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Art in crisis: contact period rock art in the south-eastern mountains of Southern Africa

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ideology, resisting change, and it is quite possible that if rudimentary property relations did develop, a similar pattern evolved among the southern San towards the end of the contact period.

However, as with hunting, the San's expertise in raiding (see Wright 1971: 36) was probably facilitated by the 'supernatural' activities of the ʘpwaiten-ka !qi:ten who entered trance, not to lead antelope into the hunter's ambush, but to capture and drive stolen cattle back to the camp. Such a development would have placed the game shamans in a position where they would be seen by the rest of the camp as not only providing these cattle but also the goods obtained subsequently by trading the cattle. Like the rain-makers, these shamans' increasingly important role would have been reflected by a growing prestige and status. Moreover, in the light of the evidence presented in the previous chapter on the payment of shamans for their services, this growing prestige may have been paralleled by an increase in personal wealth. Today amongst the Ghanzi San, the increasing importance of the shaman has been accompanied by considerable prestige and personal wealth (Guenther 1975a, 1975/76, 1976, 1986). Therefore, the exchange of cattle, even if it did not lead to the development of property relations, stimulated development of the shamanistic relation of production first created by rain-making which, in turn, led to an expansion of the game shamans' symbolic labour.

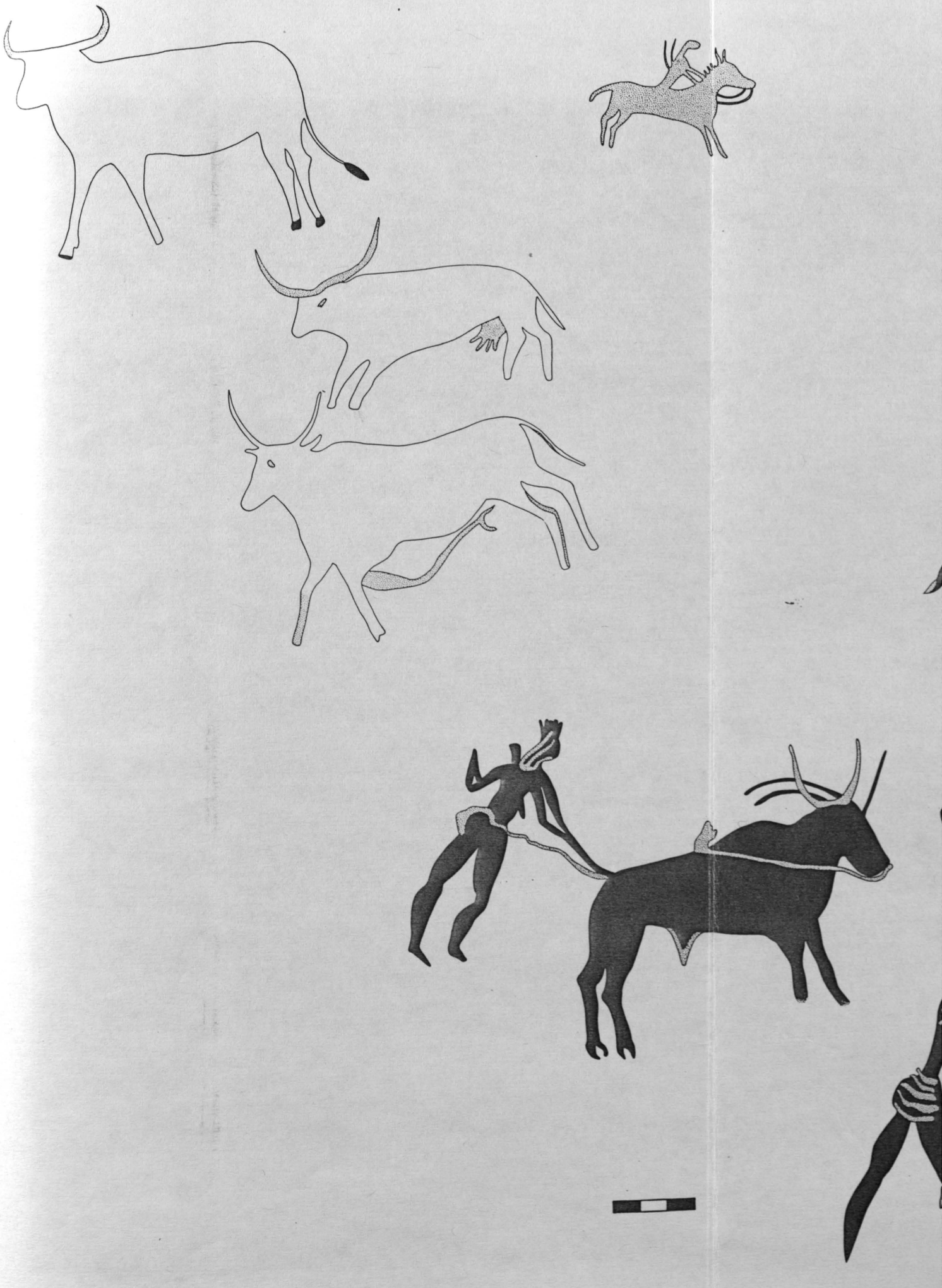
Despite the lack of conclusive historical evidence for ownership and accrual of wealth amongst the southern San, cattle transactions of one sort or another did influence the shamans' art in precisely identifiable ways. The first painting I examine (fig. 5) provides a clear link between shamans and cattle in the form of two cattle therianthropes (although the horns bear a superficial resemblance to those of the Cape Buffalo, buffalo horns are more curved and much thicker). Therianthropes occur in a wide variety of forms. These range from figures with antelope heads and sometimes hoofs (e.g., Pager 1975: 1, 23, 57, 58, 75; Vinnicombe 1976: figs 228, 230; Lewis-Williams 1981a: figs 23, 28, 30, 1983b: pl. 102) to more extreme conflations of man and antelope (e.g., Lewis-Williams 1981a: fig. 4, 1983b: pls 20, 22, 43). Although several writers have argued that many therianthropes are better interpreted as hunters wearing antelope masks (e.g., Woodhouse 1966: 169-70, 1979a: 72; Willcox 1984a: 201; Jolly 1986), this conclusion ignores the testimony of the San themselves. Dia!kwain, asked to comment on a copy of a painting depicting such therianthropes, said, "These are sorcerors [sic] who have things whose bodies they own" (Bleek 1935a: 15) - that is, the therianthropes are shamans who have fused with the animal they possess. The therianthropes in figure 5 not only have hoofs and bovine heads but red lines on their faces. Similar lines appear on the faces of numerous shamans (e.g., Vinnicombe 1976: figs 93, 109, 166b; Lewis-Williams 1981a: figs 19, 20, 28) and even eland (e.g.,



