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

Campbell, Colin

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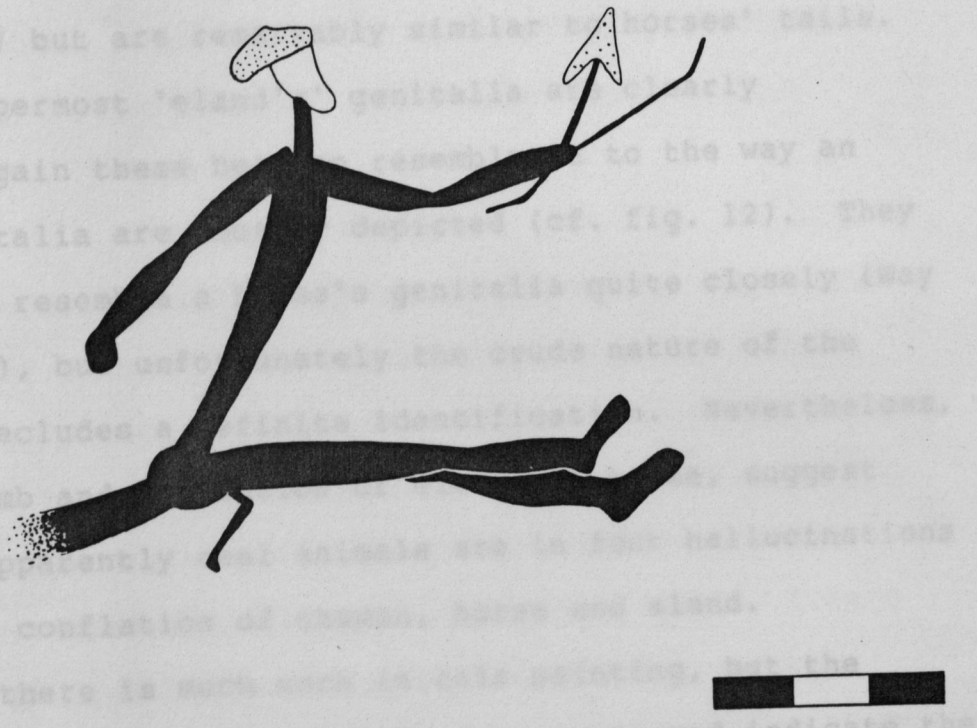


