



BEAST OF BEAUTY AND POWER: A RHINOCERINE GYNOCENTRIC METAPHOR IN A |XAM STORY

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Centuries of curiosity witnessed the objectification of rhinoceroses largely from modernity's ever-prying gaze, often intrusive, violent and destructive. Predicated on anthropocentrism, the cost of this gaze is its contribution to the near extinction of members of this family. The collision of humans and rhinoceroses falls in the broader area of human-animal relations. The exhibition *FREIGHTED* is a glimpse into natural history pursuits that have long exposed rhinoceroses to slaughter. The very organisms which humanity sought to discover were killed and turned into skin-and-bone facsimiles that largely served the gaze. Voyeurism engendered a harmful blending of knowledge with pleasure by collapsing visual and heuristic contexts. The vulnerability of rhinoceroses, with their peculiar appearance playing into the spectacle, fell at the heart of age-old practices in museums, circuses and zoos. All this stirred common imagination in ways echoed by Emilio Gargioni, art collector of modern rhinoceros art, who said of his inspiration, "I had two passions: from one side the preference for grotesque art, from the other the interest for endangered species...to put together an ensemble of artworks devoted to an endangered grotesque animal and then the rhino came out!"¹ Grotesquerie and endangered-ness are shrouded in this articulation, as both these qualities are framed as bizarreness repurposed into the currency of the contemporary gaze.

Conversely, a healthy place of refuge for rhinoceroses is shown in the abridged |xam myth described in this essay. KhoeSan worldview holds animals as sentient kin to humans. Though not a contrast of pre-literate ways of knowing with scientific approaches, this piece uncovers a congenial kind of

gaze with which ancient societies probed the biosphere for clues to understand and frame their own place in the cosmos. Prehistory studies show that profuse savanna biomes nestled human lifeworlds for many millennia, from early foragers who roved the craggy landscapes to later herders and farmers on the plains of the interior plateau. Not only did these biomes offer humans ample faunal and floral food sources and by-products, they also provided a rich menagerie of cognitive tools to think with when organising themselves in the biosphere and their social interactions. To that end, rock art offers a unique vista into those long-gone ways of thinking and knowing.

Rhinoceroses in KhoeSan worldview, with particular emphasis on the |xam

Rhinoceroses rank second only to elephants in size, strength, grandeur and resilience. Despite local-level variations, they generally surpass elephants in vivacity in ancient visual imagery around the world. They have featured in beliefs and cosmologies of forager-herder societies and agropastoralists since antiquity. In world rock art, the oldest known rhinoceros images date between 26 000 to 32 000 years ago on the walls of Chauvet Cave in France.² Similarly, about 30 000 years ago, people in Africa painted rhinoceroses typified by images on portable stone slabs that were excavated at Apollo 11 site in southern Namibia.³ The undated regional sites, however, show rhinoceroses as more plentiful and contextually varied than their Upper Palaeolithic and African Pleistocene counterparts. Figure 1 depicts four rhinoceroses in varied manners. Rhinoceroses are seldom depicted in groups in this region but



Figure 1. An engraved rhinoceros from Mamuno in western Botswana, showing similar features and proportions as the painted examples from Tsodilo Hills. Photograph: Siyakha Mguni, 2013

often singly (fig. 2) or surrounded by archers, being hunted. While twosomes or mother-calf pairings are familiar, this panel of a possible family group is rare. Following the widespread pattern of San imagery, some features of these pachyderms are purposefully accented while others are enfeebled. In this formality, disproportionality sets the distended bellies and large horns in disharmony with the short limbs and small heads. These meaningfully constituted asymmetries and associations direct the observer's attention to the subject's highlighted particulars. Likewise, omissions are crucial in gesturing significance.

Though the only two extant African species – so-called black and white rhinoceroses – are double-horned, the uppermost rhino on the right side of the panel has a single large horn. Its near match underneath has two horns that are remarkably true to proportions in reality. A little below this rhinoceros is a calf, which, unlike the outlined adult animals, is fully shaded. A notable presence in this cluster is an outlined bovine placed

behind the rhinoceroses, but in relational unity with them. This bovid is often speculated to be an ox, but based on the typical deeply curved horns, sturdy neck and short-humped back profile, it is more likely a buffalo. The significance of rhinoceroses is further confirmed not only by these enduring paintings and engravings, but also by sculptures in wood, terracotta and metal found in excavated deposits. In South Africa, the iconic Mapungubwe golden rhinoceros falls in the latter category. Even more evocative of rhinocerine aura in indigenous architecture are plinths, stelae and monoliths that stand erect in the manner of horns of this species, adorning walls, entrances and courtyards. Amidst this diversity of representation and signification, the keys to the symbolism of rhinoceroses are attainable by probing diverse

culturally situated stories, such as found in the nineteenth century |xam folklore collections.

