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

Campbell, Colin

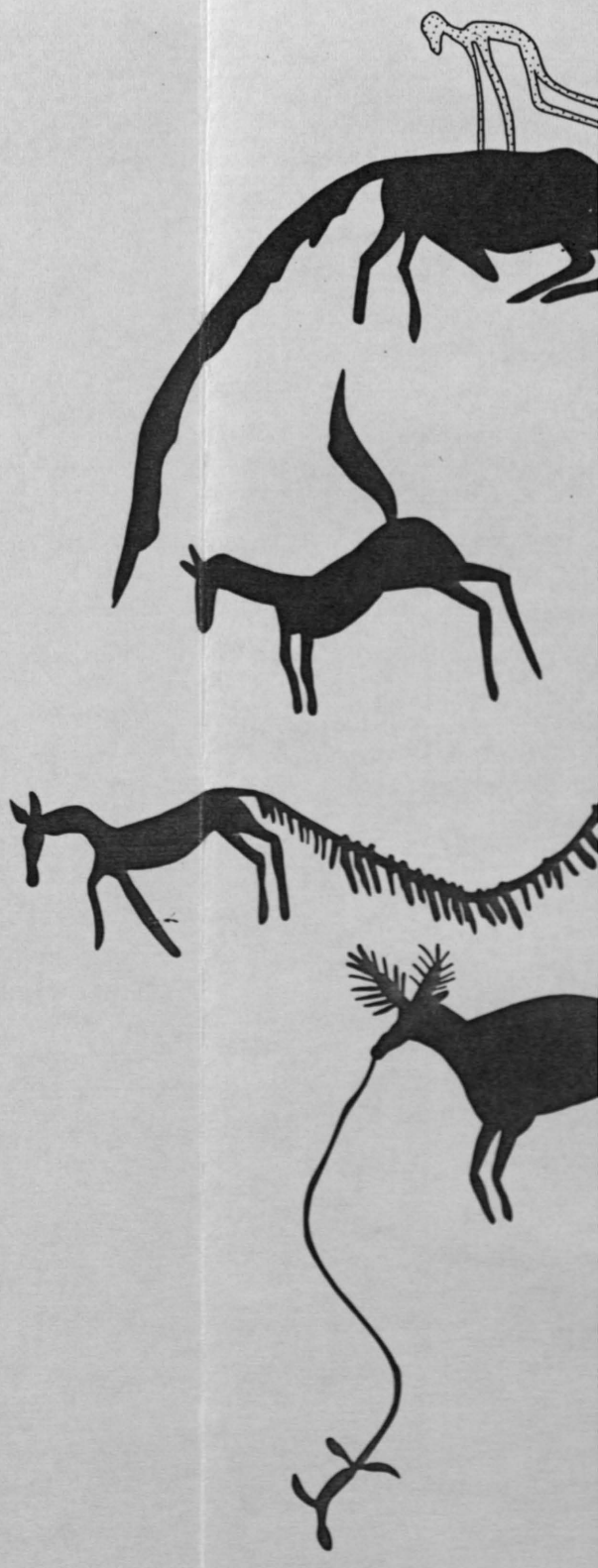
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relations of production. Furthermore, the increasing dependence of the San upon horses, guns and other articles meant that more and more San became dependent upon a superior and generally hostile community: they were losing control over their means of production. Moreover, the high value accorded European goods may have begun to develop into a pursuit for wealth and social status through the possession of cattle, horses and other exotic goods - a situation which is certainly true for the modern San (Guenther 1976: 131). Access to these items was, as I have argued, through the shamans' symbolic labour. Therefore it is likely that the shamans would have stressed their importance and promoted the development of the new shamanistic relation of production by demonstrating their control over access to these items by assimilating them into their ritual activities, and in particular, their paintings.

The art suggests that such a process did indeed occur. Despite the fact that the San encountered horses only late in the contact period, several equine paintings contain curious features. A painting from the Bushman's Nek area (fig. 8) is a particularly fine example. The most striking features of this painting are the grossly elongated and transformed tails of the horses. I have already referred to the ability of shamans to transform themselves into the animal whose potency they possess, but it appears that shamans also experienced more bizarre metamorphoses. Lewis-Williams (1986a) has argued that shamans sometimes identified themselves with a