Figure 5. Giant's Castle, Natal Drakensberg
(The left horn of the right therianthrope, now damaged, has been reconstructed from Willcox's (1956: pl. 31) colour photograph)

Vinnicombe 1976: figs 102, 109, 247, 249; Lewis-Williams 1985a: fig. 16) and, although their exact meaning is unclear, they are undoubtedly associated with trance performance (Lewis-Williams 1985b: 57-8). The depiction of cattle therianthropes thus suggests that some shamans 'possessed' cattle even as others possessed eland and other creatures.

These cattle therianthropes are highly significant because they demonstrate the need for a much more subtle analysis of paintings of cattle than they have hitherto been accorded. The subtlety and complexity of San beliefs about cattle is clearly revealed by figure 6 (cf. Vinnicombe 1976: fig. 83). Ostensibly a realistic portrayal of San herding cattle (Vinnicombe 1976: caption to fig. 83), this painting in fact contains several features that demonstrate the inadequacy of any such interpretation. This is not to deny that the San witnessed and were actively involved in events such as this. Indeed the paintings were presumably inspired by events the artist either witnessed or took part in. This does not, however, mean that the paintings were executed as records or memorials of these events. The San place no importance on preserving the memory of so-called 'historic events' (Bleek 1928: 40; Marshall 1960: 325, 330, 1976: 266; Tanaka 1980: 110). Rather, the painted details suggest another reason for their execution. One of the drovers (arrowed), for instance, is grasping the tail of a cow. This parallels a well-known relationship with antelope in the traditional art (e.g., Frobenius 1931: fig. 97; Pager 1975:



