27) that the eland was simply « the favourite item on the Bushman menu » or that it provided « the most economical quantity of food for the average sized tribal unit ». If this were so, we should expect to find it to be the animal most frequently depicted in hunting scenes and not the small antelope. Clearly the emphasis on certain antelope must be explained in some other way. I return to this crucial point in the final section of this paper.

Art for art's sake

Art for art's sake as an explanation for the European palaeolithic paintings did not enjoy continued acceptance. The location of much of the art in the dark recesses of the underground caverns strongly suggested a more esoteric, even arcane, motive. Further support for this conclusion came mainly from Australia. Reports concerning the religious beliefs of the Aborigines confirmed the view that « primitive

man » was not the simple creature he had been supposed to be, but was capable of evolving comples social structures as well as religious beliefs. This view is expressed by Graziosi (1960: 34) in a discussion of the painted therianthropes of western Europe:

> They can be explained as the expression of a primitive mentality which failed to establish definite boundaries between humans and animals but saw in all the creatures surrounding it a vital expression of nature, of which it felt itself to be an integral part, therefore establishing with those creatures deep indissoluble ties. The spiritual world of Paleolithic man must have been imbued with all this, and surely his imagination, when exteriorizing itself in expressions of figurative art, was deeply influenced by it.

In southern Africa, on the other hand, art for art's sake has continued to receive widespread credence. Willcox (1963: 84) rightly allows that there was probably a diversity of motive but comes down strongly in favour of pure aesthetics:

> As to his motives, whatever part magical intent may have played in the early development of the Eur-African rock art there is little to suggest it in the South African paintings. Some work may have had historical intention or have been done to illustrate a tale but in general the art gives strongly the impression of being *art pour l'art* executed for the pleasure of the artist in the work and the reciprocal pleasure of the beholder. It achieves this effect even on the observer of today.

More recently he has expressed reservations on the newer ideas concerning motivation which I advocate below and has reaffirmed his belief in art for art's sake:

> Vinnicombe and Lewis-Williams, in studies not yet fully published, seek to show evidence of less materialistic motives, the former for an eland cult, and the latter for religious symbolism, carrying the argument into metaphysical realms whither we cannot now follow him. Although more statistical analysis may change the picture I see no reason now to revise my opinion that hunting magic played a part in the early development of the art, and that some traces of it perhaps remained to the end; but that the later work was executed mainly as *art pour l'art*; the artists taking pleasure in seeing animals and human situations created under their hands, and in showing their skill to their small community —

> motives that have moved artists the world over and throughout history (Willcox 1973: unnumbered page).

A similar conclusion is reached by Cooke (1969: 150):

> The development of this art from single unrelated figures to landscape composition, whether achieved independently or by diffusion throughout Africa, shows that this was in the main « art for art's sake », an endeavour by the artist to record scenes and events, sometimes the loss of a headman or often a scene of beauty remembered for its aesthetic qualities.

It is to a consideration of these widely held views in the southern African context that I now turn.

There are perhaps two main reasons why this belief has remained tenable. First is the high aesthetic standard of so much of the work. Much primitive art, like primitive music, is incomprehensible, even grotesque, to a casual western viewer: the distorted proportions, staring eyes and terrifying aspect of many pieces are to him repugnant. Not so the southern San art. The delicate shading, the vivid portrayal of movement and sheer vitality of the work delight the modern viewer and, because it is so captivating simply as art, he feels that there is « no need of a remoter charm, By thought supplied, or any interest Unborrowed from the eye ». Secondly, all the art is easily accessible and the dark somewhat frightening recesses have been avoided by the San artists. Some paintings, it is true, appear to have been executed in positions that must have been uncomfortable for the artists, such as the ceilings of caves or on narrow ledges, but none can be compared with the astonishing inaccessibility of much of the European palaeolithic art.

Part of the problem with understanding the European palaeolithic art is that nothing is known about the purpose for which the caves were used: some appear to have been used very infrequently, but, on the other hand, others contain the remains of hearths. Similar ignorance, it is seldom recognised, characterizes the study of the southern African art. The San certainly lived in decorated caves: we have the word of the early travellers for that and this has been confirmed by excavations. But the art is also found in small shelters and on open rocks that could not have been living sites for a family let alone a hunting band. The small overhanging rock at The Meads,

East Griqualand (Willcox 1963: fig. iii; Vinnicombe 1976: ii), would not shelter even one person, yet it bears a magnificent panel of eland in various positions, foreshortened and exquisitely shaded. It is difficult to understand why an artist would have chosen such a position for his masterpiece. Not only would the painting of the panel have been difficult, but viewing was also accomplished only with some inconvenience (this rock is now preserved in the Natal Museum, Pietermaritzburg).