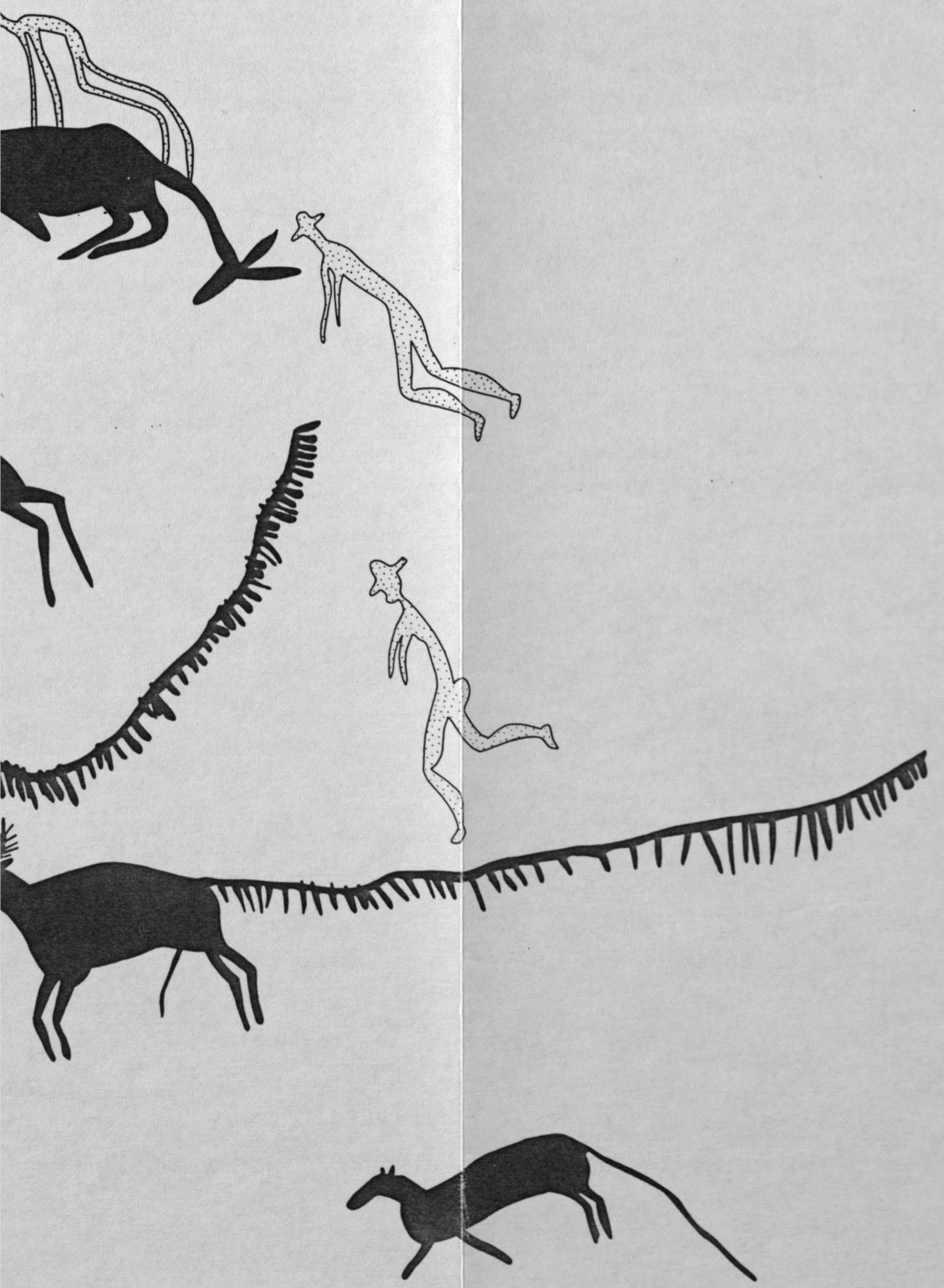


Figure 8. Bushman's Nek, Griqualand East

series of somatic and visual hallucinations they experienced while in trance. This identification resulted in a somewhat amorphous self-image: as their potency 'boiled', their bodies became fluid, with parts separating and undergoing transformation (Lewis-Williams 1986a: 174; see Katz 1982: 235-6 for San accounts of this experience). Furthermore, Lewis-Williams has demonstrated that such 'trance-formed' shamans are depicted in the art in varying degrees of transformation (e.g., Lewis-Williams 1985a: fig. 6, 1986a: figs 1, 6; cf. Stroobach 1984: fig. 4). The close resemblance of the horses' tails to the hallucinations portrayed in these paintings suggests that this is another such trance vision, with the subtle difference that the shamans have fused with the source of their power - the horse.

