

Species and supernatural potency: an unusual rock painting from the Motheo District, Free State province, South Africa

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From earlier interpretations of animal imagery in San rock art as desirable menu items or art objects,¹⁻³ researchers of southern African hunter-gatherer rock art have progressed to the understanding that painters and engravers portrayed particular species in specific postures in order to communicate cosmological and religious insights.^{4,5} Here we comment on an uncommon image that advances our understanding of the ways in which painters in a specific time and place combined observations and beliefs about antelope and large herbivores (terrestrial grazing animals heavier than 1000 kg) to produce sophisticated statements about the hunter-gatherer cosmos.

The paintings

We consider images from a site in the Motheo District, Free State province (Fig. 1). To safeguard its location, we refer to it here as Site 30. In many ways the imagery here is typical of sites in the eastern Free State and, indeed, of South Africa's southeastern mountains. Two of the most commonly encountered painted elements — depictions of eland and other antelope, and 'fragments of the dance' — occur here. 'Fragments of the dance' are references to the Great Dance, the central religious ritual of today's San people and their ancestors.⁶ There is, however, a painting that affords us a rare opportunity to understand how individuals manipulated beliefs about the supernatural potency of particular animal species to create unconventional imagery.

Embodiments of animal potency

Images that combine human and antelope features are a widespread feature of southern African hunter-gatherer paintings and engravings. Researchers believe that such confections, known as therianthropes, depict supernaturally potent beings.^{4,7-11} Those that incorporate antelope and human characteristics are the most commonly recorded examples of this category of image, but, as we shall see, therianthropes can incorporate elements associated with other animal species.

We examine three therianthrope paintings at Site 30. Images A and B (Figs 2 and 3) have heads each with a pair of pointed ears and an elongated muzzle, details reminiscent of equids (e.g. zebra) and bovids, especially antelopes. Additional features narrow the range of possible referents — image B has two parallel lines on either side of the pointed ears, features that probably depict horns. Similar horns are also associated with image A. In addition, both images have short curved lines associated with their

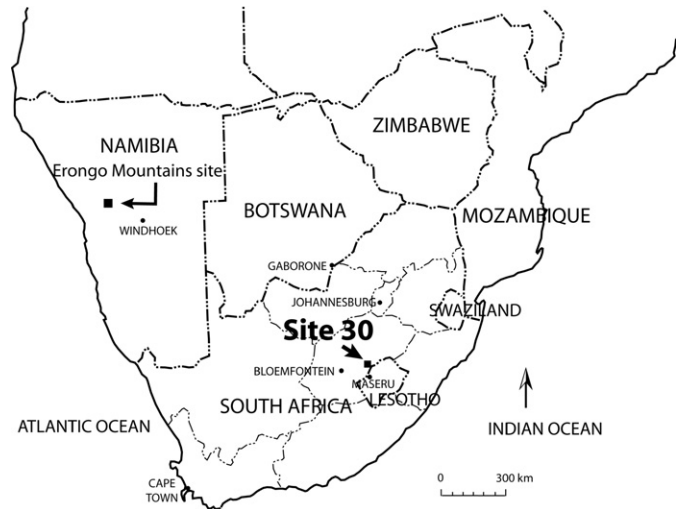


Fig. 1. Sites mentioned in text.

buttocks, a detail that may depict an antelope (but probably not an eland) tail. We conclude therefore that images A and B have antelope-like heads and tails and thus combine human and antelope characteristics.

Equally significant for our interpretation of images A and B is the posture in which both have been rendered. They bend forward from the waist, an attitude that contemporary San dancers often adopt when the supernatural potency in their stomachs is activated and causes stomach cramps.⁴ This posture is one of the most common 'fragments of the dance' depicted by San artists in the southeastern mountains.⁴ These two therianthropes therefore seem to be engaged in the activation of antelope-derived supernatural potency in the ritual context of the Great Dance.

