

Seeing is deceiving: rock art and the non-visual

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Abstract

The visual primacy of rock-art imagery can sometimes blind researchers to equally important but less obvious, non-visual aspects of rock art. Recent work from southern Africa indicates that certain San rock engravings were hammered, rubbed, cut and flaked in order to produce sound; to touch certain numinous images and rocks; and to possess pieces of potent places. By combining rock art's non-visual appeal with the concepts of questing and desire we may understand how body, landscape and mindscape combined in an aesthetic and sensory articulation.

Keywords

Rock art; southern Africa; sound; touch; quest.

Tutting to an anxious eye
That with intrusive restlessness beats off
Simplicity and self-presented truth.

I speak in recollection of a time
When bodily eye, in every stage of life
The most despotic of our senses, gained
Such strength in me as often held my mind
In absolute dominion.

(Wordsworth, *The Prelude*)

Seeing – but believing?

Humanity's aesthetic capability is considered to be both biologically (e.g. Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1988) and culturally conditioned (e.g. Adorno 1984; Maquet 1986: 1–13). Yet much of this aesthetic is based on relatively recent post-Enlightenment thinking (e.g. Bernstein 1992; Eagleton 1990) that suggests a separation between world and self. Simply put, the world is most typically constructed as an entity external to a unitary Cartesian self (e.g. Carrithers



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et al. 1985; Descartes 1995). This unitary self or ego comes to know both itself and the external world via sensory perception – by hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and, above all, by seeing. ‘Seeing is believing’, or so the saying goes, and our reality is largely the product of a world-view. Similarly, our language and our thoughts are shot through with visual metaphors such as: ‘I see’, ‘The evidence shows’ and ‘It is apparent that’ (see also Classen 1993: 60–72; Jay 1994). Sight has long enjoyed eminence as the ‘sense of reason’ (e.g. Bataille 1987) and sight has often served us well in the construction and negotiation of complex external and internal realities. However, over-reliance on a single sensory perception can lead to a skewed aesthetic appreciation of the world and the self (e.g. Elkins 1996; Mitchell 1986). Utilizing multiple senses allows each to validate or refute the other and to open up the possibility of new and non-visual ways of apprehending the world and the self (e.g. Howes 1991). For example, is ‘pain’ adequately described as a form of ‘touch’? And how to describe the electromagnetic force experienced by all animals (Ackerman 1991: 302; Classen 1993: 1–11)? Though rock ‘art’ is well placed to take advantage of our visual acuity and often makes use of cunning visual conceits, the term ‘art’ can also be singularly unhelpful (Heyd 1999). The apparently overwhelmingly visual nature of rock ‘art’ may blind us to uses of the imagery, the rock, the rock-art site and the landscape that do not obviously fall within the eye’s compass. I suggest that the rock art¹ of southern African gatherer-hunter ‘Bushman’ or ‘San’² represents a much more complete aesthetic synthesis and world understanding than has previously been realized. Indeed, it is by considering these non-visual usages – which approximate our senses of hearing, touch and desire – that we may come to a more forceful realization of the very partial nature of our senses and our similarly partial perception of the world and of our selves. In southern Africa available ethnography and related archaeology indicate that numerous San societies perceived the external world as consisting of at least three interdigitating or connected worlds, which could be further subdivided (e.g. Ouzman 1998: 34–9; Solomon 1997). The upper and lower worlds constituted the extra-ordinary Spirit World in which God, lesser gods, the spirits of the dead, supernatural people, potent animals and so forth lived. The middle world approximated the Ordinary World in which ‘normal’ people physically dwelt. All three worlds were considered real and potent landscapes in which one could experience a range of emotions and events (e.g. Guenther 1999: 58–94; Katz et al. 1997: 106–8; Keeney 1999: 62–3). The boundaries between these three worlds were considered membranous and context-contingent so that the Spirit World was everywhere immanent. The Spirit World’s immanence was manifest at certain potent locales in the Ordinary World – often in the form of rock-art sites. Rock-art sites are thus best understood as places where a world order could be contemplated, questioned, supported or altered at both corporate and individual levels. Much of this ‘mindscaping’ (Ouzman 1998) – shaping the landscape culturally – is visible in the form of engraved and painted imagery. Still deeper levels of contemplation may be fathomed by considering the non-visual aspects of San rock art.

Rock-engravings

Most of the following discussion centres on the under-researched San rock-engravings found in the central interior of southern Africa (Fig. 1). These rock-engraving sites