There are further indications of transformation in this painting (fig. 8), most notably in the lower of the two horses with the exaggerated tails. In addition to the curious tail, this horse has 'hairy' ears. The 'hairs' are probably another, somatic, hallucination because people in trance speak of a tingling or prickling sensation which is variously interpreted - the southern San spoke of hair growing on their bodies (Bleek 1935a: 2, 23). Another enigmatic feature is the object attached to the line projecting from the horse's mouth. A clue to an explanation is provided by a painting from the Wodehouse district (Woodhouse 1985: fig. 1) that portrays a feline therianthrope

with a small humanoid figure on the end of a line emerging from its head. This combination suggests that the small figure represents the departing spirit of a shaman. Similarly, inspection of the actual painting in figure 8 suggests the object at the end of the line from the horse's mouth is also humanoid (Lewis-Williams, pers. comm.). This humanoid emanation, in addition to the transformed nature of the horse's body, suggests that this horse is in fact a shaman who is using his equine power to go on out-of-body travel.

A further aspect of trance experience is illustrated by the uppermost human figure which is bending over and placing its hands on a recumbent horse. The horse's tail, while greatly exaggerated, has not reached the same degree of abstraction as those of the other two horses. More importantly, the horse is collapsing, with lowered head and buckled front legs. During the trance dance, the 'boiling' of a shaman's potency is often followed by a collapse into unconsciousness (Marshall 1969: 374-9). This is considered a highly dangerous time during which the insentient shaman must be cared for by other shamans and women (Arbousset 1846: 247; Marshall 1969: 378-9; Shostak 1981: 293). If, as I have argued, the dying horse is in fact a dying shaman, then this scene probably depicts such a caring situation (cf. Vinnicombe 1976: fig. 217; Lewis-Williams 1981a: fig. 21). Taken together, the transformed tails, 'hairy' ears, humanoid emanation and human figure in a caring posture suggest that

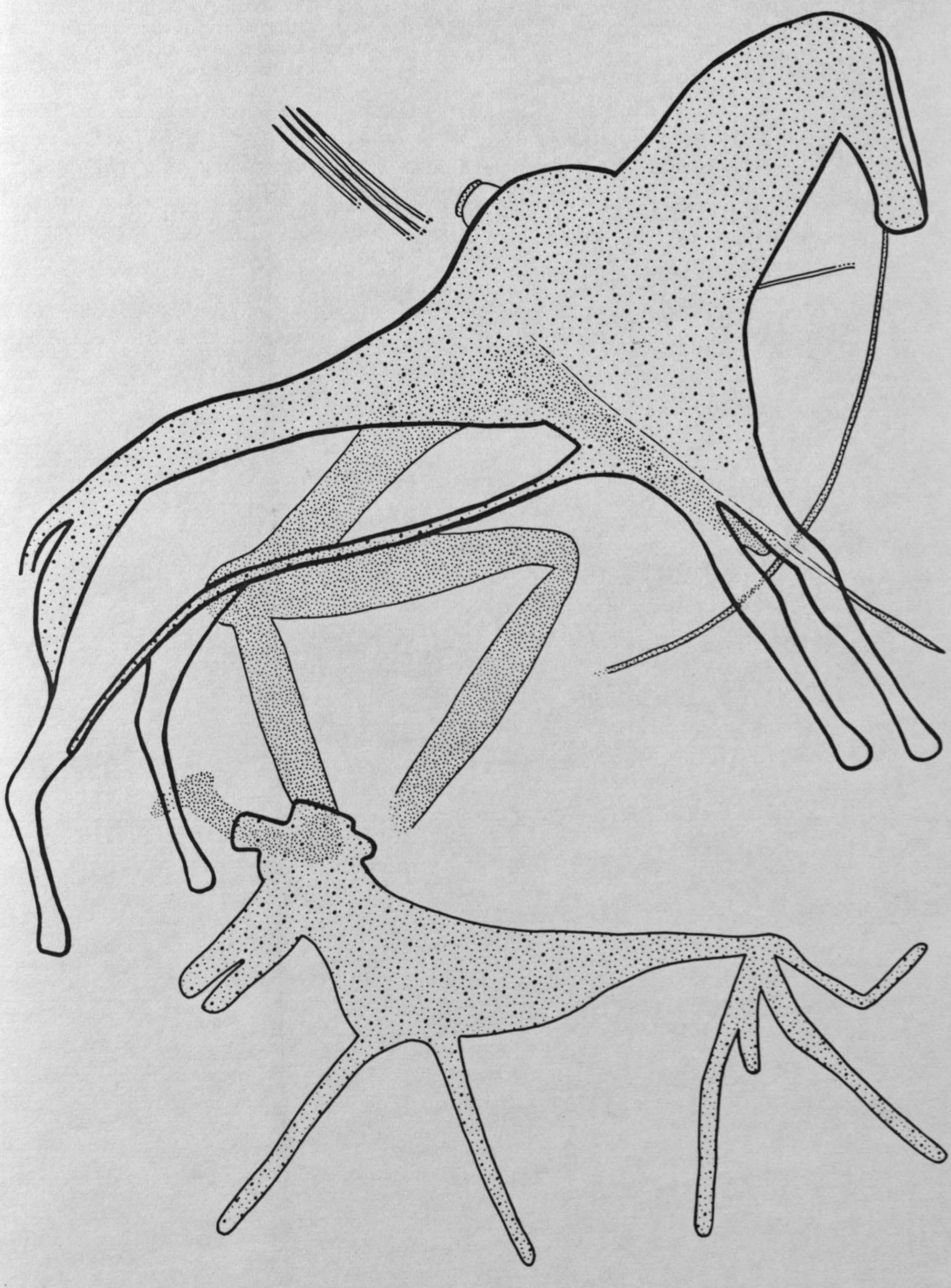
this painting, like figure 6, is the complex trance vision of a shaman: shamans have entered deep trance and fused with their equine power. Moreover, the humanoid emanation suggests at least one of the shamans has used this power to go on out-of-body travel.