Figure 13. Injasuti, Natal Drakensberg

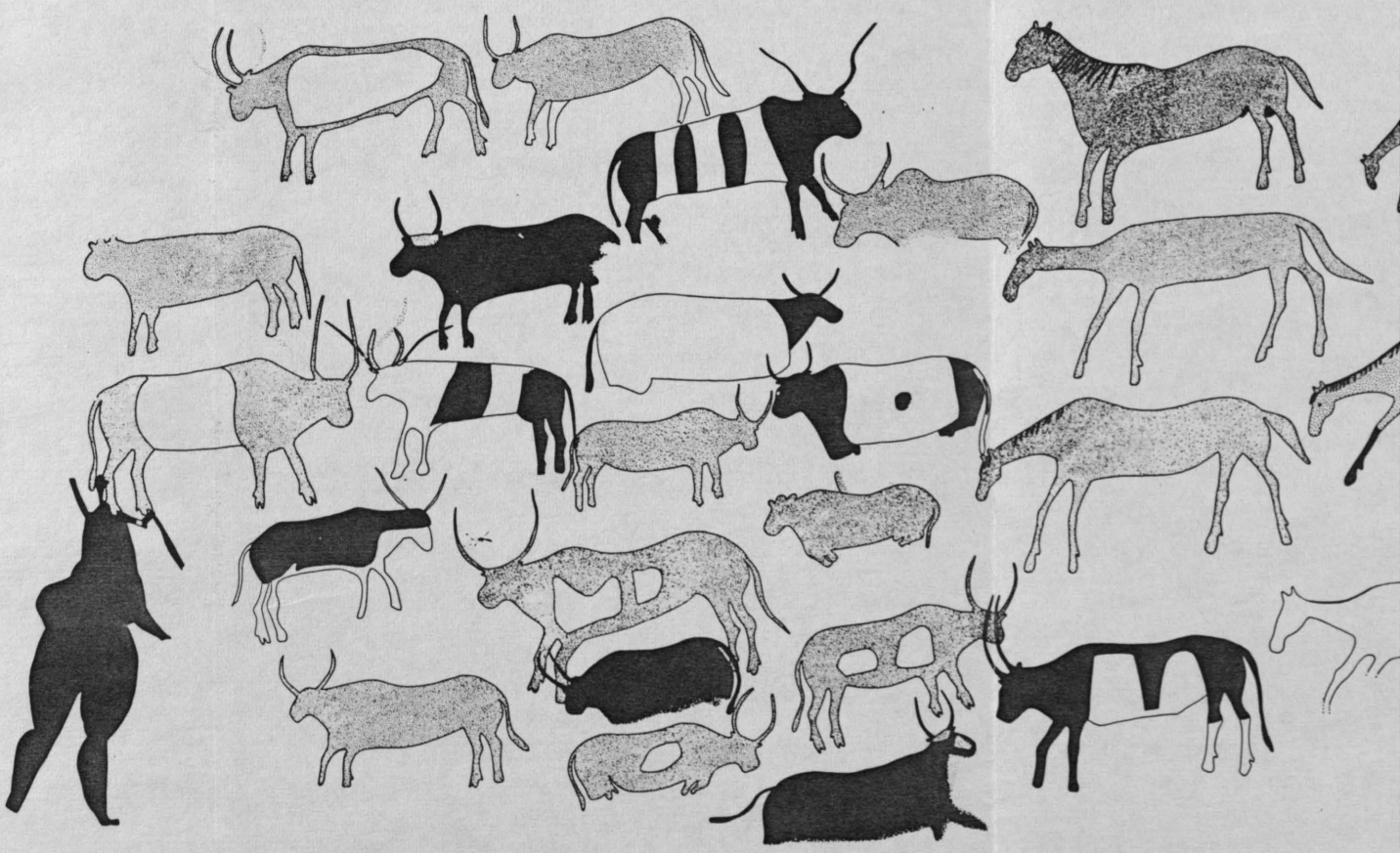
not unusual in extreme hallucinations (Kluver 1942: 183; Emboden 1979: 44). Therefore the presence of an extra limb in the Melikane painting (fig. 11) suggests, in itself, that this painting portrays another hallucinatory vision.

Any remaining doubts as to the hallucinatory nature of the painting must be dispelled by an examination of the tails of the eland. They bear no resemblance to an eland's tail (cf. fig. 12) but are remarkably similar to horses' tails. Also, the uppermost 'eland's' genitalia are clearly depicted. Again these bear no resemblance to the way an eland's genitalia are usually depicted (cf. fig. 12). They do, however, resemble a horse's genitalia quite closely (Way and Lee 1965), but unfortunately the crude nature of the paintings precludes a definite identification. Nevertheless, the extra limb and conflation of eland and horse, suggest that these apparently real animals are in fact hallucinations of a complex conflation of shaman, horse and eland. Undoubtedly there is much more in this painting, but the complicated natur e of the associations portrayed indicate the extent to which the horse was incorporated into San beliefs.

The paintings I have analysed indicate that horses provided a powerful new metaphor of control for San shamans. During a time when their symbolic labour was becoming increasingly important and the shamans themselves were gaining in influence and prestige, riding provided a powerful metaphor for their control over rain, game, cattle and

horses, all vital components of the San means of production. We are now in a position to argue that paintings of cattle and horses formed an integral part of the southern San belief system. Like the rain-making scenes, these paintings were statements about the social power of shamans and provided indelible reminders to the camp that access to cattle, horses and more indirectly, highly desirable European trade goods, all depended on the symbolic labour of the shamans of the game. Thus these paintings were an explicit ideological response to the impact of the contact period on the southern San.

This conclusion enables us to return to the right hand section of the Bamboo Mountain painting (fig. 3). This section of the painting (figs 14, 15) ostensibly represents San raiders driving cattle and horses up to a San encampment. Behind the mounted raiders two men lead horses that are being used as beasts of burden (fig. 15). I have already argued that the painting as a whole depicts the symbolic labour of rain-makers in thwarting the pursuit of the raiders. But, at the same time, this right-hand section probably portrays the symbolic labour of shamans who aided the raiders in bringing their spoils back to camp. The Bamboo Mountain panel depicts much more than a link between cattle and horses and San beliefs; it is a comprehensive representation of the triad of San symbolic labour. The volets of the panel portray two distinct, but complementary, components of the contact period shamans' work: on the left,