Another site that has attracted some attention is on the farm Balloch in the Barkly East district. It is situated high on a hill-top and consists of a number of large boulders. The small shelter is entered by bending low; the interior is in the form of a dome. On this curved surface is a painting of what appears to be a lion complete with fearsome claws and teeth. Fleeing from the lion are a number of men from whose heads rise curved lines; above the men are a larger number of « flying buck » (Lee and Woodhouse 1970: fig. 202). Some workers believe that the site was used in initiation ceremonies and that the paintings are didactic. Certainly the shelter could not have been a living site for more that two or three people.

Fulton's Rock, a curious site in the Giant's Castle area with a large number of paintings, is, as I have discovered, open to the cold winds from the mountains and offers little or no shelter from the rain. Lee and Woodhouse (1970: 96) have suggested in a discussion of the possible association of paintings with initiation ceremonies that this site « is just the remote sort of spot that might have provided a focal point for initiates ». Its remonteness, however, is felt most keenly by the modern archaeologist who has to trudge many arduous miles to reach it. These and other similar sites may have been temporary bivouacs, but we do not know for certain to what uses they could have been put.

There is, however, a different and highly significant context that has received insufficient attention: the painted burial stones from the southern Cape coast. A certain amount of confusion has, unfortunately, entered discussion of these stones through the failure of some writers to distinguish between *buried* stones and *burial* stones; the provenance of many, excavated in the first years of this century, is quite unknown, but some were definitely not associated with burials. The most striking burial stone, the Coldstream stone (Haughton 1926; Rudner 1970: pl. 45; Lee and Woodhouse 1970: fig. 4), is thought by some writers to bear a painting of a prehistoric artist together with two other figures (Woodhouse 1968); the suggestion is entertain-

ing but purely speculative. Of more interest is the depiction of all three figures ith « hooked heads » and white faces with diagonal red lines, a feature also found in the Drakensberg paintings.

The representations on the Coldstream stone and the subject matter of the stones in general (Rudner 1971) do not appear to differ greatly from the parietal paintings (Lewis-Williams 1972: 50). There is, as we should expect in a litoral site, a higher percentage of marine animals (a whale and dolphins), but the proportion of animals to human figures does not differ greatly from parietal paintings in other areas. Even though we may not have all the details we should like concerning most of these stones, it is sufficient for our present purposes to observe that the art was, in some cases, found as part of the grave furniture. This clearly suggests that the paintings on these stones were executed for more than aesthetic reasons only: the association of the art with the dead and the deliberate placing of it in a context in which it could no longer be viewed strongly indicate motives other than art for art's sake. Some of the art at least had more than simply aesthetic intentions and was associated with ritual.

The context, then, of the southern African art, with the exception of the burial stones and a few curious sites, does not suggest extra-aesthetic motives as strongly as does the context of the Franco-Cantabrian art. The other major consideration that led European workers away from the art-for-art's sake interpretation, superpositioning, is common in the southern African art; indeed it is one of the most striking characteristics and it is surprising that it has not received more attention (fig. 4).

The commonly held view of superpositioning is expressed by Goodwin (Rosenthal and Goodwin 1953: 22): « The scarcity of a smooth and sheltered " canvas " on which to paint led these artists to ignore the older faded paintings they found, and to paint over them in bright colours. » Battiss (1939: 28) goes further and distinguishes three kinds of superpositioning: « The first type consists of a casual painting of an animal over a faded painting. The second type appears as sheer vandalism: crude figures are superimposed above clear, beautiful work. The third type is intentional and done to represent objects in perspective. »

Studies in the Giant's Castle and Barkly East areas (Lewis-Williams 1972, 1974) have suggested, contrary to the commonly held view, that superpositioning was not a random painting of one representation upon another, but a structured way of linking symbols, a