Adjacent to image A are paintings of four seated figures, three



Fig. 2. The back legs of image A (to the left of the images in Fig. 3) terminate in cloven hooves. A series of white paint marks is associated with the figure's dorsal line. Black represents red paint. Deteriorated edges of the painting are shown with a dotted outline. Figure is approximately 100 mm from hooves to rump. Copy and redrawing by J.C. Hollmann.

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of which have breasts and therefore depict women (Fig. 3). The figures all have their arms extended and raised. Although we can no longer discern any fingers, their seated posture and the juxtapositioning of these figures with the characteristic dance postures suggests that these women may have been depicted as clapping their hands. Clapping is frequently depicted at painting sites in the region and has been linked to the clapping of 'medicine songs',⁴ complex rhythms believed to activate the supernatural potency that enables San dancers to enter trance.¹² This interpretation supports our argument that the imagery under discussion is linked to the Great Dance.

An unusual human–animal conflation

In common with images A and B, image C (Fig. 3) has a pair of pointed ears and an elongated muzzle, details that suggest its head is also modelled on an antelope head. The presence of two features on top of the muzzle is, however, uncharacteristic of antelope. These features differ from one another in size and shape — the one closest to the ears is of uniform thickness and about one-third of the height of the comparable feature closest to the image's muzzle. The feature on the left tapers from the base and forms a tip at its apex. Both features appear to have been carefully formed and positioned.

We suggest that the shape, arrangement and positioning of these features represent the front and rear horns of a rhinoceros (Fig. 4). There are two anatomical inaccuracies:

- The front 'horn' of image C is set back several millimetres from the tip of the muzzle, whereas the front horn of a rhinoceros rests on the creature's frontal-bone pedicel and is therefore at the tip of the muzzle.¹³
- The head and muzzle of image C are far thinner and more tapered than the massive skulls of rhinoceroses.

Apparently, the painter (though we allow there may have been more than one) selected only one characteristic of rhinoceroses: their two distinctive horns. It seems likely that, like images A and B, image C was initially modelled on the head of an antelope but then modified to create a distinct category of therianthrope.

Why was image C altered in this way? First, we must take cognisance of other associated painted features. Apart from the head and horns, the rest of image C is anthropomorphic. The arms are held in a distinctive posture — they are bent at the elbow while the upper arms are pulled back. The figure appears to grasp a stick in each hand. These details are associated with the Great Dance, during which healers hold their arms in this fashion and may at times rest the weight of their upper bodies on a pair of dance sticks.¹⁴ Image C therefore seems to be implicated