Numerous tales in southern Africa depict the rhinoceros as irascible and aggressive. Indigenous oral accounts, early explorers' travelogues and even modern-day safari diaries attest to common rhinoceros attacks. And for good reason! When threatened or provoked, a rhinoceros would inevitably charge as a pre-emptive display of territoriality and would even attack in self-defence. Predictably, tragic rhinoceros encounters were common among the colonial |xam-speaking San in the Northern Cape. For example, *ttōñō wō*, the maternal grandfather of ||*kabbo*, one of the foremost |xam teachers, was impaled to death by a rhinoceros. On another occasion, ||*kabbo* himself was gored by a young rhinoceros. No megaherbivore is more cross-culturally revered and well-signified in diverse knowledge systems. No wonder the conceptual equivalence (i.e. weapon of war) is the word “-di” from several Ju|’hoansi dialects and

Dama in Namibia, meaning both the rhinocetine long horn and the broad-bladed assegai such as that used by the Herero.⁴ However, the perceived rhinocetine bellicosity is not so much in form (aggression) as it is the content (motivation) of their hostility. As expressed in the |xam story, this division is evident in how different cultures in this region understand the species from taxonomic and behavioural viewpoints.

A less-recognised rhinocetine trope occurs in the long but little-known |xam story titled “The she-rhinoceros and her elder daughter’s suitors”⁵ (for brevity, the story is considerably paraphrased here). A she-rhinoceros had two daughters, the elder called !kwa-!khe and the younger Ssuai-ssuai-||a-|uhai (or Driving-away-husbands). It happened that suitors started to visit !kwa-!khe in secret courtship. One after the other they came into her hut, but each time the mother rhinoceros abruptly interrupted their brief rendezvous. Unbeknownst to them, Ssuai-ssuai-||a-|uhai espied all their clandestine visits and alerted her mother for a reward of morsels of food. The jackal went into her hut first, then another jackal came, who was himself followed by the hyena, and fourth came the lynx to join the courtship. “Be quickly flying! Be quickly flying!” Ssuai-ssuai-||a-|uhai urged as she sprinted to inform her mother that a man had come to her sister’s hut. “Oh mother! A man is the one who is yonder with thy daughter.” Her mother replied, “Go and fetch the short horn, for uncle jackal it seems to be.” Putting on the horn, she fiercely attacked the suitors, “lifting up” each one in turn to drive them away. (While the |xam called the short horn of the rhinoceros !kuruken, there is no direct name for the long horn. There is also no indication that they distinguished between the species of rhinoceros.) Meanwhile (and to no effect), the silver fox kept watch over these rendezvous, screaming and throwing sticks to warn the lovers of the approaching she-rhinoceros. She did not come gently but ||kwommaŋ-||kwommaŋ, a swift lumbering rhinocetine gait that lifts up a menacing dust cloud.

At last a brave leopard took on the courtship challenge. First he approached !kwa-!khe while she was sifting Bushman rice at the waterhole, and he persuaded her to take the bounty back to her hut in his company. He said: “I do not intend to eat, for I do not eat raw Bushman rice. For thou must quietly go drying to place for me the Bushman rice.” When they returned

home, the younger sister threatened to expose this suitor too, but !kwa-!khe reacted “Oh Person! Thou dost seem to think that jackals and their companions they are. For a man who is different is there” The young sister ignored this retort and reported to the she-rhinoceros: “Oh! Our mother here, the man who is yonder with thy daughter, he does not resemble the people who have been coming, for a tall man he is. His eyes are not small. The man has lain down.” As she always responded, the she-rhinoceros said, “Thou must go to fetch for me the long horn; thou must not bring the short horn; ... fetch for me the long horn, the real horn; for, Uncle Leopard it seems to be.” Despite her several attempts to impale and “lift up” the suitor from the ground, the leopard remained unperturbed, and so eventually took !kwa-!khe in marriage. “My daughter’s little husband!” exclaimed the she-rhinoceros, standing with her back to the leopard – possibly in reserved satisfaction.