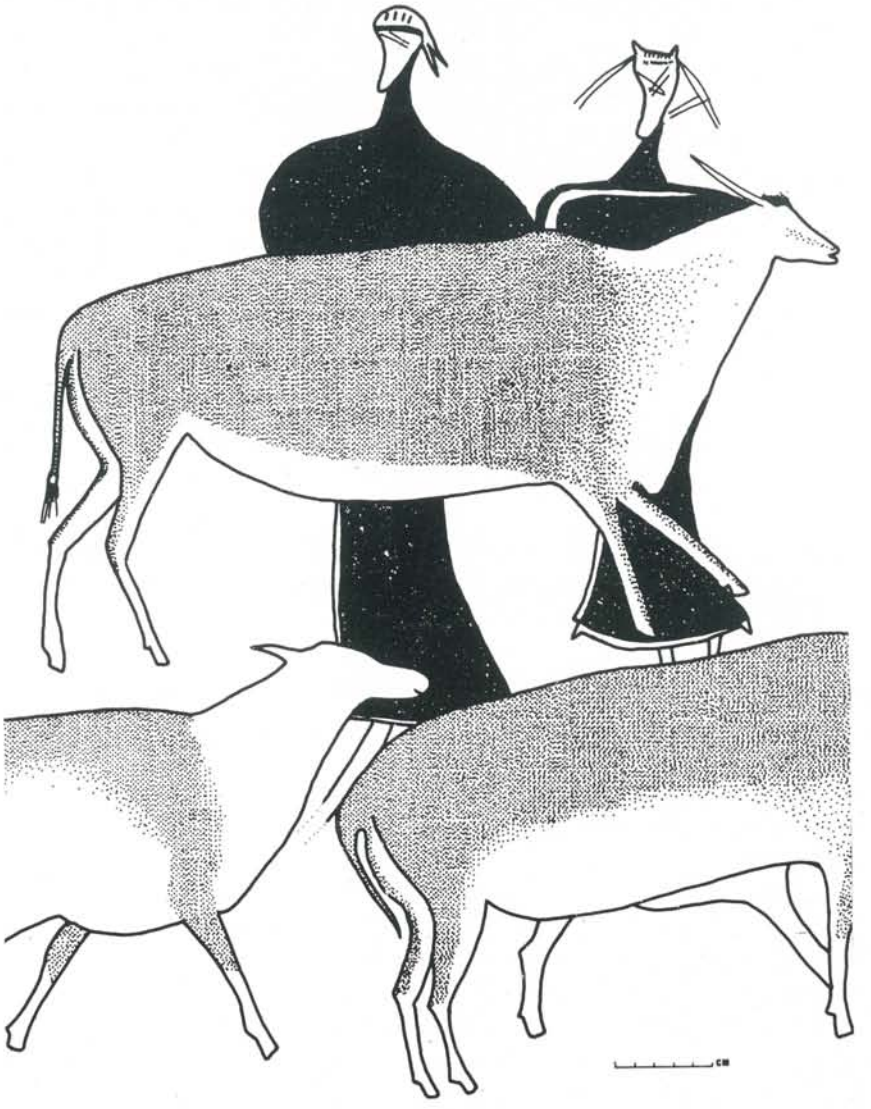

Fig. 4 - Figures clad in long karosses superimposed on eland. Eland in lower right is superimposed on another antelope. Game Pass, Kamberg.

form of syntax. In these studies a distinction was drawn between overlapping and superpositioning: in order to qualify for recording as a case of superpositioning the second painting had to be painted directly on top of the first; the overlapping of limbs or other small areas was not regarded as superpositioning. An analysis of fifty-nine cases of such two-element superimpositions at Giant's Castle showed that the initial or lower element is human in thirty cases and animal in twenty-nine cases; but of the fifty-nine terminal elements only four are human. This shows a marked preference for painting antelope on human beings and antelope on antelope, but a comparative avoidance of painting human beings on antelope. A similar position obtains at Barkly East. The preference of the painters was expressed in another way as well: this is clear when we consider the species involved in superpositioning. Of the 586 eland recorded at Barkly East 20.6% are involved in superpositioning, but only 5.0% of the rhebok are so treated. Only 4.6% of human beings are involved in superpositioning. Following the publication of these data, Pager (1975) examined the superimpositions in the Ndedema Gorge and found a similar pattern. His system of rating placed eland at the top and human figures in the lowest position.

Superpositioning was, furthermore, not the result of inadequate rock surface suitable for painting. Paintings are superimposed even where there is a clean surface immediately next to the first painting. Moreover, the number of superimpositions is not in any way related to the total number of paintings in a site. Table 2 shows the total number of paintings in ten sites together with the percentage of paintings involved in superpositioning; these ten sites have been selected from the thirty-eight sites fully recorded in the Barkly East area. The available rock surface suitable for painting has not been exhausted in any of the sites.