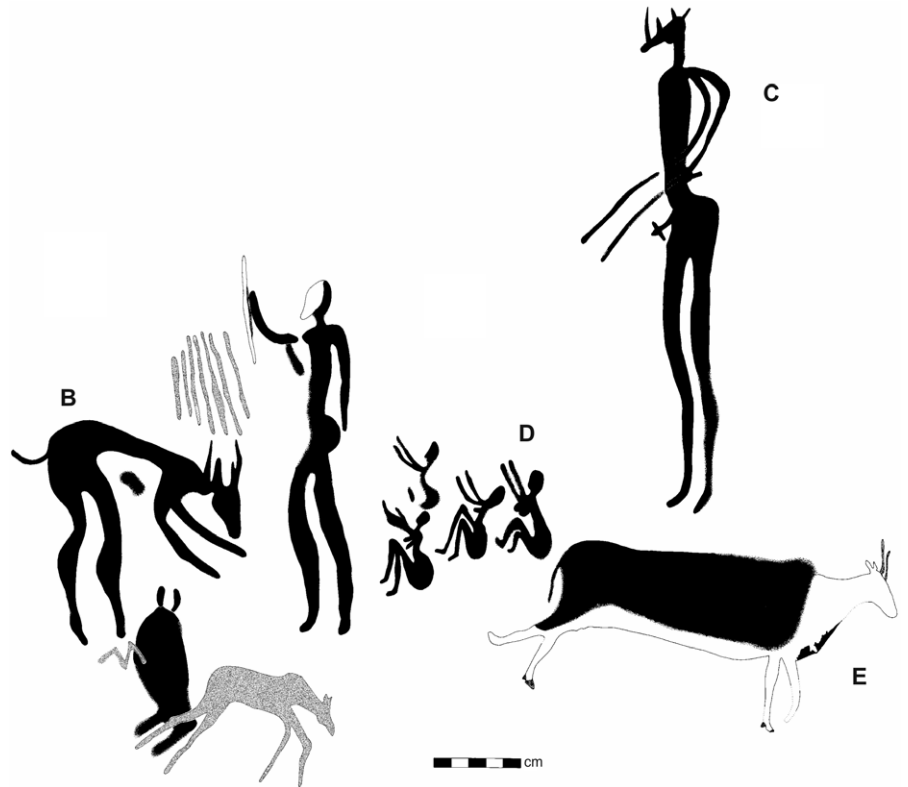


Fig. 3. Copy of a portion of a panel of images from Site 30, Motheo District, Free State province. Image B is an antelope therianthrope; C is an unusual therianthrope with dancing sticks and infibulated penis; D is four seated (female) figures; E is an eland with trailing back leg, possibly dying. Black ink indicates red paint, enclosed areas indicate white paint and stippled areas denote yellow paint. Copy by J.C. Hollmann; redrawing by W. Voorveldt.

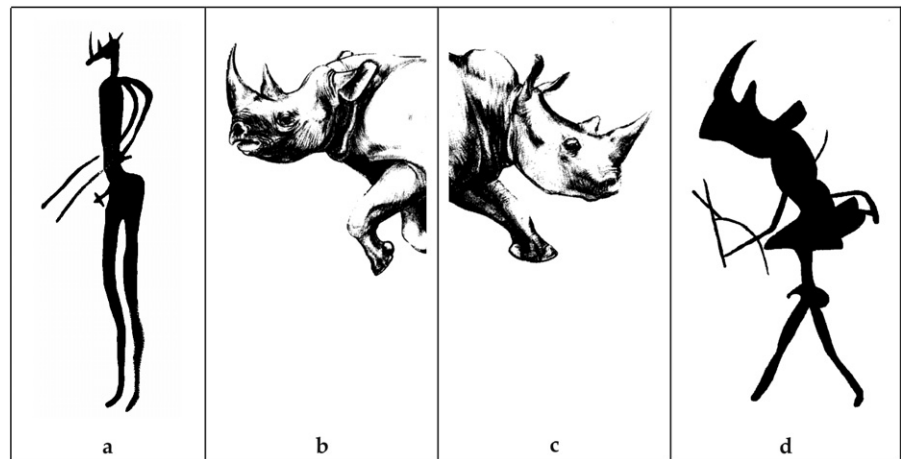


Fig. 4. (a) Image C from Site 30, Motheo District, Free State province (copy by J.C. Hollmann; redrawing by W. Voorveldt) compared with drawings of (b) the head of a black rhino (after Kingdon ref. 43, p. 319), (c) a white rhino (after Kingdon ref. 43, p. 321) and (d) a copy of a rock painting from the Erongo Mountains, Namibia (after Scherz ref. 38, fig. 290), of a combined, human-rhinoceros figure. Rock paintings are in red paint.

in the activation of supernatural potency that is associated with the Great Dance. Unlike images A and B, however, which incorporate supernatural potency embodied by antelope, image C seems to draw on rhinoceros potency. What was the significance of the rhinoceros and why did the painter apparently prefer this species to antelope?

Large herbivores and hunter-gatherer rock art

Large herbivores such as rhinoceros, elephant and giraffe are depicted in hunter-gatherer paintings and engravings in southern Africa.^{15–27} They are, however, far less frequently depicted in the

southeastern mountains than elsewhere.^{4,28,29} Rock art studies suggest that hunter-gatherer choices of subject matter were not simply based on the presence, proximity, or abundance of a particular species. Rather, it was beliefs about the significance of an animal that informed artists' decisions.