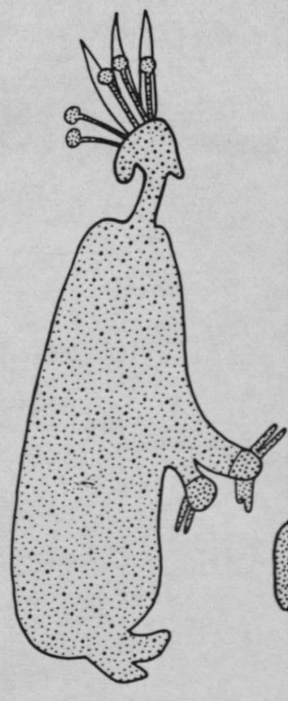
This interpretation of figure 8 can be used to explicate curious features in other paintings. For instance, the enigmatic figures to the right of figure 6, two of which are linked to cows. The uppermost appears to be in the trancing arms-back, bending forward position and is joined to a cow by a broad line, while the lower grasps a knobkerrie that runs parallel to a second cow's horns. These features probably depict the link between shamans whose potency has 'boiled' and whose bodies have transcended their normal anatomical boundaries and the source of their power.

Aside from such explicitly hallucinatory paintings as figure 8, the association between horses and shamans is further clarified by another form of syntax: juxtapositioning. The modern !Kung San believe that when a man with, for instance, eland potency dances and cures, eland are attracted to the dance and stand out in the darkness beyond the camp fire (Lewis-Williams 1981a: 83). The southern San appear to have had similar beliefs because several paintings of dances have eland closely associated with them (e.g., Lewis-Williams 1981a: figs 10, 18). Significantly, there is at least one painting of horses

closely juxtaposed to a dance (Vinnicombe 1976: fig. 224). Another painting (Vinnicome 1976: fig. 22) shows horses being driven towards a natural recess in the shelter wall where seated women are clapping. Such associations, with the horse replacing eland, suggest that, together with cattle, the horse was gradually displacing the eland in San belief and ritual.

The shamans who 'possessed' horses no doubt used their equine potency to control stolen horses, but several traditional paintings suggest a new dimension to San beliefs about the horse. On the extreme left-hand side of a panel full of dead or dying eland from a shelter in the Herschel district (Pager 1975: 42-3), a human figure is linked to an eland by two lines. Pager (1975: 43) describes the tableau as a hunter prodding an eland with his bow in order to establish it is dead. However, the posture of both the eland and the hunter argue against this conclusion: the hunter's arm is drawn backwards, suggesting that he is using the lines to pull the eland's head towards him. This view is confirmed by a painting of an eland surrounded by curious human figures (Vinnicombe 1976: fig. 111). The figure above the back of the eland holds a line which Lewis-Williams believes, from an examination of the actual painting, to be looped around the eland's neck (Lewis-Williams 1981a: 110). Again it appears as if the line is being used to raise the eland's head. Nor is this relationship limited to paintings of eland. A painting from the Slabberts district, for instance, depicts a