Nor is superpositioning an attempt to depict perspective. An examination of activity groups suggests that the artists rendered perspective by painting the further elements higher than the nearer, rather in the manner of some child art (fig. 5); although limbs frequently overlap, one representation is very rarely painted directly upon others. Exceptions to this are a few cases of men running in step (Lee and Woodhouse 1970: figs. 79 and 80; Battiss 1948: 223; Battiss 1958: 58) and a few groups of eland (e.g. Lee and Woodhouse 1970: fig. 29) thought by some to depict a herd, but this is by no means certain. It seems that superpositioning should now be ac

cepted as a significant feature of San iconography and one that suggests very clearly that there was far more in the paintings than the admiration of beauty for its own sake.

Table 2

PERCENTAGE OF PAINTINGS IN SUPERPOSITIONING
(Barkly East)

SITE	TOTAL NUMBER OF PAINTINGS	PERCENTAGE IN SUPERPOSITIONING
A	247	4.5%
B	232	12.5%
C	171	3.5%
D	168	25.3%
E	108	1.9%
F	98	16.3%
G	42	11.9%
H	27	7.4%
I	14	14.3%
J	8	50.0%

Nevertheless the most significant deprecation of a purely aesthetic interpretation of the art comes again from the quantitative studies which I have already cited. These have shown that in all parts of southern Africa the painters were not free to paint whatever they liked; definite rules of inclusion and exclusion governed the subject matter. The emphasis on eland in the central Drakensberg region has already been mentioned; other antelope, such as springbok and wildebeest, are very rarely painted. In other areas, as Vinnicombe (1972b: Table 1.) has shown, different antelope are emphasised. When an explanation is found for this striking feature, we shall be closer to explaining the motivation for the art.

I spite of what I have so far said, I do not deny that *some* paintings may have been done purely for pleasure, but I find it perverse to the point of obscurantism to maintain, in the light of those features of content and context to which I have referred and, moreover, the considerable ethnography on the San, that the art was chiefly *art pour l'art.*

Fig. 5 - Fight between two groups. Colours: reddish brown and white. Bamboo Hollow, Giant's Castle.

Towards a new interpretation

Any new interpretation of the art must not be based on a subjective and selective record of the paintings: Stow's tendentious approach should be eschewed in favour of the non-selective recording of all the paintings in a large number of shelters in each limited geographical area. This is the only method of obtaining objective and reliable data concerning the paintings and their characteristic. Speculations regarding motivation that do not have this sound basis must remain suspect. However, because the labour involved in the compilation of analytical inventories is time-consuming and has frequently to be performed under adverse conditions, few are willing to commit themselves to such an undertaking. It is significant, however, that the re-assessment of the paintings that is now taking place is a direct result of such an approach.

Most of the workers employing quantitative techniques have been using the criteria and categories originally suggested by Vinnicombe (1967). Following some years of testing this system in the field a small group of workers met in Pietermaritzburg, Natal, in 1974 to standardise recording techniques. The data is now recorded in a manner that facilitates computer analysis (see Evans 1971 and Pager 1971); this is indubitably the most satisfactory and effective way of handling the large quantities of data required for reliable analysis. The new recording system is available to all persons interested in this work. Two levels of recording are offered: a basic level noting site location and art data on a single sheet, and a second detailed level covering numerous characteristics of each representation. It is hoped that the data so assembled will be handled by a central museums' computer. This scheme will make available large quantities of data and facilitate detailed regional comparisons which are rendered more difficult at present owing to points of incompatibility in the systems employed by various workers. Such information, particularly site locations, will, however, be available only to bona fide workers and with the consent of the person who supplied the data; this rectriction is necessary to prevent vandalism.

The system currently being employed entails the recording of a multiplicity of features under a limited number of headings. For each human figure the following are noted: sex, clothing, equipment, head type, headgear, colours, special features (e.g. toes, fingers), size, elevation, position (i. e. running, sitting etc.) and grouping. Animals are

similarly treated where the categories are appropriate. Such a system makes possible objective numerical statements concerning, for instance, human figures with a particular head type which are carrying hunting equipment or are depicted in hunting scenes. The system facilitates an objectivity not previously attainable: statements regarding the paintings are expressed numerically and are no longer a subjective impression received by the viewer.