typically take the form of boulder tumbles, glaciated pavements, hills, ridges and rocks located within a semi-arid and predominantly flat and rocky landscape that has isolated and impressive hills and mountain ranges, vast plains and few watercourses. Sites can comprise a single image on a single boulder or over 10,000 images that sprawl over several kilometres; though 30–350 engravings per 250 m² site is most typical. The rocks chosen for engraving are usually Ventersdorp diabase – a dolerite or 'ironstone' rock with a very dark, almost black outer cortex covering a much lighter, almost white heart rock beneath. Newly made engravings thus contrast strongly with the unengraved rock, acquiring a dark patina over time. Available dating evidence suggests that the San rock-engraving tradition is at least 14,000 years old (Thackeray 1983). Rock engravings seldom display the same fine detail or occur in the compound 'scenes' common to rock paintings and though both forms of rock art represent the extra-ordinary symbolic and spiritual endeavours of San communities and individuals, the precise relationship between rock engravings and rock paintings remains unclear. Rock engravings have attracted less research interest than rock paintings because of their location in harsh landscapes and their apparent visual simplicity (but see Fock 1979; Fock and Fock 1984, 1989; Scherz 1970, 1975; Wilman 1968 for quantitative analyses; and Deacon 1988; Dowson 1992; Morris 1988; Ouzman 1995, 1996a, 1996b; Walker 1997 for interpretative work). Significantly, it was rock engravings and not rock paintings with which almost all ethnographically observed San were most familiar (e.g. Bleek and Lloyd 1911: xiv; Deacon 1988). The rock-engraving heartland of central South Africa, southern Botswana, Namibia and southern Zimbabwe (Fig. 1) neatly overlaps with the areas in which these San communities lived. This spatial overlap serves to bolster our confidence in the available ethnography and increases the specificity of analysis. To ethnographically informed analyses of rock engravings we are able to add the concept of 'landscape' as:

a frame for discourse that encourages the development of metaphors, which enables the exploration of old topics in new ways, and which may provide the framework for the construction of new theories.

(Morphy 1995: 205)

In this way ethnographic specificity and landscape's heuristic potential may allow new and varied views on specific rock-engraving sites and images. For example, most rock-engraving sites have non-representational culturally manufactured marks that occur both as sub- and super-impositions with engraved images and which are seldom remarked upon (e.g. Fig. 2; site 1). These non-representational marks may be placed in three broad categories: hammering; rubbing and cutting; and flaking.³ These marks are visually and procedurally different from the many ground, hammered, rubbed and scraped marks produced by utilitarian activities such as cracking nuts, grinding plant food, making beads and sharpening tools; activities that seldom occur on engraved rocks. Ironically, without their visuality the meanings of these non-utilitarian marks might never have become known. I examine each category of mark in turn and consider their meanings in terms of the non-visual – specifically sound, touch and the desire to possess pieces of potent places.

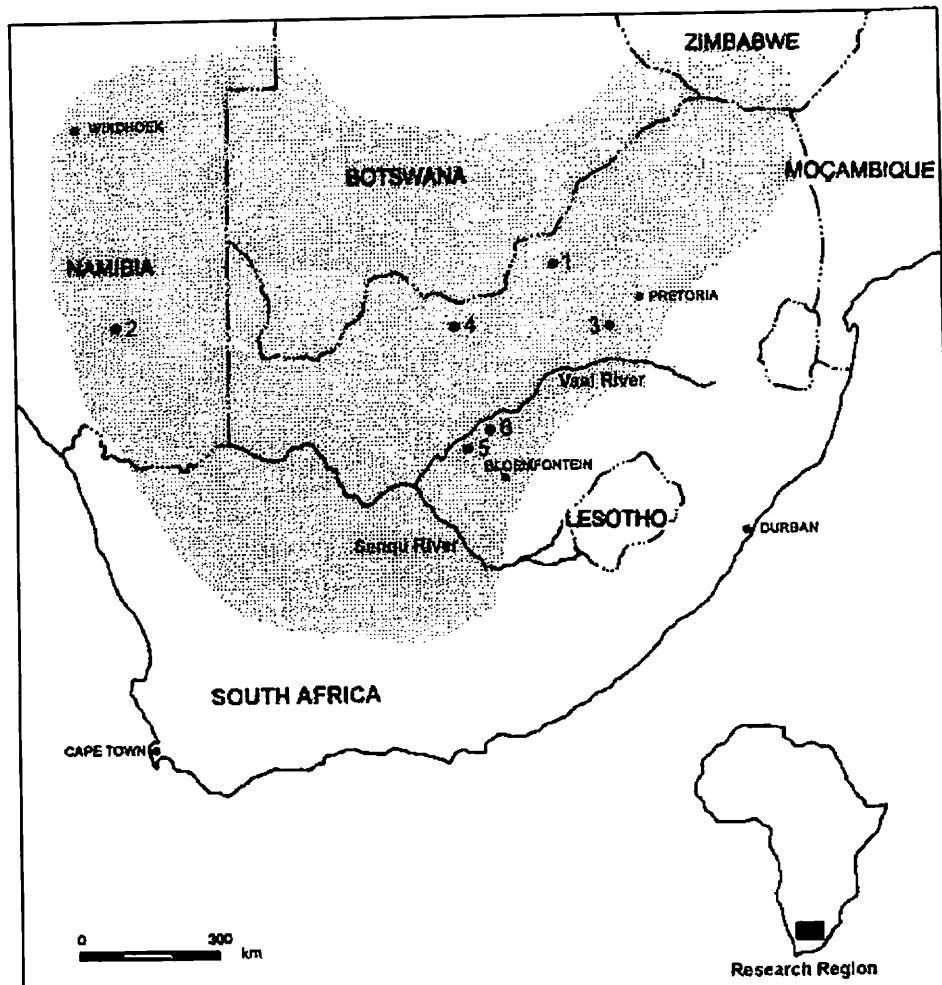


Figure 1 Map of southern Africa with rock-engraving heartland and key sites.