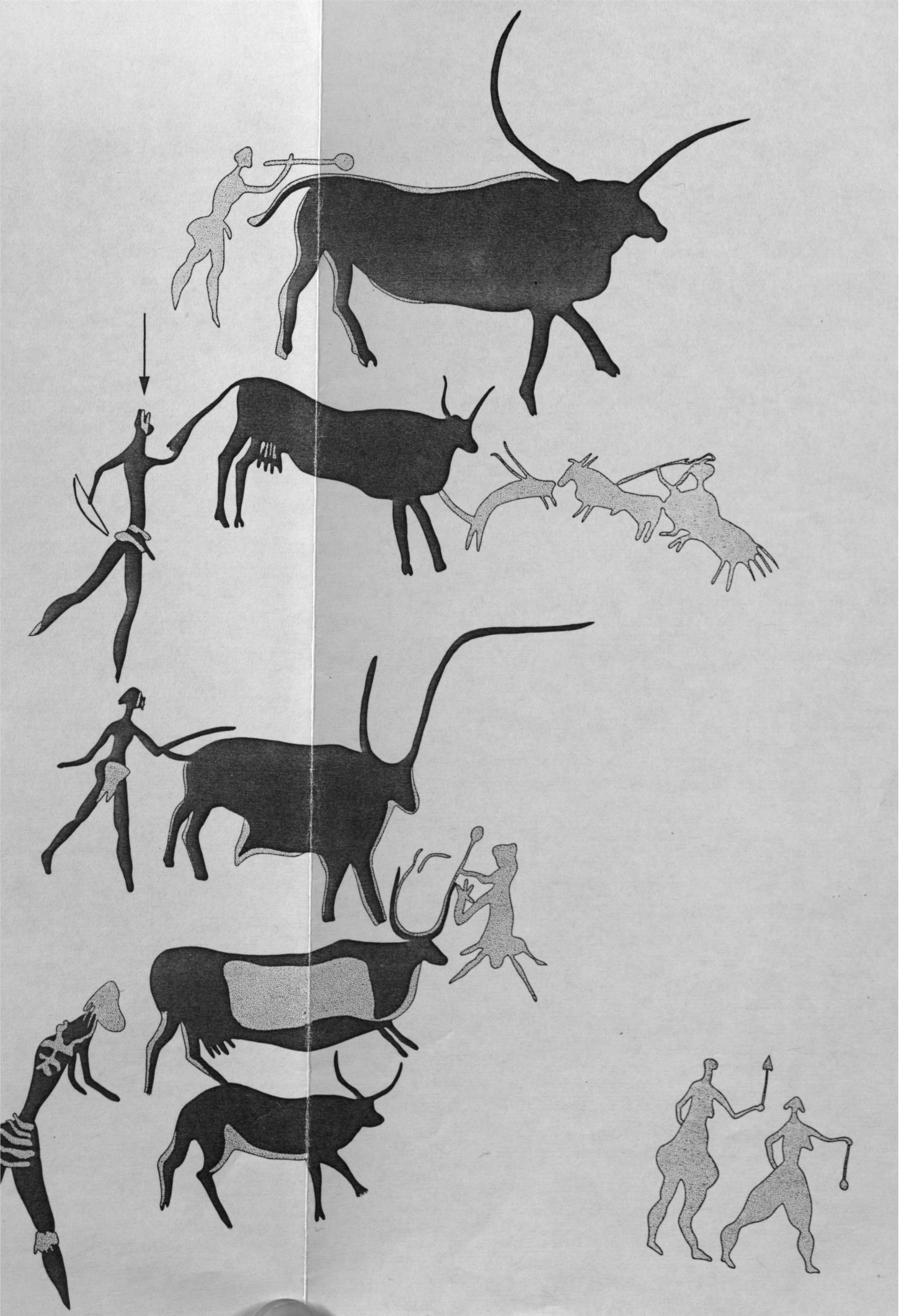


Figure 6. Makhenckeng stream, Eastern Lesotho

83; Vinnicombe 1976: fig. 111). The key to unlocking the meaning of this posture is provided by a panel from the Kamberg area (Lewis-Williams 1981a: fig. 28, 1983a: pls 59, 60, 61) which depicts a therianthrope grasping the tail of a dying eland and accompanied by three other therianthropes. Like the eland, the therianthrope holding its tail has antelope hoofs, crossed legs and hair standing on end. The eland and therianthrope are thus clearly linked to depict the relationship between the shaman and the source of his power. He is appropriating the potency released by the death of an eland, in this case so fully that he has entered deep trance and, along with the other shamans, begun to fuse with the source of his power (Lewis-Williams 1981a: 91).

Although none of the bovids in figure 6 appear to be dying, there are several clear indications that, like the Kamberg panel, the painting is associated with shamanistic activity. In the first place, some of the figures have strange patterns on their bodies. Although one of these patterns could conceivably be interpreted as a loin-cloth, the shapes and locations of the patterns on the other figures suggest entoptic phenomena such as those I noted in figure 4. One of the most common forms these phenomena take are nested U-shapes (Siegel 1977: 138) such as are found on the lower figure, and, in addition, the patterns on this figure spill off the body. It seems therefore probable that these patterns, like those in the Bamboo Mountain painting (fig. 4), are in fact entoptic phenomena. Interestingly, many of

the bovids are outlined, at least partially, in red - a feature of the Bamboo Mountain rain-animal (for another example see Lewis-Williams 1985a: fig. 11).

