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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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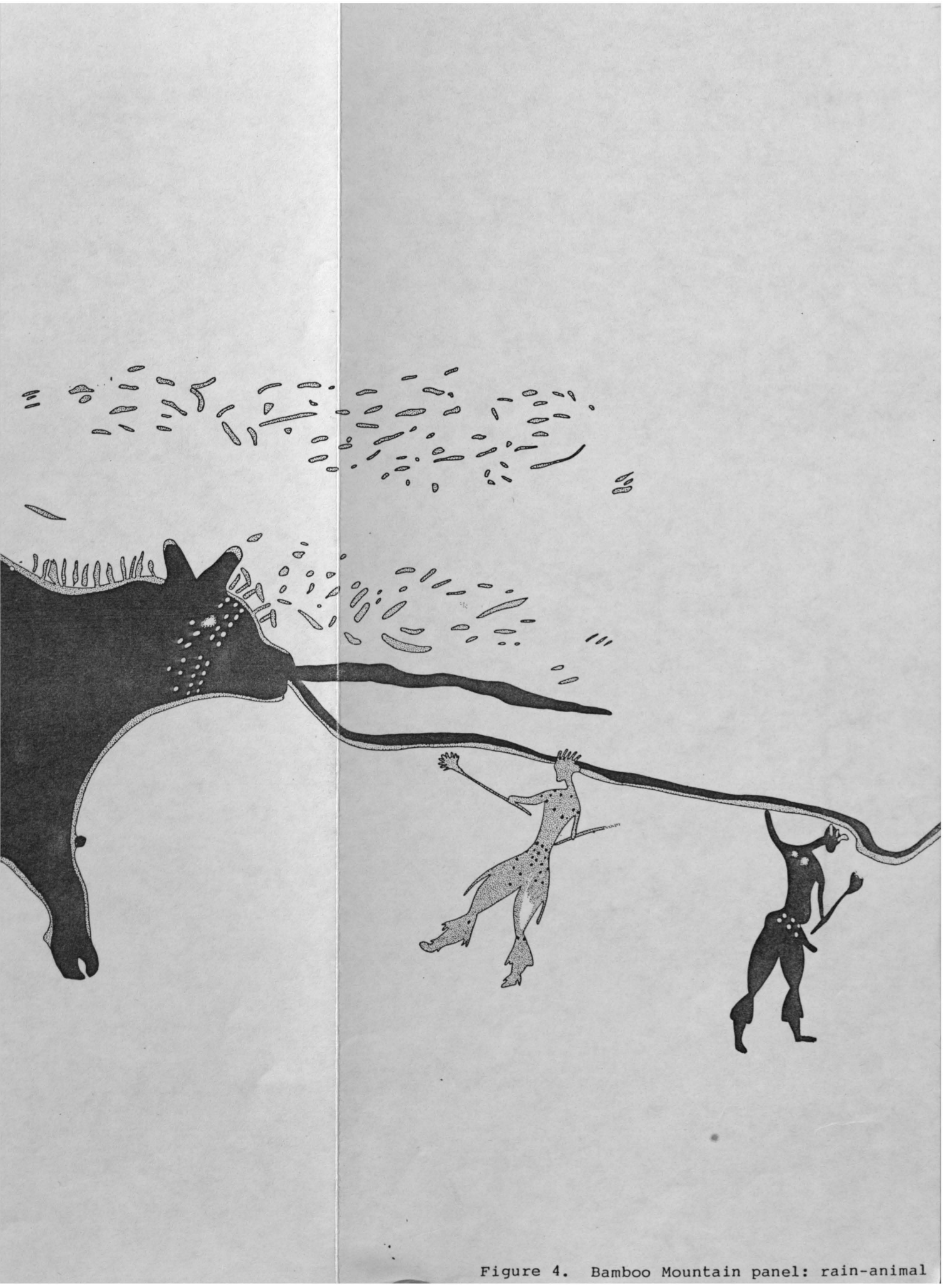