Resounding rocks

The need to create sound is a fundamental human trait and makes for a vigorous research field (e.g. Bregman 1994; Rouget 1985), with rock art being no exception (e.g. Dauvois 1996; Hedges 1993; Huyge 1991; Scarre 1989). The gist of these researches is that sound – especially percussive sound – often accompanies ritualized human behaviour. Echoes were, for example, considered by many cultures to be a supernatural phenomenon, and many rock-art sites echo – leading to the hypothesis that sound reflection was influential in the placement and subject matter of certain rock arts (Waller 1993). In a sample of 762 San rock-engraving sites spread over 800 000 km², eighty-four sites (11 per cent of sample) co-occur with 'gong rocks'. 'Gong rocks' are naturally occurring ironstone boulders that either rest on top of other ironstone boulders or have a natural resonator (Plate 1; site 2).



Plate 1 Gong rock with rock cortex removed by hammering. Southern Namibia.

Though a common landscape feature, only a small percentage of gong rocks bear human hammer marks. These humanly hammered gong rocks co-occur with rock engravings in all but six instances. When struck, even with a bare hand, these gong rocks emit a harsh metallic sound rather like striking a blacksmith's anvil with a hammer. The sound is usually restricted in tone and timbre, though some gong rocks have a three-octave range (e.g. Fagg 1997: 35–40; Fock 1972). In each instance, the places where the gong rock has been struck corresponds with a resonant 'sweet spot'. In addition to gong rocks almost all southern African rock-engraving sites bear groupings and lines of non-representational hammer marks (e.g. Fig. 2). Care must be taken not to confuse appearance with meaning or of homogenizing visually identical but epistemologically separate marks. For example, it does not appear as if these hammer marks represent the bright pinpoints of 'entoptic' light sometimes 'seen' in an altered state of reality (e.g. Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1988). Rather, it is only when one strikes these rocks with the palm of a hand, a piece of wood or a cloth-wrapped rock that the function of many of the hammer marks becomes apparent. As with gong rocks, striking these hammered rocks produces a percussive metallic sound. Many of these non-representational hammer marks may thus represent the visual residue of aurality. A physiological explanation for the co-occurrence of sound and image is that repetitive percussive sound can induce a heightened state of reality (e.g. Needham 1967; Neher 1962). Feelings of general euphoria as well as sensations of fear, angst and disassociation from one's body can result from the combination of percussive



Figure 2 Hammer and scratch marks on an engraved rock that has rhino-rubbing. Originally North-West Province, South Africa. Scale bar is 30 mm.

sound with strenuous physical activity – such as dancing (e.g. Hanna 1977) – that typically accompanies sound-dominated events:

My skull is a drum; each great beat drives that leg, like the point of a stake, into the ground. The singing is at my very ear, inside my head. This sound will drown me! 'Why don't they stop!' I cannot wrench the leg free. I am caught in this cylinder, this well of sound.

(Neher 1962: 157)

In the case of San communities, the example of a sound-dominated event *par excellence* is the medicine or trance dance (Marshall 1969). The frequent depiction of the medicine dance in rock engravings and rock paintings throughout southern Africa attests to its pervasiveness and antiquity. That the medicine dance is still performed today (e.g. Katz et al. 1997: 71–83), when most San communities are suffering tremendous social dislocation, marginalization and stress, attests to its centrality. Typically, the medicine dance occurs at night and involves everyone in the community (e.g. Katz 1982: 120–2; Marshall 1969: 357–8). People sit around the dance fire and clap, sing, dance and trance for many hours. Lorna Marshall evocatively captures the essence of such a dance:

In the orchestration of thudding feet, swishing rattles, and the voices of the singers, the women's clapping is not an incidental accompaniment. It contributes greatly to the intricacy of the rhythm pattern, and it adds brilliance to the thudding and swishing.
(Marshall 1969: 365)

The flickering firelight of the dance serves to hide more than it reveals and the importance of ordinary vision decreases and aural aspects are ascendant. Many rhythms and sounds intermingle creating a dense soundscape. The shrieks and utterances of the trancers are highly formalized and represent an alternative discourse. Marshall is correct that medicine dance sounds are not an 'incidental accompaniment' and the sound structure mirrors, in onomatopoeic fashion, the sonorous Spirit World, described thus by the /Xam man /Han=kass'o: 'O beast of prey! [respect term for a shaman] Thou art the one who hearest the place behind [the Spirit World], it is resonant with sound' (Bleek and Lloyd 1911: 247). Similarly, in the 1970s Beh, a !Kung (!Xun) woman saw:

a herd of giraffes running before an approaching thunderstorm. The rolling beat of their hooves grew louder and mingled in her head with the sound of the sudden rain. Suddenly a song she had never heard before came to her, and she began to sing. G//aoan [the great god] told her it was a medicine song.
(Bieseile 1993: 67)