Altered states of consciousness are even more clearly suggested by the bull at the lower left-hand side of the panel. It is linked to its drover by a sinuous red line and the drover is apparently also holding the bull's tail, although there is no clear distinction between the tail and his arms. Similar red lines, often fringed with white dots, have been interpreted as lines of potency (Lewis-Williams 1981b). The clearly non-realistic nature of this line and comparisons with paintings of eland linked to shamans by such red lines (e.g., Pager 1975: 78-9; Lewis-Williams 1981b: fig. 2) suggest very strongly that we are dealing with a similar concept: a shaman is interacting with his source of potency, in this case a bull. Furthermore, the painting as a whole suggests a second facet of these shamans' relationship with cattle; they are using the potency appropriated from the cattle to control these animals. Therefore, just as lines linking shamans and eland in the traditional art probably refer to the control of antelope by the shamans of the game (Lewis-Williams 1982: 435), so the line linking the bull to the shaman, and the drover holding the cow's tail, may also be expressions of control.

The third facet of the game shamans' relationship with cattle is suggested by the bull itself: it possesses two sets

of horns of which only one set is bovine. The extra set probably portrays another aspect of trance experience. During trance shamans often experience a tingling sensation on top of the head (Katz 1982: 165), the spot from which the spirit is thought to leave the body on out-of-body travel (Marshall 1969: 377; Katz 1982: 100). Numerous paintings of clearly hallucinatory figures have long lines emanating from the tops of their heads (e.g., Lewis-Williams 1981a: figs 31, 38) which probably depict their spirits leaving the body (Lewis-Williams 1981a: 95, 1981b: 8). Most have only one line but, significantly, some (e.g., Lewis-Williams 1984c: fig. 9.2D) have two. Comparisons with paintings such as these suggest that the second set of 'horns' represents the departing spirit of a shaman (cf. Lewis-Williams 1983b: 57). The painting thus indicates a further level of trance experience: the bull is a shaman who has fused with his source of power, the animal he 'possesses'. This painting thus completely encapsulates the game shamans' relationship with cattle. First, the shamans are associated with the source of their power; second, they are using this power to control stolen cattle and, finally, in the climax of their trance, they have become cattle.

The indisputable association in these paintings of trance related postures and hallucinations with cattle indicates that the symbolic labour of the ʘpwaiten-ka !qi:ten was extended to cattle. This symbolic labour could have taken two forms: first, these shamans provided supernatural aid to

the raiders, making stolen cattle easier to control, just as traditionally they directed antelope into the hunters' ambush. Secondly, it is possible that shamans claimed to steal cattle while on out-of-body travel. An analogous situation is recorded in the ethnography where a shaman, on out-of-body travel in the form of a lion, killed a farmer's ox (Bleek 1936: 132-3). Although out-of-body travel was usually accomplished in the form of an animal or bird (Lewis-Williams 1981a: 95), this seems not always to have been the case (Bleek 1936: 142-3). Shamans may therefore have gone on out-of-body travel in human form to steal cattle. Such a hallucinatory raid may well explain the painting in figure 6. Shamans were differentiated according to the creature they were believed to possess (Lewis-Williams 1981a: 83) and these two paintings (figs 5, 6) suggest that some shamans might have become 'shamans of the cattle', or xoro-ka !qi:ten.

In addition to paintings linking cattle to shamans of the game, there are paintings that indicate that cattle, like eland and other antelope, had further associations for the San. Such a painting is found in Griqualand East (fig. 7). This scene was described by Vinnicombe (1976: caption to fig. 248, see also 1985: 20) as a human figure holding a "stick" towards the head of a bull eland. Like figures holding antelope tails, figures holding a line or stick to an antelope's nose or actually touching the nose are a well-recognised theme in the art (e.g., Woodhouse 1969; Pager