Figure 4. Bamboo Mountain panel: rain-animal

Bleek 1933: 382). The tufted stick held out to the rain-animal by a second shaman in figure 4 is probably buchu being used to sedate the animal. Two more shamans follow the rain-animal. According to Dia!kwain, one of Bleek's informants, an experienced shaman led the rain-animal while his apprentices followed behind (Bleek 1933: 379). Furthermore, the two shamans following the rain-animal have trance-blood falling from the nose, and the uppermost shaman is in another characteristic trance posture, bent forward with his arms parallel to his sides. Amongst the modern Kalahari San, some shamans adopt this bending forward posture as their potency begins to 'boil' in their stomachs, contracting their stomach muscles into a tight painful knot (Marshall 1969: 363-4; Katz 1982: 98). While in this position, dancers may extend their arms backwards, a posture adopted when asking god for potency and as the potency enters the body (Lewis-Williams 1981a: 88). These postures are frequently depicted in paintings of dances (e.g., Vinnicombe 1976: figs 217, 224; Lewis-Williams 1981a: figs 20, 33, 1983b: figs 8, 62).

In addition to observable trance behaviour, this painting contains other, more subtle, indications of trance. In an early stage of trance shamans experience a neurological phenomenon in which they 'see' various geometric shapes. These entoptic phenomena, as they are called, include zigzags, dots, nested U-shapes and vortexes (Siegel 1977: 138). These forms have been incorporated into San art in a

variety of ways (Maggs and Sealy 1983; Lewis-Williams 1985a: 49-53; 1986a), but numerous writers have interpreted them literally. White lines and dots on many figures, for instance, have been interpreted as body decoration (e.g., Willcox 1956: pl. 22, 1984b: pl. 9A; Rudner and Rudner 1970: 152-3; Pager 1975: 52; Woodhouse 1979a: pl. 66). Although it is apparently true that the San did practise such decoration (Vinnicombe 1976: 253-7; Rudner 1982: 204-10; Jolly 1986: 8), in the paintings these patterns sometimes trail off the body in a deliberate manner (e.g., Pager 1975: 55, 61) and are frequently found in explicitly hallucinatory contexts, such as a scene from the Harrismith district (Lewis-Williams 1985a: fig. 11) where similarly 'decorated' men are shown pursuing another rain-animal. Not only are the shamans in the Bamboo Mountain painting covered in red dots, but the rain-animal, an explicitly hallucinatory form, has similar red dots arranged in arcs on its hindquarters, hump and face. Rather than body marking this suggests that these dots are better interpreted as entoptic phenomena.

This conclusion also provides an alternative explanation for the many flecks of paint surrounding the rain-animal which have been interpreted as rain (Vinnicombe 1976: 339). Apparent confirmation of this belief was provided by Dia!kwain's comments on similar flecks in the Sehonghong rain-making scene: "the strokes indicate rain" (Orpen 1874: 12). Similarly, Qing described the flecks as "things growing underwater" (Orpen 1874: 10). However, entoptic phenomena

are not static: they are constantly shimmering and moving (Kluver 1942: 177; Siegel 1978: 311). They also often occur around the periphery of vision and, as the level of trance deepens, are projected against and become conflated with emotionally charged objects (Siegel 1977: 132, 134, 1978: 311), such as the human figures and rain-animal in this painting (fig. 4). This interpretation of the flecks does not contradict Dia!kwain's or Qing's statements. Although these phenomena are universally experienced, their interpretation is culturally determined. Thus it is possible that entoptic flecks shimmering around a shaman's central vision of a rain-animal were construed as rain by some people and as "things growing underwater" by others. Either way, both interpretations suggest the 'underwater' experience of trancing shamans (see Bleek 1935a: 32; Biesele 1975: II, 156; Lewis-Williams 1980: 472).

The portrayal of hallucinations and entoptic phenomena together with actual, observable trance behaviour suggests very strongly that the artist was himself a rain-maker and that he was depicting his own trance experience. This Bamboo Mountain painting has in fact been described as the "clearest of the Drakensberg rainmaking scenes" (Vinnicombe 1976: 339). This clarity is significant because in Vinnicombe's classification of painting phases, scenes belonging to the final period of the art are "often quite complex compositions with a distinctly narrative character" (Vinnicombe 1976: 141). It is possible therefore that all rain-making scenes

belong to this final period of the art. Certainly, many paintings of rain-animals are distinctly bovine in form (e.g., Pager 1975: 50; Vinnicombe 1976: fig. 240; Lewis-Williams 1981a: fig. 35), indicating a post-contact date for these paintings. Significantly, the /Xam word xoro here translated as 'animal' is also frequently translated as 'ox', 'cattle' or 'bull', both in rain-making and other contexts (Lewis-Williams 1981a: 104). Indeed, Schmidt (1979: 219-20) goes so far as to suggest that the concept of the rain-bull was brought to southern Africa by the black farmers, replacing the snake or eland in San rain-symbolism. If this is so, then most, if not all, paintings of rain-animals belong to the contact period.