While rhinoceros grotesquerie has gratified scientific and voyeuristic gazes, from trophies adorning walls to taxidermic models in museum displays and presences in zoos and circuses, the unparalleled beauty of this species can only be fully appreciated in its natural settings. This |xam story highlights the spirit of this contextual emphasis: rhinoceroses are beautiful in their place. Established readings usually invoke rhinocetine masculinity predicated on their horns, from signifying royal strength and authority among Bantu-speaking groups⁶ to the notions of their fat’s supernatural power in rain-making symbolism among KhoeSan societies.⁷ In an unfamiliar interpretation, this story exposes rhinocetine gynocentrism. Prevailing perspectives, informed by androcentric worldviews, emphasise masculine supremacy among Bantu-speaking patriarchal societies, and are inconsistent with the largely egalitarianist KhoeSan societies. Hence, the story portrays the virtuosity of the she-rhinoceros as overprotective motherhood, while her daughter exudes a latent fecundity of youthful femininity, both desirable qualities in hunter-gatherer societies. !kwa-!khe’s feminine charm is signalled by relentless courtship pursuits from many suitors – notably all are carnivores, from smaller canids to larger felids (the hyena too, as an intermediate feliform). It is plausible that !kwa-!khe’s frustration with familial meddling rested on naivety from being infatuated by her desirability to her suitors. But her wise mother actively shielded

her from vulnerability, as would a responsible mother. Her determined goading of these untried and ineligible suitors was itself an effective selection process for a good husband. Chronic antagonism was aroused in response to the suitors trying to take her daughter without the mother's consent or proper decorum. The caveat is therefore in recognising a mother's capacity for discernment of uprightness in a suitor who might be a good husband for her daughter.

In reality, female rhinoceroses typically raise their single calves on their own, oftentimes in solitude. Furthermore, males do not generally stay with the harems after mating, nor do they defend females and calves from harm. This incongruity is not lost in the story, as the failed suitors point out that the he-rhinoceros just lies at home while they rendezvous with !kwa-!khe. Unlike strongly bonded elephant societies, where the young are raised communally, rhinoceroses habitually pursue single parenthood, with ferocious maternal overprotectiveness being a necessary survival strategy. Females reach reproductive maturity early in their lifecycle, just a year or two after being weaned. In some respects, this biological trait mirrors the journey of motherhood in KhoeSan societies, where motherhood is realised early in life. Here too, as with rhinoceroses, it is evident that although the San live highly social lives, mothers still raise one child at a time, with infants nursing longer than in other societies. But San children have stronger bonds with their mothers than with any other group members, a fact that is also observable from the archival genealogical profiles of |xam informants.

In |xam knowledge and experience, informed by observations of predator-rhinocerine relations, the rhinoceros horns echo the feminine strength and aggression that emerge from selfless motherhood when protecting young. Significantly, the artists of the Tsodilo Hills panel downplayed sexual dimorphism in rhinoceroses and did not separate the two African species, preferring instead to portray them very likely as a single category that bears these maternal virtues. In parenthood, therefore, it is unimportant that males are absent fathers, as the desired qualities are pre-eminently possessed by ever-present females, who are responsible and overprotective mothers. Virtuous motherhood is a social competency marker

of leadership in the family and even in a network of close-knit families. The she-rhinoceros signals this resonance when she “puts on” the horns, first the short one and then the long one, to repel the unwelcome suitors of her daughter. A consideration of |xam lexicon sheds light on idioms employed in the narrative: the verb “!kAm:” means “to put on” and “to lead, be first, return.”⁸ All these metaphorical resonances come into force in the story. When the she-rhinoceros “puts on” the horns to fend off her daughter's suitors, she demonstrates her leadership by proactively rising up to the challenge of confronting carnivores even as the unconcerned he-rhinoceros

lies snoring under a thornbush.

Recalling the buffalo on the Tsodilo Hills panel, it is plausible that this representational focus echoes territorial security of the breeding ground. In megaherbivore inter-species interactions,



Figure 2. An engraved rhinoceros from Mamuno in western Botswana, showing similar features and proportions as the painted examples from Tsodilo Hills. Photograph: Siyakha Mguni, 2013

buffaloes and rhinoceroses are fierce antagonists, even as the latter habitually win territorial battles. To extrapolate from the Zulu worldview, buffaloes epitomise the social category of maleness,⁹ as do carnivores. Similarly gendered interspecific social relations are re-enacted by the Swati during the Incwala ceremony, where the lion, signifying the King (iNgwenyama), is conjoined with the elephant, a category symbolising the Queen (iNdlovukati), as twins¹⁰ uniting the masculine-feminine power nexus. These ideas spring from long-established meshing of animal symbolisms within Nguni-KhoeSan ideologies produced from over a millennium of forager-herder-farmer interactions. This view completes the metaphoric relation of ferocious feminine protectionism (rhinoceros) with intrusive masculine peremptory (carnivore). Furthermore, to ‘reign’ over their territory, rhinoceroses routinely return to favourite resting and feeding spots. Yet in the story, *neighbourhood* is blended with *personhood* to denote a ‘return’ that is not only to a spatial locale but is also a social category. With her young nursing daughter, the she-rhinoceros displays maternal concern through her persistent ‘return’ to protect the elder daughter, who by now ought to be autonomous.