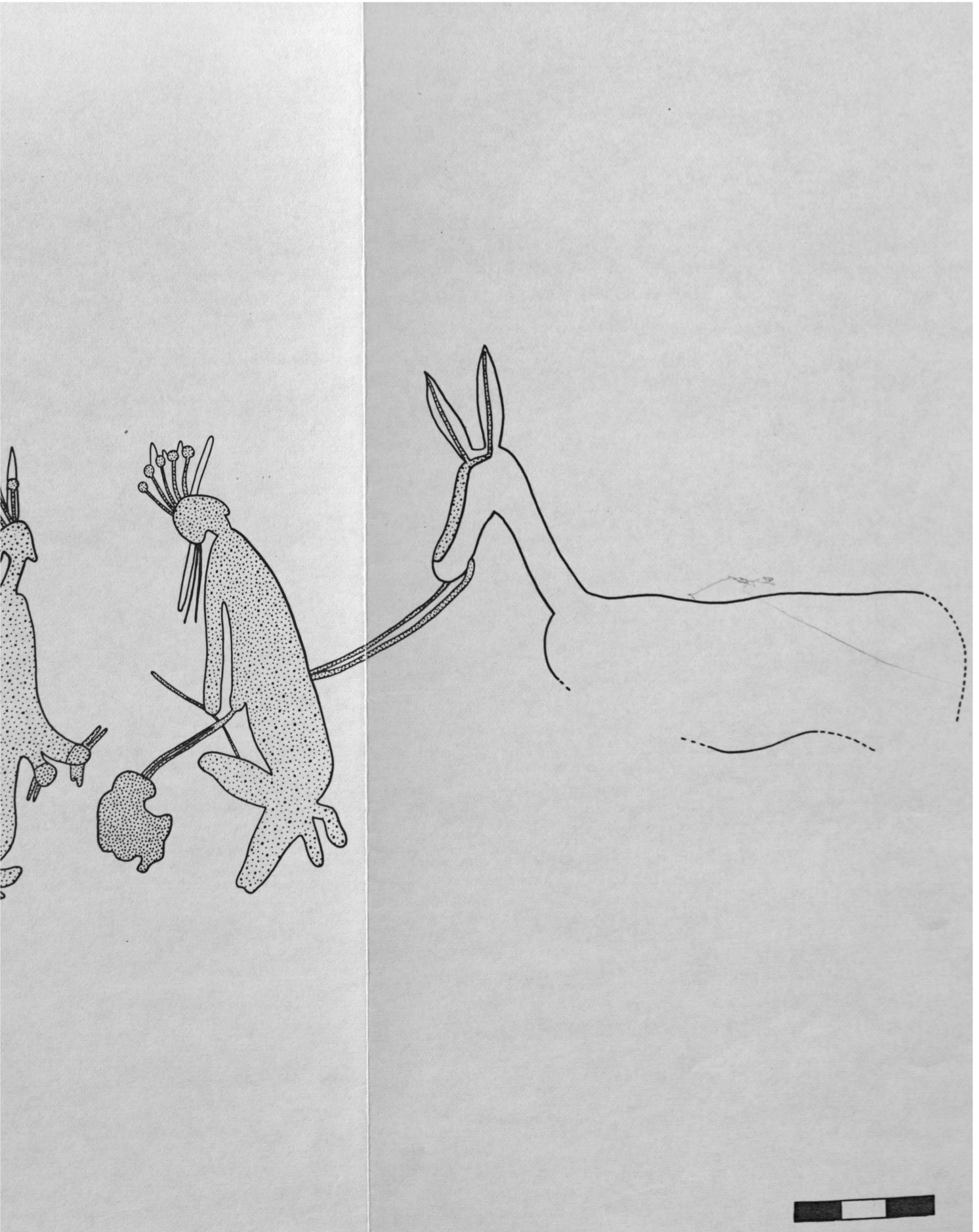


Figure 9. Slabberts, Eastern Orange Free State

kneeling shaman who is bleeding from the nose and holding two lines attached to a rhebuck's head (fig. 9; see Woodhouse 1979b for an alternative, but implausible, explanation). All three paintings therefore give the impression that reins have been attached to the animals. This apparent anomaly is clarified by an explicit statement given to Bleek (1933: 305): "They [the shamans] rode the rain, because the thongs with which they held it were like the horse's reins, they bound the rain." Thus the southern San shamans, who traditionally likened control of rain to a thong flung around a rain-animal's neck (Bleek 1935a: 44-7), extended this basic concept, following the advent of horses, to include reins. Reins, therefore, came to symbolise the shamanistic concept of control. In addition, this and other accounts suggest that 'riding' became a metaphor for this control. For instance, one shaman declared "I will make it (rain), for you to see ... I will really ride the rain up the mountain on top of which I always cut the rain" (Bleek 1933: 308-10; for further corroboration see Bleek and Lloyd 1911: 195).