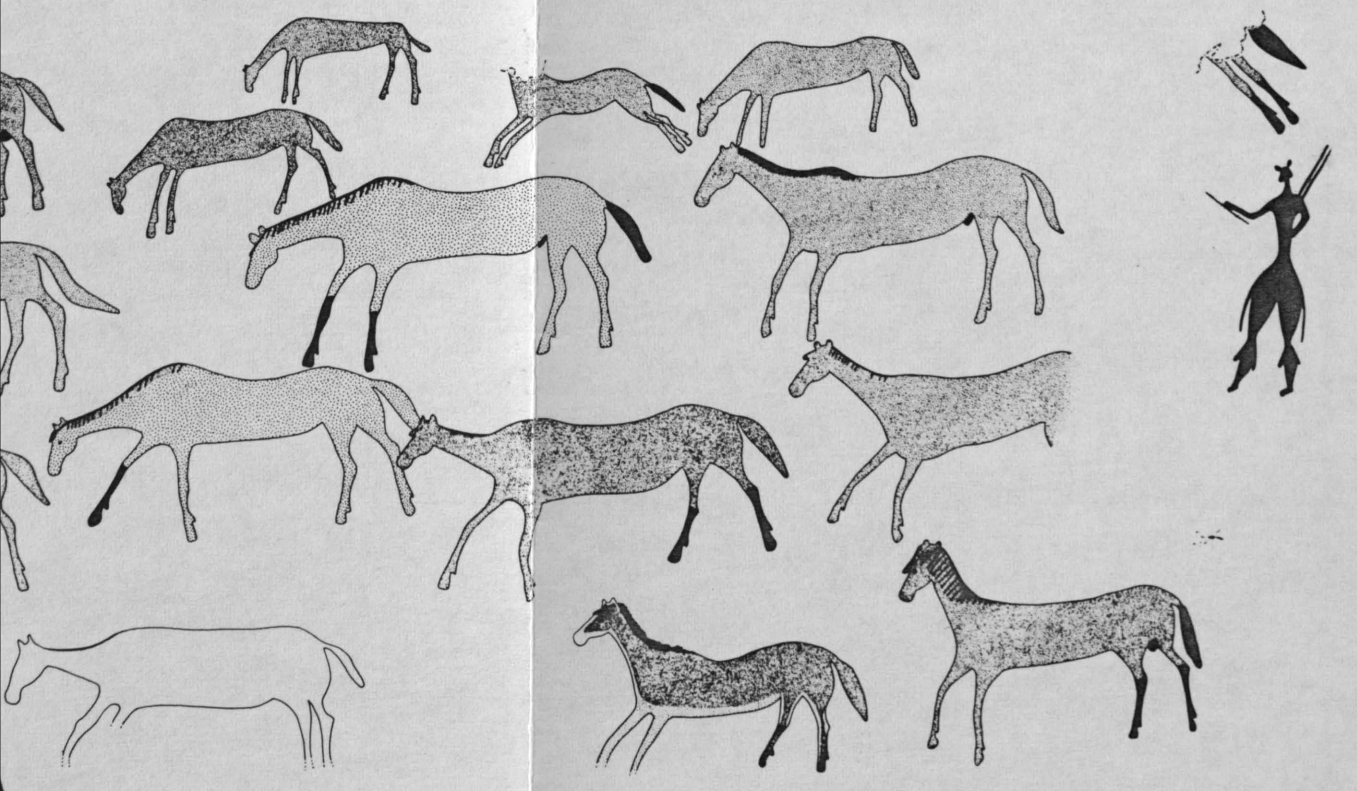


Figure 14. Bamboo Mountain panel: cattle and horses



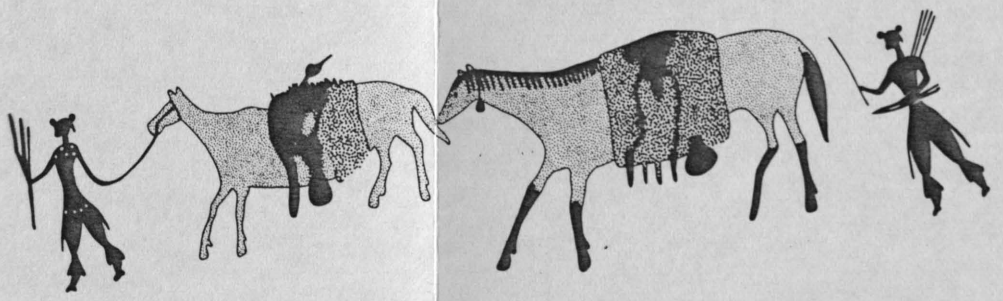


Figure 15. Bamboo Mountain panel: San horsemen

rain-making and, on the right, the control of domestic animals. The panel is so constructed that these flanking volets direct attention to the central camp, the principal arena for the last component of the symbolic labour triad - healing.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONFLICT, STRESS AND HEALING