Overall, the incidence of rhinoceroses in only a few |xam stories is a noteworthy inversion of their obvious prevalence in rock art, especially the engravings of the |xam’s Karoo homeland. This paucity in folklore does not, however, render rhinoceroses any less important than the more commonly featured animals, such as springboks, ostriches and others. Though the |xam symbolism of proper parenthood predicated on the purposeful ferocity of female protectionism may at first seem to be an outlier, it is a central KhoeSan social metaphor. This metaphor rests on the liminal pliability and strength of the horns of rhinoceroses as organs of defence that occur on both males and females. They are compounded into a single feminine category embodying the *mater familias* as a force binding together social groups in San social worldview.

¹ Gargioni 2024

² Chauvet et al. 1996

³ Rifkin et al. 2015

⁴ Bleek 1956

⁵ |hanʒkass’o 1878

⁶ Boeyens & van der Ryst 2014

⁷ Ouzman 1996

⁸ Bleek 1956

⁹ Berglund 1972: 149

¹⁰ Kuper 1973: 621







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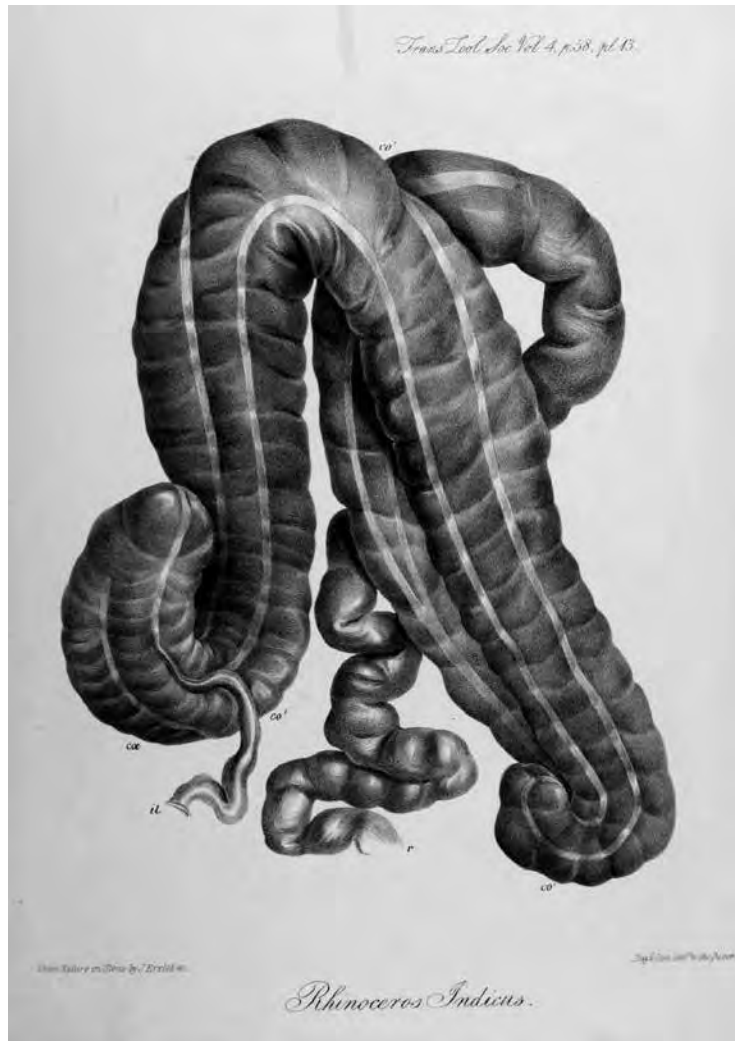
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Exhibition detail. Intestines based on Owen's rhinoceros dissection of 1849.
Photograph: Fritha Langerman



Anatomical drawings of an Indian rhinoceros. From Richard Owen, 1852. 'On the anatomy of the Indian rhinoceros' (*Rh unicornis*, L.). The caecum, colon and the beginning of the rectum.
Transactions of the Zoological Society of London



Portion of the inner surface of the beginning of the jejunum, at the end of the jejunum, near the end of the ileum.
Transactions of the Zoological Society of London