Paintings of reined horses, therefore, are not necessarily literal depictions. A painting in the Bushman's Nek area (fig. 10), for instance, portrays a reined horse with 'horns' - a clearly non-realistic feature. These 'horns' do not resemble those of any species of southern African antelope. Therefore, rather than depicting a conflation of horse and antelope, these horns, like the horses' tails in figure 8, are probably another

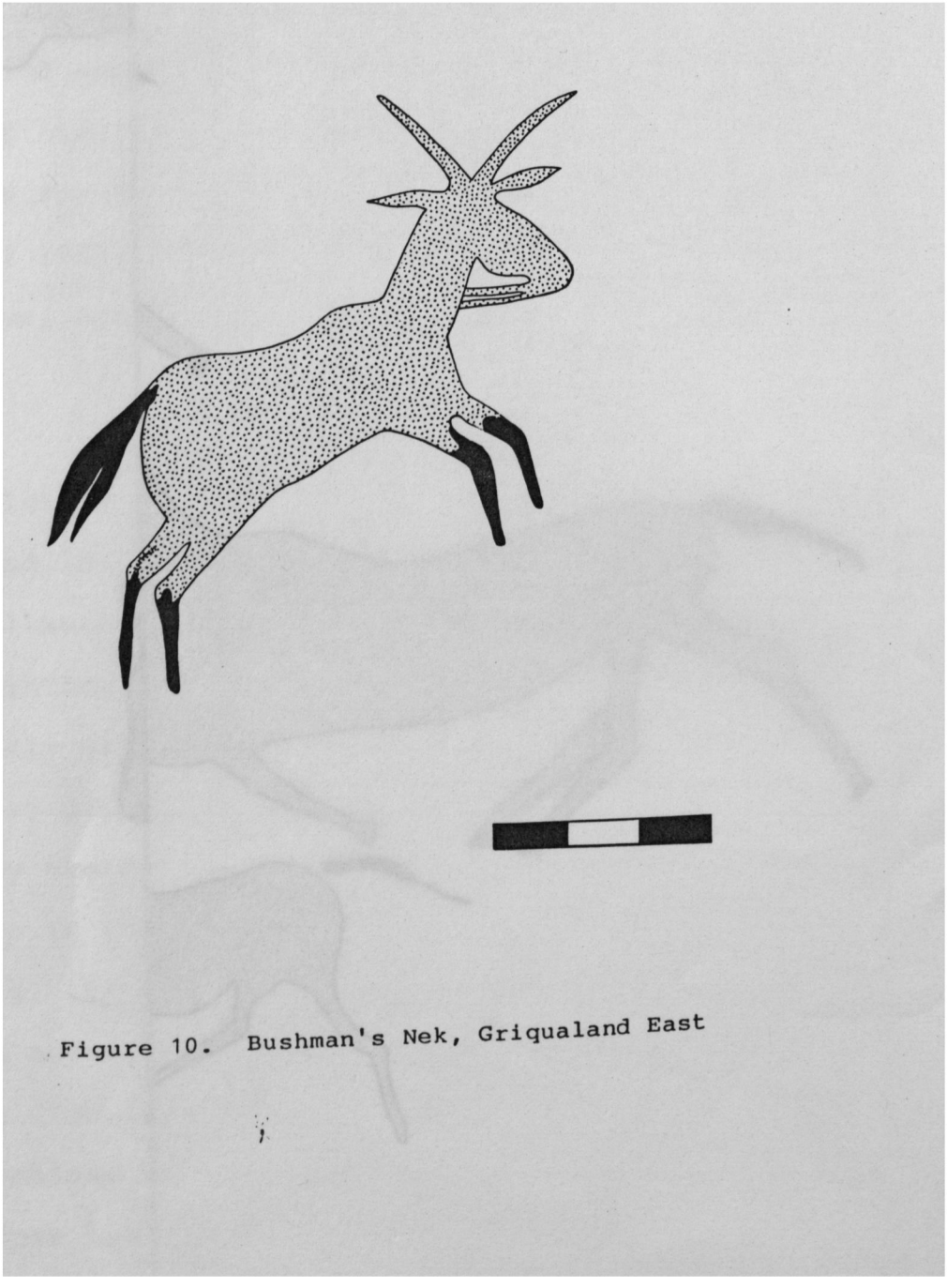
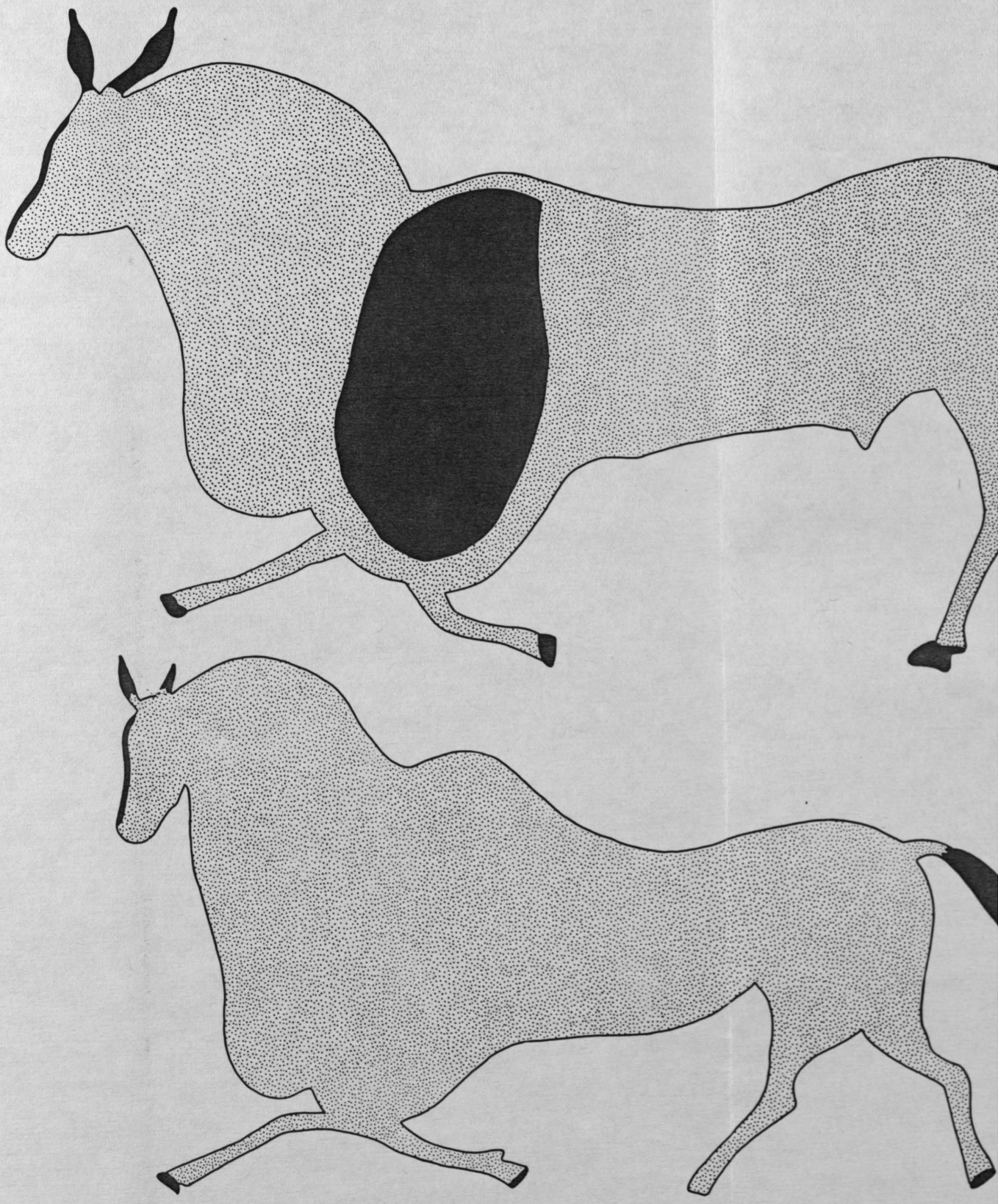