In the previous two chapters I explained certain paintings by relating them to two categories of symbolic work: control of domestic animals and rain. In this chapter I consider the last in the symbolic labour triad, that performed by the healers, or !qi:ten. Keeping the social relations of production in good repair in the face of social and ecological stresses, reducing intra-camp tensions and reproducing the wider inter-camp relations, the contact period !qi:ten were at the heart of San socio-economic change during the contact period.

Ecological stress was, of course, not a new experience for the San, but during the contact period periodic shortages of resources were exacerbated, first, by gradual usurpation of the San's traditional domains by black farmers and white colonists, and, second, by the decimation of the game. As I have shown, the decline in game was at least partially alleviated by stock theft, but the use of stolen stock to obtain corn from black farmers (Wright 1971: 118) and the theft of maize and fruit from farms (Wright 1971: 95; Vinnicombe 1976: 40) indicates that plant foods, the staple diet of the San, were at least periodically in short supply.

The southern San believed that game, rain and plant foods were all under the control of supernatural powers and beings whose sometimes obstructionist influence had to be counteracted by the shamans (Lewis-Williams 1982: 433). An increase in ecological stress would therefore be accompanied by an increase in the shamans' symbolic labour (cf. Dirks 1980: 27).

The principle stresses experienced by the San during the contact period were, however, social. The role that conflict played in San social life prior to the arrival of the white colonists is unknown. Strife no doubt occurred during the initial 'moving frontier' and even with the development of the 'static frontier' there must have been occasions when exchange and kinship relations broke down and hostility between the San and black farmers resulted. Nevertheless, as I have argued, the San's traditional aversion to conflict, combined with the absence of such strife in Bantu-speaker oral traditions, suggests that conflict did not play a major role in relations between the San and blacks - at least until the difaqane. With the difaqane, strife engulfed most of the black farmers of south-east Africa (Omer-Cooper 1966; Thompson 1969), but it is impossible to ascertain the extent to which the San were involved in the general upheaval. It has been argued that in certain areas, such as the Caledon River Valley, the San were indeed caught up in the fighting and suffered accordingly (Wright 1971: 16) and, furthermore, that, even if the San avoided the actual fighting, the influx

of refugees into the Drakensberg would have placed a considerable strain on available resources (Wright 1971: 16), greatly increasing ecological tensions and perhaps leading to intra-San conflict over resources. Certainly, shortage of and access rights to resources are a source of conflict amongst the modern Kalahari San (Hitchcock 1985: 34; Hitchcock and Holm 1985) and self-preservation undoubtedly became a strong factor in the relationships between southern San camps. Towards the end of the contact period a number of San, in a cold-blooded attempt to clear themselves of accusations of stock theft laid by Henry Fynn, travelled deep into the Drakensberg and attacked two groups of San, killing several and taking eighteen men, women and children prisoner. In addition, twenty-one cattle and several horses, stolen from the colonists, were recovered (Wright 1971: 128).

This increase in self-interest amongst the San was paralleled by a gradual worsening of relations with the black farmers. In particular, following the arrival of the colonists, relations with blacks became more and more fraught with conflict. This development can be ascribed to at least three causes: first, the increased use of blacks in the colonists' punitive commandos; second, the establishment of the buffer settlements between the San and the colonists which lead to increased theft of black farmers' cattle; and, third, the gradual movement of black farmers and so-called 'bandits' into the San's last remaining territories (Wright 1971; Vinnicombe 1976). This increase in hostility was

paralleled by a change in the Bantu-speakers' attitudes towards the San. The San were increasingly regarded as inferiors and intermarriage came to be frowned upon (Wright 1971: 14). What the San themselves thought of this change in attitudes is unknown, but today amongst the Ghanzi San a similar process has resulted in an extraordinarily low self-image that creates attitudinal problems and increased social stress (Guenther 1975a).