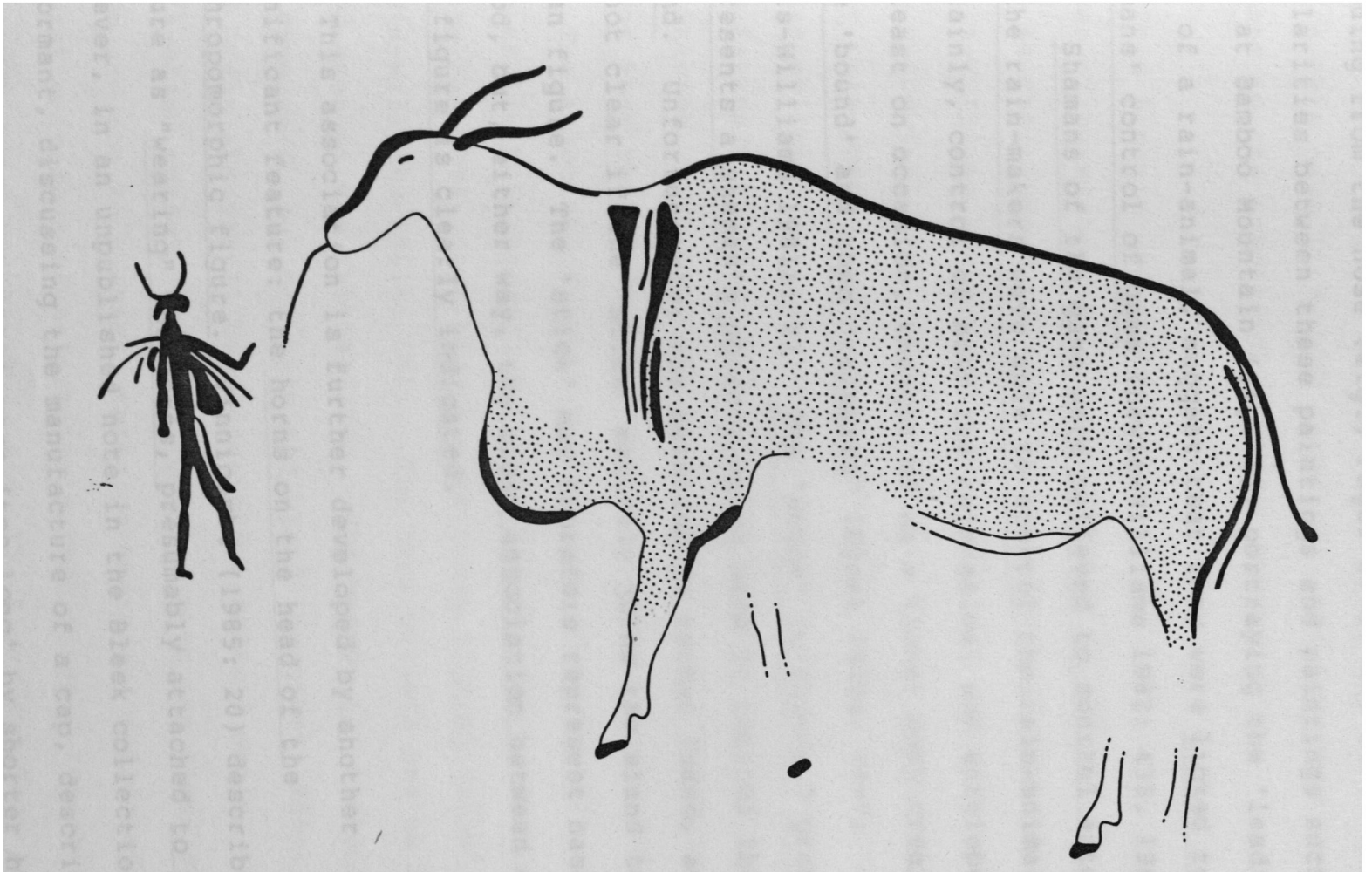


Figure 7. Mount Currie, Griqualand East
(Redrawn from a photograph of Vinnicombe's
(1985: pl. 3) copy of the original painting)

1975: 78-9, 82-3; Vinnicombe 1976: fig. 95, 247). In some paintings the animal is in a dying posture, sometimes bleeding from the nose (e.g., Pager 1975: 82, 84). The close similarities between these paintings and paintings such as that at Bamboo Mountain (fig. 4), portraying the 'leading out' of a rain-animal, suggest that they were linked to the shamans' control of game (Lewis-Williams 1982: 435, 1983b: 59). Shamans of the game were believed to control antelope as the rain-makers were able to control the rain-animal. Certainly, control of both the rain-animal and antelope was, at least on occasion, thought of as a thong: both creatures were 'bound' and then 'released' (Bleek 1935a: 44-7; Lewis-Williams 1981b: 8). The 'stick' in figure 7 probably represents a shaman's potency being used to control the eland. Unfortunately, the painting is rather faded, and it is not clear if the 'stick' actually joins the eland to the human figure. The 'stick' may therefore represent nasal blood, but, either way, the close association between eland and figure is clearly indicated.