Figure 10. Bushman's Nek, Griqualand East



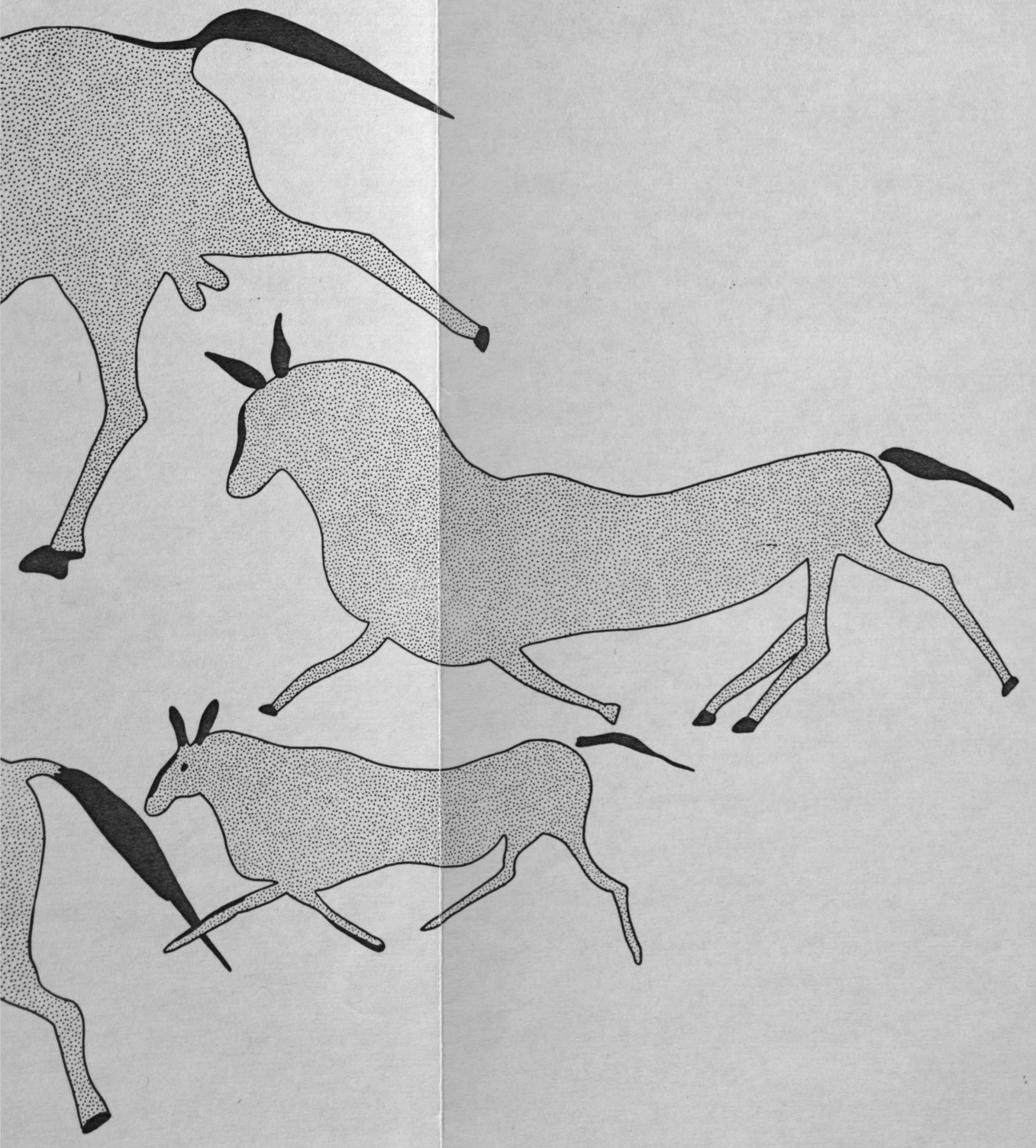


Figure 11. Melikane Valley, Eastern Lesotho

transformation experienced by a trancing shaman. Similar uncharacteristic 'horns' appear on the head of an eland therianthrope in a painting from the eastern Cape (Lewis-Williams 1983b: fig. 20). In this instance (fig. 10) the association of reins with a 'trance-formed' shaman may have expressed another aspect of a shaman's control - over the level of his trance. Such control is a necessary prerequisite for a shaman to perform various tasks while in trance (Katz 1982: 42, 135). Thus figures 8 and 10 are cognate forms, portraying the complex hallucinations of San shamans.

The depiction of such complex hallucinatory visions as figures 8 and 10 enables us to throw new light on a painting from the Melikane Valley (fig. 11). At first glance this is merely a painting of four rather crude eland, but there are certain easily overlooked, highly significant features that make it a key painting. The first of these is the extra leg possessed by the eland on the right. Extra limbs are in fact not uncommon in the art, occurring in paintings of both animals (fig. 12) and human beings (fig. 13). These occurrences are often in explicitly hallucinatory contexts such as the fighting eland in figure 12. This intricate painting combines the metaphor of an 'eland fight' with therianthropes (for a more detailed discussion of the painting see Lewis-Williams 1987b: 245-7). In this painting the eland's extra leg is especially noteworthy because polymelia, the sensation of having many limbs or digits, is