Rhinoceros potency

Researchers have advanced several species-specific reasons to account for the choice by both contemporary San groups and ancestral hunter-gatherers of certain large herbivores as natural models for paintings, engravings and rituals.^{21,30–33} These studies identify the large body size of large herbivores and, in particular, the possession of large quantities of body fat (a substance that some Bushman/San groups equate with supernatural potency⁴) as reasons for the incorporation of large herbivores into paintings and engravings. The suggestion is that hunter-gatherers drew on the supernatural potency of rhinoceroses, as they did with eland, to heal and to control the movements and behaviour of game animals.³⁰

Researchers have also argued that hunter-gatherers strongly associated large herbivores, specifically giraffe, elephant and rhinoceros, with rain and rain-making.^{21,30–33} Many San groups conceive of the rain as an animal.^{4,34,35} By virtue of its tendency to sweat profusely, its association with waterholes and because it prefers to be active at night, hunter-gatherers ancestral to San people may have identified the rhinoceros with rain and the rain-animal.³⁰

These facets of rhinoceros morphology and behaviour are not explicitly depicted at the site in question, however, though the painter and viewers of the imagery were almost certainly aware of them. Here the artist chose to depict only rhinoceros horns and no other rhinoceros attributes. What was the significance of this exclusive focus on the horns? We need first to examine the natural historical functions of rhinoceros horns and then determine if these may have any symbolic bearing on their association with image C. (In a discussion that is beyond the scope of our arguments here, Ouzman³⁰ sees symbolic links between the depiction of horns and gender relations.)

Rhinoceros horns grow continuously up to 150 cm in length and are used in horn-fencing and thrusting between rival males.¹³ They are also formidable weapons — a rhinoceros has been known to impale a lion in defence of its calf.¹³ The artist may have believed that the natural functions of rhinoceros horns were a counterpart to the rhinoceros' supernatural potency and, therefore, that those specimens with long horns may have been considered to be especially potent. This supposition may account for the many engravings of rhinoceroses with long (often exaggeratedly so), front horns^{7,15,30} (Fig. 5). There is also an intriguing set of engravings in which two rhinoceroses are linked by an engraved line between the animals' front horns (Fig. 5). This line may be similar to lines elsewhere that have been identified as 'threads of light', or 'paths' that connect with the spirit world.³⁶ The association of rhinoceros horns with image C may therefore reflect the therianthrope's possession of the supernatural potency that facilitates transcological journeys.

'Species' of supernatural potency

We began by pointing out that most of the images at Site 30 are typical of this region — paintings of eland are juxtaposed with 'fragments of the dance' and human-antelope confections. Numerically, the paintings are thus overwhelmingly predicated on antelope potency. It is against this background that we must assess the significance of the unique inclusion at this site of an