By painting these scenes shamans were sharing their trance experiences with the rest of the camp. There are no hidden mysteries in trance experience; the modern !Kung, for instance, talk freely about their trance experiences (Biesele 1978a: 937) as did the southern San (Bleek 1935a: 31). Access to the 'other-world' of trance experience is open to all, even if it is only indirectly. During the contact period indirect access to the 'other world' of trance experience by painting may have been stressed by the rain-makers to demonstrate the increasing reliance of the camp as a whole on their symbolic labour.

If this was indeed the case there should be a correlation between the distribution of these paintings and the centres

of San rain-making activity. Significantly, Bamboo Mountain, location of the rain-making scene in figure 4, was known to the black farmers as Mvuleni, or 'Place of Rain' (Vinnicombe 1976: 44). Therefore it is possible that they periodically sent gifts of cattle to this particular spot as an application or payment for rain. The cattle and horses to the right of the panel (fig. 3) being driven towards the 'encampment' may thus be an exaggerated statement of the rewards brought to the camp by the rain-makers.

It is more likely, however, that the cattle and horses are the spoils of a San raid because, whereas the San frequently stole both cattle and horses at the same time (see Wright 1971: 196-201), there are no records of Bantu-speakers ever supplying the San with horses. A link between raiding and rain-making is again provided by the location of the Bamboo Mountain painting itself. Bamboo Mountain, on the upper Mzimkhulu river, lies in the heart of the country to which the majority of stock raids were traced (Vinnicombe 1976: 158). Although San stock raids occurred throughout the year, they were more common during the wet season (Wright 1971: 202; Vinnicombe 1976: 32). Several reports by white colonists describe torrential rain washing away the spoor of stolen cattle (Vinnicombe 1976: 43). At a time when the rain-makers were growing in status and influence it is possible that these shamans took this opportunity to enhance their reputations and underscore their importance by appropriating the responsibility for these fortuitous

squalls. That this was the case is suggested by a report cited by Vinnicombe (1976: 44-5) from the Natal Independent of 1851 which describes how a party of San raiders, relentlessly pursued by Zulus, "resorted to magic, and summoned a torrential downpour of rain by blowing a blast on an eland horn." Although this does not accord with the ethnographically recorded southern San methods of rain-making, it is interesting to note that a !Kung shaman dispersed rain by singing and blowing on a "buck's horn" (Bleek 1935b: 269). The close similarities between these two accounts suggests that the Natal Independent's report does indeed detail an otherwise unknown southern San method of dispersing rain.

The Bamboo Mountain painting (fig. 3) probably reflects this additional link between rain-making and the stock raids. The left-hand rain-making section is, as I have argued, the hallucinatory vision of a shaman. Its association with a San 'encampment' and cattle and horses may thus portray one or more shamans' symbolic labour - ensuring the continued existence of the San social formation by entering trance to produce rain which will ensure a continual supply of cattle payments to the camp or shield raiders from pursuit. But, more importantly, it is also a statement of the shamans' social power, demonstrating to the rest of the camp (and perhaps to visiting blacks) their increased dependence upon the shamans' symbolic labour. Rather than a literal depiction of a bull being led to a San encampment

(Woodhouse 1979a: 121), the panel is an explicit shamanistic response to the contact period. The rain-makers' growing importance did not indicate a requirement for more rain or that there was a drought. Instead it indicated that their ritual activity had given rise to a new shamanistic relation of production. Access to resources and distribution of the product were no longer exclusively controlled by traditional inter-camp relations but, in addition, through the shamans' ritual activities. Nor is this painting limited to the rain-makers' symbolic labour. On the contrary, it also portrays a subtle link between rain-making and domestic animals, a link I examine further in the following chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