In the south-eastern mountains this stress was greatly exacerbated by conflict with the colonists themselves. Although contacts with the colonists were not always hostile (Thompson 1827: 55, 61) - there were attempts by farmers to stop San raids by supplying them with cattle and by shooting game for them (Thompson 1827: 221; Collins 1838: V, 3; Wright 1971: 27) - the colonists' relations with the San were, by and large, inimical. For the colonists, the pattern of raid and retaliation experienced in the Cape Province (Wright 1971: 25-7) was repeated in the south-eastern mountains. Although there is no doubt that many blacks were involved in the raiding (Lye 1967), the San invariably became the colonists' scapegoats.

Despite only five recorded instances of San surprised by retaliatory commandos between 1840 and 1872 (Vinnicombe 1976: 23), the heyday of the raids, there were doubtless many unrecorded instances, to say nothing of isolated incidents of assault and murder (Orpen 1908: 260; Lewis-Williams 1981a:

28). Besides punitive commandos, farmers also kidnapped San children to be raised on the farms as servants (Arbousset 1846: 252; Orpen 1908: 259, 260, 319, 322; Ross 1981: 224). In one instance Orpen accompanied a Bloemfontein commando which attacked a shelter, killed twenty-five men and took as many children from their mothers for servants and herdboys (Campbell 1959: 43). The result of these depredations was a great deal of social tension and fear amongst the San. Orpen was informed that his guide Qing had never seen a white man "but in fighting" (Orpen 1874: 2). According to Arbousset, the very sight of a white face was sufficient to create panic; every time he went near the San, they "raised loud cries, and sought to flee or to conceal themselves" (Arbousset 1846: 250; see also Orpen 1908: 319).

This strife, both with Bantu-speakers and colonists, placed the San social formation, and in particular the inter-camp relations of production, under considerable strain. Conflict undermined inter-camp relations by making visits to distant camps more difficult and dangerous. Anxiety for the safety of kin and friends in these camps would have increased. Significantly, conflict seems to have led to the development of a degree of self-interest not encountered before: I have already referred to the instance of a San camp attacking another in an attempt to deflect culpability for stock theft. Self-interest is always present in San society, but it is usually kept under control (Marshall 1961); the development of overt inter-camp conflict

may thus indicate that the system had begun to break down under the strains of the contact period. Reproduction of the San social formation depended upon these inter-camp relations (Keenan 1977; Lewis-Williams 1982: 436), and, since it is the task of the !qi:ten, through their accounts of out-of-body travel, to keep these relations in good repair, it follows that their task would have become increasingly important as the contact period progressed. Within the camp, conflict no doubt resulted in increased anxiety about the safety of men on hunting or raiding expeditions and women out gathering plant foods. Again it is the task of the !qi:ten to alleviate these fears and tensions. Indeed, the elaboration of the economic and social stresses experienced by the San and the ensuing growth in the importance of the healers' role, may have been expressed by an increase in the occurrence and importance of the trance dance with a corresponding increase in the status and influence of the healers.

Such a development is suggested by the response of modern San groups to increased social stress resulting from severe economic, attitudinal and existential problems (Guenther 1975a, 1975b, 1975/6, 1976, 1986). Amongst the modern Ghanzi San, for instance, where social interaction with white and black farmers is "marked by constant and intensive conflict" (Guenther 1976: 125), the shamans have become influential and wealthy specialists (Guenther 1975/6). By incorporating the new tensions, fears and sickness into the trance dance, the

shamans have enabled the Ghanzi San to deal with the pressures of contact: aside from the dance's therapeutic and integrative qualities, it also provides for a powerful cathartic release of frustration and resentment (Guenther 1976: 130). The dance has become an important rallying symbol, creating sentiments of emotional recharge. Passive acceptance of their unenviable situation changes to resentment or outrage, and the San consider positive measures for actively dealing with their domination and exploitation (Guenther 1979: 113). Existential stress has galvanized Ghanzi San ritual (Guenther 1985: 9).

Although the southern San's situation was somewhat different from that of the Ghanzi San, there are enough similarities between the two to suggest that the increase in the pressures faced by the southern San, especially during the final stages of the contact period, should have been paralleled by an increase in ritual activity. Significantly, Arbousset (1846: 253) records that the San performed the dance of the mokoma (the "dance of blood" or trance dance [Arbousset 1846: 246-7]) throughout the night "in times of famine and before going to war." Although dancing before "going to war" could be thought of as akin to the popular notion of American Indian war dances, when considered in the light of the San trance dance and the inevitable fears and anxieties for kin and friends such a hazardous undertaking as raiding would generate, it is far more likely that the dance was performed in a conscious effort to alleviate these