One of the primary functions of the medicine dance is to create a physical and emotional context within which the shaman can operate. A large part of the shaman's activities were conducted in the 'Spirit World' – what we call an 'altered state of reality'. In order to transcend the permeable but fraught boundary between Ordinary and Spirit Worlds, physical exertion, mental energy and pain were required of the shaman:

In trance, with the support of the women in the community, who sing and clap, a master of trance works himself into a state where he transcends himself and enters the realm of the supernatural where the ghosts of dead ancestors live. Here he struggles with the ghosts. The struggle is intense both emotionally and physically. He is overcome with pain and fear, afraid that he will lose himself in the realm of the supernatural and not return.
(Wiessner and Larson 1979: 25)

Sound is able both to facilitate the transition of state and help the shaman in the invertebrate, uncertain and often dangerous Spirit World in two ways:

First, percussive sound acts as an analgesic by blocking or overriding pain (Gardner and

Licklider 1959). The medicine dance's percussive rhythms approach the 10-hertz alpha cycle of the brain (Cytowic 2000: 202; see also Hobson 1994) and help induce a state qualitatively different from a waking state of reality (e.g. Dobkin de Rios and Katz 1975; Tuzin 1984). The cacophony that is the medicine dance is thus a physiological resource that the shaman can and must use to cross the painful threshold between worlds/states.

Second, once the threshold has been crossed, the shaman has to exert considerable energy in maintaining her/his identity and purpose in the Spirit World. Even one's ego is susceptible to drastic changes to the extent that gender and gender allegiance becomes uncertain and may transform into entirely new gender identities. In an altered state of reality, one's normal sensory perceptions alter radically and one's sense of separation from self becomes marked. In the ritual context of such activities the distinction between sound, rhythm, touch, smell, taste, desire and the like may become confused. Our sensuist nature is such that even 'daily life is a constant onslaught on one's perceptions, and everyone experiences some intermingling of the senses' (Ackerman 1991: 290). Sometimes this intermingling is biologically determined by an overdeveloped limbic system in 'synaesthetes' – people who confuse and conflate sensory perceptions and who can, for example, 'hear' colour and 'taste' sound (Baron-Cohen and Harrison 1996).

Whether synaesthete or not, the only constant in an inversive altered state of reality is the insistent, percussive sound and rhythm of the medicine dance that reminds the shaman of the Ordinary World and guides her/him back to it. Some hammer marks at rock-engraving sites may have been made by trancing shamans who wished to alert the Spirit World to their impending entry by tapping or hammering on rocks or by people calling the shamans back to the Ordinary World. This suggestion represents more than speculation given the widespread San belief that certain rocks were potentially permeable interfaces between Ordinary and Spirit Worlds (Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1990). Consider also the role of the 'audience' at such a medicine dance, who did more than provide a conducive atmosphere for trancing shamans. They too became caught up in the peristaltic rhythms and sounds of the dance and may have wished to add to the dance's rhythm or accentuate particularly important passages or phases of the dance. San societies were thus deeply concerned with producing sound – by singing, clapping, dancing and by hammering certain rocks and engraved images.

Touchstones

Hammering rock with rock, wood or one's bare hand necessitates a repetitive action that produces not only percussive sound, but also a characteristic stinging tactile sensation. In this way, the auditory power of sound and rhythm combines with a thrumming vibration felt by the body (e.g. Hart 1990: 62, 68–82) to induce or intensify a state of reality in which people experienced central religious truths. These central religious truths were not just reified concepts – they were embodied in certain rocks and images that people accessed by coming into contact with them – literally. At 103 (13.5 per cent of sample) of the 762 San rock-engraving sites studied there is evidence of human rubbing of certain engraved rocks (see Yates and Manhire 1991: 4, 8–10 for human rubbing of certain rock paintings). Close examination reveals that the rubbed areas on these rock engravings are very

restricted and precise and could therefore not be the product of rubbing by animals like rhinoceroses who rub their bodies against trees and large standing stones to get rid of ectoparasites (Skead 1976). Unlike the diffuse, undifferentiated patches of animal rubbing, the humanly rubbed areas on engraved rocks have flat cross-sections that do not bear striations, which indicates that the rubbing was done not with a stone or hard object, but with a finger or a piece of animal hide. In southern Africa, rubbing is a rare engraving technique and in most cases it is an additive, post-engraving mark that focuses on select imagery. For example, a gynandromorphic or dual-sex eland (*Tragelaphus oryx*) engraving has two precisely incised rectangular outlines that circumscribe patches of human rubbing (Fig. 3a; site 3). One of these rubbed patches has been very carefully placed on the eland's nuchal hump – one of a restricted range of anatomical areas considered significant in San shamanistic practice (Lewis-Williams 1981: 95). Similarly, a nearby incised eland has a glossy, very noticeably rubbed forelock (Fig. 3b) – the area where the powerful /Xam trickster deity /Kaggen liked to sit (Bleek 1924: 11). Two hundred and twenty-four kilometres to the west-south-west is a rock-engraving site at which the foreleg, back, nuchal hump and horn of an engraved white rhinoceros (*Ceratotherium simum*) and the belly of an adjacent, finely engraved eland bear smooth, finger-width rubbed lines (Fig. 4; site 4). In these and other instances only certain types of images – usually large antelope like eland, megaherbivores like rhinoceros and occasional human figures – have been rubbed. In terms of San belief, eland (Vinnicombe 1976: 163–6) and rhinoceros (Ouzman 1996a: 42–59) were spiritually pre-eminent animals. They enjoy greater attention to detail and a greater variety of engraving techniques than any other image class – including sustained rubbing. To produce the kind of rubbing found in Figures 3 and 4 would have required generations of people repetitively rubbing the hard iron-stone.