Once the facts of the paintings have been so assembled interpretation can proceed cautiously. It is important in this hazardous undertaking to examine the paintings not only in the setting of the economic life of the painters, important as this is, but also in the context of the painters' system of values and religion: no aspect of culture or « social institution » should be studied in isolation. Workers in southern Africa are exceptionally fortunate in this respect because two classes of ethnographic data make possible such a programme of research. The first, and the one which must be given precedence, is the work of writers who collected material from the San of the nineteenth century and earlier. These writers, such as the Bleeks, Stow, Orpen and Arbousset, were contemporary with the last of the painters. The Bleek material alone is probably one of the most important collections of mythology and ethnographic data in existence; here are to be found the myths, rituals and beliefs of the now extinct southern San painters (see Lewis-Williams 1977: 64-82). More recently workers like Marshall, Steyn, Heinz, Lee, Biesele, Katz and Silberbauer have collected material from the extant San of the Kalahari. Although these non-painting San live in an environment different from the better watered Drakensberg, they are, nevertheless, of the same racial group and some are still practising a hunter-gatherer economy. Recently discovered striking parallels between northern !Kung and southern /Xam rituals have indeed thrown important new light on the southern rock paintings (Biesele and Lewis-Williams in press).

It is essentially the availability of the nineteenth century and the more recent ethnography that gives the southern San paintings their special interest, although in the past some naive attempts at interpretation have unfortunately tended to discredit the study. There is, however, enough material, both painted and ethnographic, to establish the southern San rock art as one of the most valuable sources for the study of « primitive art ». One of the first writers to demonstrate this importance convincingly was Vinnicombe; her work has shown that the

art warrants more sensitive and sophisticated treatment than has often been accorded it.

In one of her earlier interpretative papers, Vinnicombe (1927b) discussed the numerical emphasis on certain animals in terms of the concepts of *n/um*, *n!ow* and *soxa*. *N/um* is a « supernatural potency » possessed by certain things; it can be good or bad. Amongst the many items said by the Kalahari !Kung to possess *n/um* is the giraffe. Vinnicombe points out that it is « perhaps more than coincidental that giraffe are the predominant animals depicted among the engravings at Twyfelfontein in South West Africa, an area not far removed from the present !Kung habitat » (id. 200). *N!ow* is a force which interacts between people and certain large game animals to effect changes in the weather. Small animals do not possess *n!ow* and this, Vinnicombe suggests, may explain the absence of small antelope from the engraving sites of the northern Cape. « *Soxa* is a term given by Hei-//om Bushmen to the meat of animals killed with the bow and arrow, and which is subject to rigorous dietary prohibitions and rules of etiquette and food sharing » (id. 201). Certain animals are said to be more *soxa* than others, especially the eland which some San do not kill at all.

In a more detailed discussion of the eland, Vinnicombe (1975) analyses the three published myths which concern the creation of this antelope (Bleek 1924: 1-5 and 5-9; Orpen 1874); she suggests that they show a special relationship between man, eland and deity. Then, in a detailed discussion of the rules and prohibitions associated with the eland hunt, she suggests that hunting had a sacrificial significance for the San. She concludes: « Among the Southern Bushmen, the eland became the symbol through which natural phenomena, human experience, cosmic events and divine activity were inextricably interrelated: the eland was the pivot of a value structure upon which the stability of the social organism was dependent. » Whilst I believe Vinnicombe is essentially right in this general conclusion, my reading of the unpublished portions of the Bleek collection and my field work among the !Kung have led me to believe that the real significance of eland hunting lay primarily, not in general or even supposed « sacrificial » hunting, but in a boy's first-kill eland; the published version of the rituals, which Vinnicombe used, does not, by itself, bring out this important point clearly.

Vinnicombe's most recent publication (1976) is the splendid volume, *People of the Eland*; it is a signal contribution to the study of San rock paintings (Lewis-Williams 1976). The first part of her book

is an historical account of the San of the southern Drakensberg which, together with that on the same subject by Wright (1971), makes further historical research virtually redundant. Vinnicombe then allots chapters to individual animal species and to certain human activities depicted in the art, but she does not, I feel, demonstrate clearly enough the many facets of meaning of the polysemic central symbol in San thought and art which, as her title implies, she correctly recognises to be the eland.

An understanding of the meaning of this antelope is, as the quantitative studies have shown, central to a proper appreciation of the art: in a detailed discussion of the eland's associations in San thought and art I (Lewis-Williams 1977) have tried to show that it featured prominently in three San rites of passage, boys' first-kill, girls' puberty and marriage: it was an « *animal de passage* ». The values associated with the eland in these contexts are too complex to consider here, but I have suggested that they lay behind many (but not necessarily all) of the paintings of eland. In addition to this important trilogy of rituals I have also suggested that the eland was important in trance performance. Trance, the esteemed accomplishment of the San medicine men, is the ecstatic climax to which the drama of the medicine dance moves through a crescendo of successive phases; while in trance the medicine man « cures » all present at the dance. The eland, I have tried to show, was, by a metaphorical process, associated with entrance into trance (Lewis-Williams 1977: 189-253). Both trance and the eland were further associated with rain-making. In this important area of San life a series of related metaphors added yet another dimension to what I believe to have been the southern San central symbol (Lewis-Williams 1977: 256-293).