CATTLE AND HORSES IN SAN ROCK ART

Most rock art literature, in accordance with the dominant story, sees paintings of cattle and horses only in terms of the popular notion of the San as thieves - "The evidence of the paintings ... illustrates Bushman raids" (Woodhouse 1979a: 26-7; see also Vinnicombe 1976; Willcox 1978b). San stock raiding has usually been explained by three observations: first, their inability to distinguish between wild and domesticated animals; second, economic necessity; and, third, reprisals against the colonists (Stow 1905: 39, 215; Bleek 1924: viii; Bleek and Stow 1930: pl. 20; Willcox 1956: 29, 1963: 21, 1984a: 192; Walker 1957: 34; How 1962: 57-8; cf. Richie 1979: 120-1). Each of these explanations needs examination before proceeding to a reassessment of depictions of domestic animals.

The first observation arises from the colonial view of the San as little better than animals, too stupid to make the distinction between domestic and wild animals. The San were, however, in contact with black farmers for generations and must have rapidly discovered that cattle and, later, horses were in a different category from wild game. No doubt some cattle raiding took place, but it is highly significant that

there are no references to San depredations in early Bantu-speaker traditions (Vinnicombe 1976: 12). Indeed, contrary to the dominant story, some sort of understanding appears to have developed between the two groups. Yet within six months of the arrival of the white colonists in Natal their stock was being stolen (Vinnicombe 1976: 23). Only towards the end of the contact period, following the creation of the buffer settlements, did the theft of black farmers' cattle become common (Vinnicombe 1976: 51; see also Wright 1971). The white incursion, rather than the blacks', should therefore be seen as the catalyst that triggered San raiding. The belief that the San were incapable of distinguishing between domestic and wild animals can thus be discounted.

The second explanation for stock raids, economic necessity, is more difficult to assess. Although the San frequently slaughtered cattle and, to a lesser extent horses, for food (e.g., Stanford 1910: 436, 437; Vinnicombe 1976: 57) and made use of cow's milk (Bleek 1932b: 246), shortage of game does not appear to have become a problem until near the end of the contact period. Shepstone, for instance, travelling through Griqualand East in 1846, found the country to be full of game (Wright 1971: 60). There is no doubt, however, that the colonists' habit of making annual hunting trips into the foothills of the Drakensberg (Drayson 1858: 109) had an adverse effect on the antelope. Hitchcock (1985: 34) has suggested that the use of guns in hunting frightens

game and increases their flight distance. If so, this would have made the task of the San hunters, armed with short-range bows and arrows, much more difficult and raiding comparatively more attractive. Moreover, by 1866 hunting had so reduced game numbers that the Natal government took steps to protect eland, hartebeest and several smaller species of antelope (Wright 1971: 160-1). That some ecological stress existed at this time is revealed by reports of the San using 'emergency rations' made from eland hide (Vinnicombe 1976: 32; see also Arbousset 1846: 250). There are also accounts of farmers supplying cattle to starving San (Collins 1838: V, 3). Furthermore, a definite correlation existed between the years of drought in the interior and an intensification in raiding along the northern Cape frontier (Wright 1971: 27). On the other hand, in the south-eastern mountains, raids occurred more frequently during the summer months, rather than during the winter when resources would have been more difficult to obtain (Vinnicombe 1976: 32). Economic necessity was, therefore, one but not the only reason for San stock-raiding.

The third explanation for raiding suggests that raids were a deliberate attempt to halt the expansion of the white colonists - a manifestation of the 'heroic struggle' element in the dominant story. In an analogous situation, attempts by the Herero to occupy the waters of the central Nyae Nyae in Namibia were opposed by the San who killed their cattle (Marshall and Ritchie 1984: 3). Such a response to the

colonists would also explain the San practice of killing stock rather than letting them be recaptured by their owners (Wright 1971: 36). However, the available records indicate that the raids were never very frequent, 64 being recorded in the 27 years between 1845 and 1872 (Wright 1971: 196-202). This relative paucity of raids argues against the raiders' primary objective being the defence of their traditional domains.