This immense and sustained labour centred on the belief in the rock as a permeable interface between Ordinary and Spirit Worlds. The act of engraving removes the outer layer of the rock to expose the lighter, contrasting rock beneath. Otherwise put, the engraved image resides either in the Spirit World or in an ambiguous space between Worlds and becomes a potent, even numinous image and object (cf. Otto 1950). Indeed, the San aesthetic was such that they did not consider engravings to be 'images' or representations – rather, these rock-engravings were the Spirit World animals and beings emergent. Rubbing them allowed people to access the potency they embodied. Repetitive rubbing, possibly with a strong-smelling animal hide, and the sweat from one's exertions under the hot sun would have created a powerful and visceral bodily engagement with image, rock and the Spirit World beyond. Another, related way of comprehending the activity of rubbing certain images relates more immediately to the shaman. The shaman is considered a potent being (e.g. Katz 1982: 240–1; Keeney 1999: 99–101) whose touch is of particular importance as it is by touching people and rubbing them with blood or sweat that healing and catharsis occur (Katz 1982: 106–7, 168):

During !aia [deep trance] the reality of the unseen dominates. Like healers in most parts of the world, the Ju'hoansi lay on hands to pull out the sickness. They place their fluttering hands on either side of the person's chest or wherever the sickness is located. They touch the person lightly, or more often vibrate their hands close to the skin's

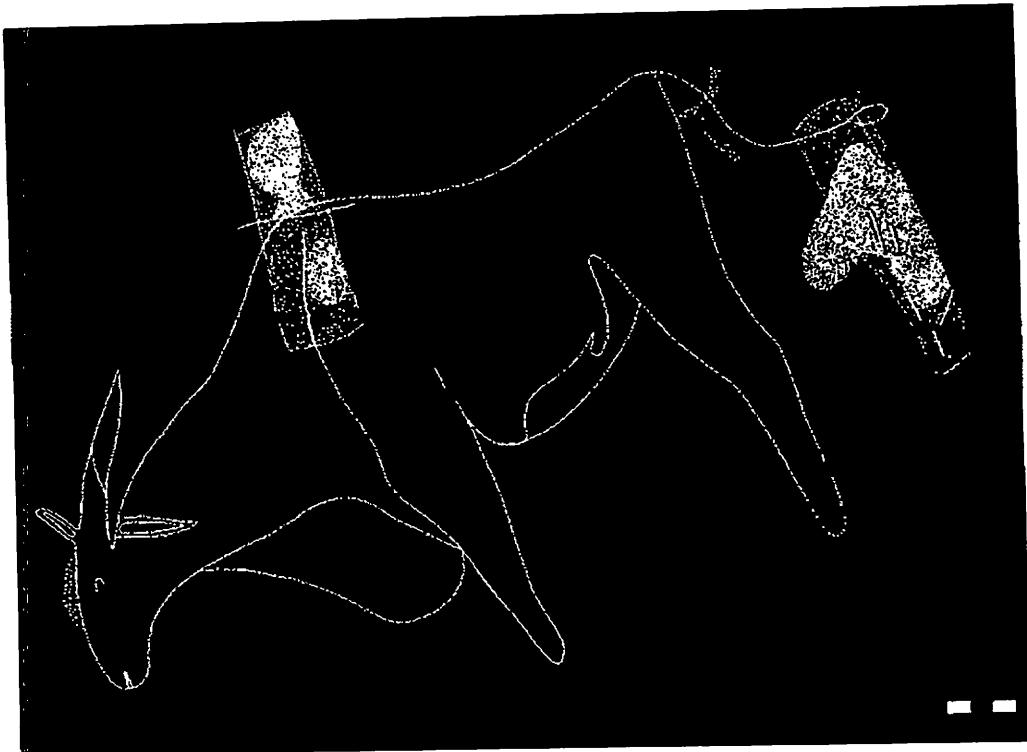


Figure 3 a) Incised rock-engraving of dual-sex eland with circumscribed rubbed patches. Stipple = rubbing. Gauteng Province, South Africa. Scale bar is 30 mm; b) Visibly rubbed forelock of incised eland.