This association is further developed by another significant feature: the horns on the head of the anthropomorphic figure. Vinnicombe (1985: 20) describes the figure as "wearing" the horns, presumably attached to a cap. However, in an unpublished note in the Bleek collection, an informant, discussing the manufacture of a cap, describes the replacement of horns that were 'too long' by shorter horns from a young gemsbok (Lewis-Williams 1986c: 10). The

considerable length of the horns in this painting thus argues against their being literal, and, if the horns are not literal, we are again dealing with a cattle therianthrope, but in this case linked to an eland - the most prominent element in the traditional subject matter.

This link is interesting because the San recognised a number of physical similarities between cattle and eland, such as their spoor, fatness and the taste of their flesh (Lewis-Williams 1981a: 106). In addition, there appears to be a conceptual link between cattle and eland in San beliefs about rain-making. The role of cattle in San rain-symbolism was established in the previous chapter, but the eland's association with water and rain and therefore cattle requires examination. Two versions of a southern San creation myth stress that the eland was created in water (Bleek 1924: 1, 5). The association between eland and water is made even more explicit by another myth wherein the eland is equivalent to the rain: "At that time the Rain was like an eland" (Lewis-Williams 1981a: 106). The same beliefs are to be found amongst the Kalahari San. The Nharo, for instance, use the same word, du, for rain and eland (Guenther 1986: 234, 236). England (1968) has described a musical scale, the "rain-eland scale", which is found in both the Eland Bull dance and the Rain song. These concepts are reflected in several paintings of rain-animals that closely resemble antelope (e.g., Tongue 1909: fig. 32; Bleek and Stow 1930: pls 18, 41; for a more detailed discussion of the association

between eland and rain see Lewis-Williams 1981a: 103-16). Thus there is a close association between eland, water and rain-making in San beliefs.

A further link between cattle and eland is provided by the syntax of the art. Stow (Bleek and Stow 1930: pl. 49) copied a painting of a cow clearly superimposed on an eland. Apparently there were a few such paintings in the shelter, for, according to Bleek, "At one end are cows [superimposed] on bucks, of which the best example has been copied" (Bleek and Stow 1930: caption to pl. 49). Another example is to be found among Vinnicombe's unpublished copies of paintings in the Natal Museum. Despite their rarity, these paintings are highly significant because studies have shown that superpositioning, while still imperfectly understood, is not random or accidental, but rather a deliberate way of linking paintings according to certain, as yet unknown, conventions (Lewis-Williams 1972: 57-9, 1974b, 1983b: 40-1; for debate see Willcox 1978a and Lewis-Williams et al. 1979). Moreover, quantitative analyses have revealed that the eland is the element most commonly found superimposed on eland (Pager 1971: 354-5; Lewis-Williams 1972: 58). Although we may never decipher the exact meaning of superimposed paintings, they too suggest that cattle and eland became, in some way, related animals. As the eland was shot out, the decline in their numbers, together with the shamans' increased preoccupation with cattle, may have led to cattle supplementing the eland in the shamans' power-symbolism,

accounts of hallucinations, paintings and possibly rain-making rituals. Eland and cattle thus became closely related, perhaps in some ways equivalent, symbols in San thought.

So far I have concentrated on cattle because they comprised the overwhelming majority of animals stolen by the San. I now turn to an animal which achieved a prominence in the art out of all proportion to the relatively small number stolen - the horse. Historical records indicate that the San did not trade horses to Bantu-speakers; they preferred to keep them for themselves (e.g., Vinnicombe 1976: 24, 92). They were used as food, beasts of burden, transport and to hunt antelope (Wright 1971; Vinnicombe 1976). Amongst the modern Kalahari San, hunting with guns from horseback has made the procurement of game much easier, with the result that the distribution of meat tends to proceed along lines of short-term material utility rather than as an affirmation of kinship ties (Biesele 1978a: 933). Since hunting is much easier, meat is no longer such a scarce resource; consequently, animals are not utilised to the extent they were previously, large parts of the animal go to waste and meat sharing declines in importance. For the southern San, the slaughter of stolen cattle would have provided an abundance of meat and it is probable that in these circumstances a similar situation developed. Thus the economic benefits provided by horses had an adverse effect on generalized reciprocity and undermined the inter-camp