The inadequacies of these three explanations clearly demonstrate that the reasons for stock-theft are not clear-cut. This is an important realisation because the theoretical standpoint I have outlined shows that an appreciation of paintings of domestic animals depends on a thorough understanding of the place these animals occupied in San thought - even as with paintings of more traditional subjects such as eland. I therefore consider, in turn, the role cattle and horses played in San society during the contact period and their impact on the shamans' ritual and art. I confine myself to cattle and horses because, although paintings of sheep occur in the south-eastern mountains, they comprise a very small proportion of the art (Pager 1971: 321, 326; Vinnicombe 1976: 153; Lewis-Williams 1981a: 135; Mazel 1982).

The key to San concepts about cattle lies in their treatment of stolen stock. Although some accounts suggest they kept cattle for long periods (e.g., Wright 1971: 84-5,

114-5; Vinnicombe 1976: 48), the San usually disposed of cattle within a short time of their theft, either by slaughtering them for food or, more importantly, by trading with black farmers. The records show the San traded cattle to blacks for tobacco, dogs and grain (Wright 1971: 118, 120). They also 'sold' oxtails to the Bhaca (Vinnicombe 1976: 57) and, on at least one occasion, paid for 'lodging' with the black farmers in cattle (Wright 1971: 89). These transactions involved San maintaining a hunter-gatherer way of life. Aside from those San living with black farmers, at least one group of San adopted a sedentary life, intermarried with blacks and practised mixed farming (Wright 1971: 66; Vinnicombe 1976: 34). Although no longer practising a hunter-gatherer lifestyle, these San seem to have maintained links with independent San (see, for instance, Wright 1971: 66) and even, on occasion, reverted to hunting and gathering. Madolo, for instance, lived at a mission station for several years until, blamed by the local civil commissioner for unrest in the region, he fled back into the mountains (Saunders 1977). Aside from these instances of San adopting a sedentary life in one form or another, it is clear that they used stolen colonial cattle to transform their economic relationship with the Bantu-speakers.

The white colonists not only provided the San with cattle (and horses), albeit unwillingly, that could be used to trade with blacks, but they also introduced a wide range of manufactured items much sought after by the San. These

included saddlery, tinder-boxes, knives, metal pots and in particular guns and ammunition (Wright 1971: 188; cf. Guenther 1976: 128). Although the San did trade directly with white colonists on occasion, as when Dick King exchanged guns and ammunition for horses and ivory respectively (Wright 1971: 62), these goods were probably obtained mainly by theft or from blacks in exchange for stolen cattle. A stimulus for San raiding, therefore, may have been the desire to obtain cattle specifically to trade to black farmers.

This trading of colonial cattle to black farmers may have begun as a purely economic relationship. However, towards the end of the contact period, faced with ever increasing pressure from the colonists, the San were forced into much closer relationships with the blacks. These included alliances whereby, in exchange for shelter from the colonist's retaliatory commandos, the raiders shared the spoils of their raids (Wright 1971: 189). In effect, the blacks were using the conflict between the San and the white colonists to achieve economic domination and exploitation of the San, a reversal of the position the San achieved by rain-making.

These new economic relations, based on the exchange of cattle, represent an important change in the San means of production. This change was, in itself, not incompatible with the inter-camp relations of production: raiding was functionally equivalent to hunting, supplementing the men's

hunting activities during the contact period. However, the productivity was far higher; according to the available records, San raiders stole up to three hundred cattle at a time (Wright 1971: 196-201). This inevitably meant an increase in the material wealth of individual San camps. As was the case with rain-making, the question of ownership of stolen cattle and goods received for them from Bantu-speakers is an extremely important one. The vast increase in the number of cattle involved, creating, for the first time, a large potential surplus product, may have heralded the beginning of property relations. Such a development would ultimately result in a breakdown in the egalitarian inter-camp relations of production because the ownership of stock facilitates the growth of individual wealth and the consequent formation of a class system incompatible with the traditional relations of production. Unfortunately, there is no evidence on this point, but, even if rudimentary property relations did develop, it is unlikely that they developed to the extent that they caused a major shift in ideology because, in the Kalahari today, incipient property relations are apparently not incompatible with traditional San ideology. Increasingly, individuals are permitted to own cattle and other livestock without being subjected to social pressure to slaughter them and distribute the meat to less fortunate kin, so long as they maintain their reciprocity relations by other means (Wiessner 1982: 82). Cattle have been placed outside the inter-camp relations of production. This is, I believe, a function of the conservative nature of