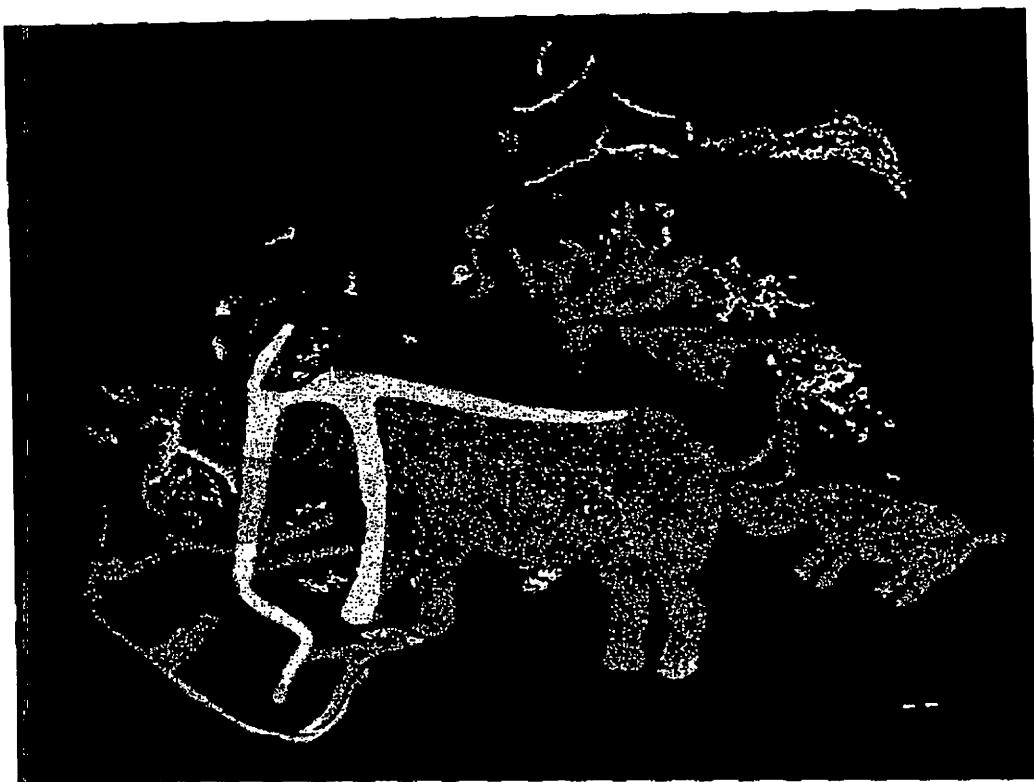


Figure 4 Photograph and redrawing of rubbed lines on an engraved white rhinoceros and eland. North-West Province, South Africa. Scale bar is 30 mm.

surface. At times healers wrap their bodies around the person being healed, rubbing their sweat – believed to carry healing properties – on the person.

(Katz et al. 1997: 23–4)

There is a physiological explanation for the importance of the shaman's touch. During strenuous activity, such as occurs during the medicine dance, the human body releases endorphins and peptides into the lymphatic and vascular systems (Frecska and Kulcsar 1989). Rubbing sweat and blood onto people transfers these opiate-like substances from shaman to patient, effecting a mild feeling of well-being (Stimmel 1981). Indeed, touch is a powerful essential in healing and communication (Barnard and Brazelton 1990).

The interplay of animal rubbing of rocks, human rubbing of images and rocks and the shaman's touch combine to validate the potency of certain rock engraving sites. Both hammering for aurality and rubbing for tactility could have had further utility in affirming people's ties with certain engraved locales. For example, after an engraved image has been produced, weathering progressively dulls the rock engraving with a dark patina. Considered metaphorically, the Spirit World is reclaiming that image/being. Hammering and rubbing images renews them, experientially and visibly maintaining contact between Ordinary and Spirit Worlds. Sometimes images were not only renewed; they were re-

made. For example, in Figure 5 (site 5), among a constellation of non-representational hammer marks and scratches there is a finely pecked and rubbed hippopotamus that has had two much rougher, unrubbed rhinoceros-like horns added to it subsequently. This addition makes a familiar animal of the Ordinary World into an unfamiliar animal of the Spirit World. Stepping back from the image and combining it with a consideration of the surrounding landscape reveals the engraved rock to be on the summit of a hill overlooking the Vaal River. This physical configuration exactly matches the widespread San belief in a large and fat species-indeterminate 'rain-animal' resident in large bodies of water (e.g. Bleek 1933a). This rain-animal was captured by rain-shamans who took it to the top of a hill and slaughtered it so that its milk and blood combined as rain, flowing off the hill and renewing the surrounding landscape (Deacon 1988: 132–6). Furthermore, this rain-animal was called a 'galloper', mimicking the sound of thunder (Bleek 1933a: 304) and it is surely no accident that Figure 5 bears a grouping of aurally produced hammer marks at its feet. Another look at Figure 5 also reveals two groups of fourteen and seventeen fine, parallel cut marks on the engraved rock's margin. These cut marks may be evidence of the San practice of 'cutting the rain' and 'breaking' its ribs (Bleek 1933b: 387). Look again at Figure 4, which has at least 141 hammer marks that cluster very precisely on the ribs of the large rhinoceros, suggesting a controlled hammering in the service of rain-making (Ouzman 1996a: 56). Such cutting and hammering of the rock also functioned more generally as a means of piercing the rock so that potency could flow from the Spirit World into the Ordinary World. Not only did potency flow between worlds, so did the San who journeyed across the landscape, seeking out potent places and even desiring to possess pieces of such potent places. Evidence of this desire to journey and possess – best described as questing – is found in the third category of non-representational marking – the physical removal of pieces of engraved rocks.