A feature of the metaphors of San (and not only San) thought is, I suggest, a movement from the conceptual to the visual (Lewis-Williams 1977: 328-343). The verbal metaphor of, for instance, the eland in the girls' puberty rituals (« she has shot an eland ») is, at a second level, made visual by the Eland Bull dance (see Bleek 1928: 23; Schapera 1930: 119; Marshall 1969: 365): the miming and certain sounds combine to make the eland metaphor more experiential. Then at a further and to us more enigmatic level the eland is said to « materialise » before the eyes of the ritual participants (Biesele 1975 II: 170).

It is in the light of this characteristic of San thought that we should see the rock art. The paintings are, I believe, another element in one shifting pattern of thought which moves from believing to

seeing: the conceptual to the visual. In putting it that way I do not, of course, suggest that the paintings are the « final stage » of a chronological process; I rather urge that, although each level is distinct in itself, none is isolated from the other levels. The « meaning » of the thousands of apparently unrelated eland paintings is not to be found ultimately or exclusively in one or other of the shifting levels. Some paintings certainly reflect what happened at the ritual level, but neither the paintings nor the metaphorical levels should be thought of in a linear arrangement which can be followed until the point or origin is reached They are, on the contrary, more like a model of a molecule: the atoms are joined in complex interrelationships which do not permit the isolation of one as the ultimate from which the others derive.

From this point of view the traditional explanations for the « motivation » of the rock art appear quite irrelevant, as I believe they indeed are. In answering the simplistic question, « *Why* did they paint? », I reply, not with any theory of motivation, but that visual representation was simply another part of the complex and subtle web of San thought and belief. I do not know « why » they painted, any more than I know « why » they « see » the eland approaching the Eland Bull dance. All I can say is, « This is the way it is in San thought and the content of the art strongly suggests that the paintings belong to the same pattern of believing and seeing ».

It has not been possible in this brief review of recent work on the southern San rock art to give details of the complexities that are now emerging as a direct result of the approach I have advocated in this paper, but I believe I have been able to indicate that some widely held views on the southern San art are in need of drastic revision; the San paintings are as important as the European palaeolithic art, although text books seldom accord them that status. The rethinking of the art that has taken, and still is taking, place has shown that the paintings are not the product of a idle pastime or a naively conceived sympathetic magic, but are a complex semiotic system dealing with central San values. The new insights into San rock art may, indeed, help to throw light on « primitive » art in other parts of the world.

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Fig. 6 - Unshaded polychrome eland superimposed upon the legs of a theriathropic figure. The leading leg of a second therianthropic figure appears lower left. The cloven hoofs of the first figure are leaving hoof-prints painted in black. Note detail of eland's head and hoofs. Site: Burley, Barkly East.

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RIASSUNTO

Per molti anni le pitture rupestri sud africane sono state studiate con metodi eclettici: si sono selezionate le pitture più belle e interessanti mentre il resto è stato ignorato. Il grado di distorsione portato da questo metodo viene qui discusso. Le due fondamentali teorie circa le motivazioni comunemente accettate, quella simpatico-magica e la teoria dell'« arte per l'arte », vengono prese in considerazione e respinte: né l'una né l'altra spiegano infatti il modello emerso quale risultato dello studio quantitativo dei dipinti. Si discute anche circa l'aver enfatizzato alcuni elementi, averne esclusi, al contrario, altri e, infine, circa il problema delle sovrapposizioni. L'A. suggerisce che le pitture rappresentino un complesso sistema semiologico pertinente ad una specifica realtà sociale e religiosa.

SUMMARY

For many years the southern African rock paintings have been studied by eclectic methods: the most beautiful and interesting paintings have been selected while the rest have ben ignored. The extent of the distortion introduced by this method is discussed. The two commonly held theories of motivation, sympathetic magic and art for art's sake, are considered and rejected: neither theory explains the pattern that has emerged as a result of the quantitative study of the paintings. The emphasis on some elements and the exclusion of others is discussed as well as the pattern of superimpositions. It is suggested that the paintings are a complex semiological system concerning social and religious issues.