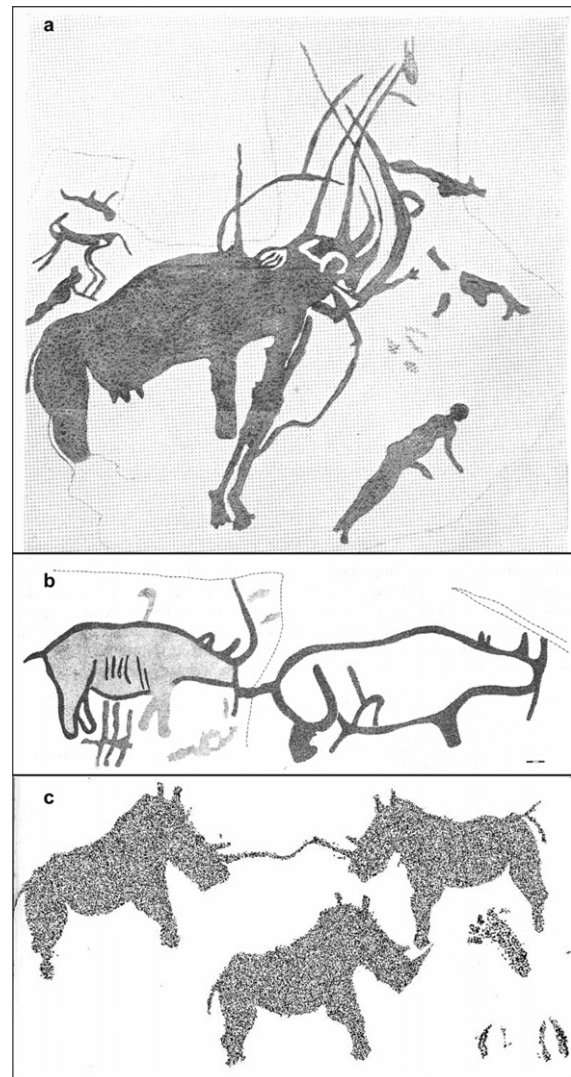


Fig. 5. Many engravings of rhinoceroses feature exaggeratedly long front horns (a and b) and there is an instance in which the front horns of two rhinoceroses are linked (c). (a) after Wilman ref. 15, plate 51; (b) after Ouzman ref. 30, fig. 5b; (c) after Dowson ref. 7, fig. 125.

image that may draw its power from a quite different taxon — rhinoceros.

Although San rock engravings of rhinoceros are common,^{15–20} paintings of these large herbivores are far less numerous,³⁷ while paintings of human-rhinoceros confections seem to be extremely rare; besides the image under discussion, we know of only one other convincing painted instance on the subcontinent: it is in the Erongo Mountains in Namibia³⁸ (Fig. 1). Why then did the Erongo and Site 30 artists, over 2000 km apart, deviate from the antelope 'convention'?

In our attempts to understand the significances of hunter-gatherer imagery it is crucial that we are aware of the dynamics that pertain between an individual and group norms and conventions. For instance, Biesele³⁹ observed that most Ju/'hoan ritual specialists' descriptions of trance experiences are quite similar because people are conditioned to expect the same experiences as everybody else. At the same time, however, Biesele has emphasized that the Ju/'hoansi tolerate and even respect a degree of deviance from these norms. Individuals' trance experiences, for example, are accepted as valuable revelations of the spirit realm.^{11,40}

In this way, individuals within San communities may advance

idiosyncratic viewpoints and experiences of the spirit realm. These viewpoints consolidate and entrench ritual practitioners' social position and status.^{11,40} The manipulation of rock art imagery (in this case, the creation of a rhinoceros therianthrope in contradistinction to adjacent antelope therianthropes) may be an aspect of such a dialectic (see Dowson's studies^{41,42} of the role of the individual in creating rock art imagery). An individual may have decided that, rather than creating a human-antelope conflation that draws on antelope potency, he/she would paint a combination that points to a species of supernatural potency from a different kind of animal, a rhinoceros. A recent analogous instance of a such a shift is the story of Be, a Ju/'hoan woman who received the 'gift' of a new giraffe medicine song in a dream.³⁹ This song rapidly replaced the older gemsbok song. The image at Site 30 may also have come to the painter in a dream or vision. In this way, the painter distinguished him/herself by possession of supernatural potency derived from a highly unusual species. The words of a Ju/'hoansi storyteller are worth quoting in this regard:³⁹

Yes, of course, some people tell stories one way, some another [But] all these stories people use different words and names for the same things. There are many different words and names for the same things. There are many different ways to talk. Different people just have different minds.

In an analogous fashion the Site 30 anomalous rhino therianthrope, an unusual 'species' in a conceptual world dominated by antelope, may be an example of an individual manipulating conventions to communicate familiar concepts in novel ways.

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