Questing and the desire to possess potent places

The human flaking of engraved rocks is less common than hammering, rubbing and cutting ($n = 41$ sites; 5.4 percent of sample), but it is no less important. Care is needed that human flaking of rock is not confused with lightning strikes or frost fracturing, both of which result in large flake scars and may even shatter whole boulders. Rather, the flaking I discuss takes the form of small to medium flake scars that are visually and procedurally identical to those of the cores and flakes found across the research region. Flakes are usually interpreted in economic and technicist ways as stone 'tools'. This explanation is mostly correct, but the selection of a very restricted range of engraved rocks as lithic cores indicates additional organizing principles are at play. For example, the engraved rock represented in Figure 6 (site 6) has been subjected to at least five episodes of use:

- Used as a rhinoceros's rubbing post.
- Engraved with a black rhinoceros (*Diceros bicornis*).
- Human hammering below the rhinoceros engraving.
- Human rubbing of the engraved rhinoceros's horns.
- Human removal of at least four flakes.

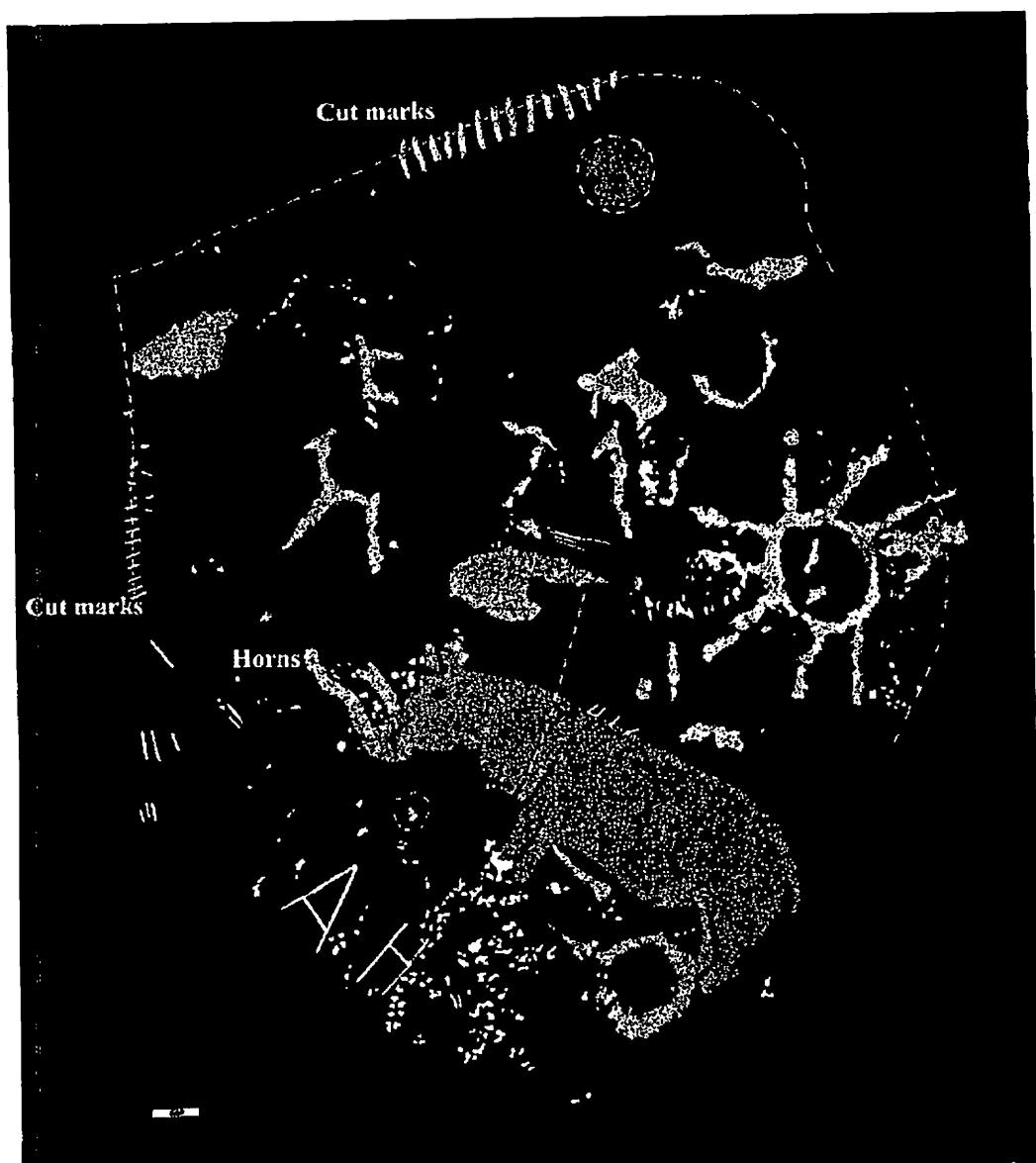


Figure 5 'Rhinopotamous' rock-engraving with hammer marks, scratches and thirty-one cut marks on rock margin. Free State, South Africa. Scale bar is 30 mm.

This intensive layering of usage would have served to mark this rock as 'cynosuric' – one that sets the tone among the 255 engraved rocks at the site (Ouzman 1996b). This contrasts with the notion that rock-engraving sites are atomistic and unstructured, and mapping eighty-nine rock-engraving sites has revealed conscious planning in the selection of sites and in the placement of imagery, with certain rock engravings clustering and even assuming a pre-eminence (Taçon and Ouzman *in press*). These pre-eminent image

Humans have long been fascinated by the properties of stone. Hardness, durability, colour, coarseness, size and situation in larger landscapes are but a few of the qualities that have stimulated human imagination and interest. Responses have been both symbolic and aesthetic, with many stone landscapes acquiring fantastic origin myths and specific sites being marked or sculpted to accentuate human significance.

(Taçon 1991: 205)

An entirely speculative but tantalizing suggestion is that geophagy or the ingestion of the rock debris produced by hammering or flaking the rock so that the site would inhere in a person was practised (cf. Reid 1992). That not all San rock-engraving sites exhibit evidence of flaking suggests an *emic* site hierarchy in which certain sites and certain images were considered pre-eminent. Perhaps these pre-eminent sites were spread out across the landscape in a route or concatenation and acted as mnemonics or conceptual maps of gatherer-hunter religious and symbolic territories (see also Smith 1994). This site 'map' could then be followed if one was able correctly to apprehend landscape and iconography. For example, those apparently isolated engraved outliers commonly found at rock-engraving sites may have been intended to alert people to the presence of an extra-ordinary place that required a different code of behaviour and which may have had to be approached in certain prescribed ways (see also Skotnes 1994). Imagery immediately appropriate to the activity of questing includes the persistent and widespread rock-engravings of human footprints and animal tracks or 'prints'. Prints are extra-ordinarily potent metonyms that simultaneously presence two dominant gatherer-hunter concerns – identity and journey. From an identity perspective, prints encode a wealth of practical, everyday information such as direction and speed of travel, numbers, group composition and even emotional state. But the persistent presence of six-toed human footprints and weird, unidentifiable animal tracks at rock-engraving sites speaks of Spirit World authorship. When more than one print occurs, it immediately suggests a track or pathway that the questor could follow. Indeed, even a single print may indicate a pathway that proceeds directly from the rock and into Spirit World beyond. Just as the insistent, percussive sound at the medicine dance guided people in altered states of reality to safety, so the widespread print imagery may have guided questors safely across ordinary and sacred landscapes allowing them to approach, appreciate and possess potent places.

Conclusion

What emerges from an analysis of rock art and the non-visual is that engraved and marked rocks are not just representations of San aesthetic and shamanistic practices – they were active participants in those practices. Rock engravings were hammered, rubbed, cut and flaked to produce sound, sensation and to deepen personal and community relations with potent images and places. Rock-engraving sites approximate what Mircea Eliade termed 'hierophanies' – manifestations of the sacred in place – that represent:

radical ontological separation of some object from the surrounding cosmic zone; some tree, some stone, some place, by the mere fact that it reveals that it is sacred, that it has

been, as it were, 'chosen' as the receptacle for the manifestation of the sacred, is thereby ontologically separated from all other stones, trees, places, and occupies a different, a supernatural plane.

(Eliade 1989: 32)

Though 'different' and having 'supernatural' elements, San rock-engraving sites were deeply humanistic places where people explored their identity and spirituality through conventional and unusual applications of their sensory perceptions. The interdependence of our senses can be marked and reliance on a variety of sensory perceptions articulated within coherent but deeply individual understandings of the cosmos allowed San individuals and communities to nuance themselves and their worlds finely. Why certain places were chosen as rock-art sites is not always certain. Unusual acoustics, singular physical properties or association with important past events are contributing factors that are archaeologically recoverable and which may point the way to unbundling those factors that make objects numinous and people desire to quest. It is important that we reveal these factors in accessible but empirically verifiable ways. We need only partially to close our eyes, open our minds and slowly feel our way towards the mindscape of our predecessors in order to appreciate the power and limitations of our sensory perceptions and acknowledge the existence of realities beyond our ken.

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Notes

- 1 Southern Africa is home to many rock-art traditions including the rock arts of Black farmers, Khoekhoen herders and White colonists. I discuss only San rock art.
- 2 I use 'Bushman', 'San' and 'gatherer-hunter' as honest and honourable terms for southern Africa's First People.

3 I exclude 'cupules' – small, humanly made semi-hemispherical rock hollows – from this discussion as they are a unique form of 'rock art marking'.

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