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APPENDIX I

PUBLISHED PAPER

"Images of war: a problem in San rock art research", World Archaeology, 1986, 18: 255-68.

Images of war: a problem in San rock art research

C. Campbell

San (Bushman) rock paintings depicting conflict are not uncommon in southern Africa. They are distributed from the Cape Province (Manhire, Parkington and van Rijssen 1983) in the west to Moçambique in the east (de Olivera 1971). This wide distribution is not surprising because violent confrontation characterised the recent history of the San. The San were hunter-gatherers who occupied southern Africa for millennia before their unrestricted monopoly was challenged by immigrant groups. Sheep and cattle herders, the Khoikhoi, appeared about 2000 years ago in the west (Deacon *et al.* 1978), and about the same time, Bantu-speaking mixed farmers began moving into the eastern areas of the subcontinent.

Relations between the early Khoikhoi and the San are difficult to determine. Some writers have argued that the distinction between San and Khoikhoi was minimal: a San with stock was a Khoikhoi and vice versa (Marks 1972: 57). Others believe that the differences were more subtle (Elphick 1977: 23–30). Some interaction certainly occurred (Theal 1883: 202), though there is evidence that Khoi occupancy of the low-lying grazing lands caused the San to concentrate in the mountains (Elphick 1977: 23).

Farther to the east, the distinction between San and Bantu-speakers was greater. Although hostility inevitably existed, there is evidence that a form of symbiotic relationship developed (Vinnicombe 1976: 10). In some areas the San entered into a serf relationship which included hunting animals for meat and skins and herding cattle (Orpen 1874: 2; How 1962: 11). Trade and intermarriage also occurred (Wilson 1969: 106). The San were, moreover, respected for their ritual competence and they became acknowledged rainmakers (Hook 1908: 327; Stanford 1910: 439). The Pondomise, for instance, often sent cattle to the San as an application for rain. In addition, as a token of thanksgiving for the rain they provided, the San were given the right to collect a small share of the harvest (Barry 1883: II, 409).

This situation was disrupted by the arrival of white colonists in the seventeenth century. These colonists soon spread north and east from the Cape, bringing with them the unassailable combination of horse and rifle and ultimately destroying the game and overgrazing the veld. Soon the San and Khoikhoi were at odds over diminishing resources, while in the east the Bantu-speakers aided both the San in the raids (Stanford

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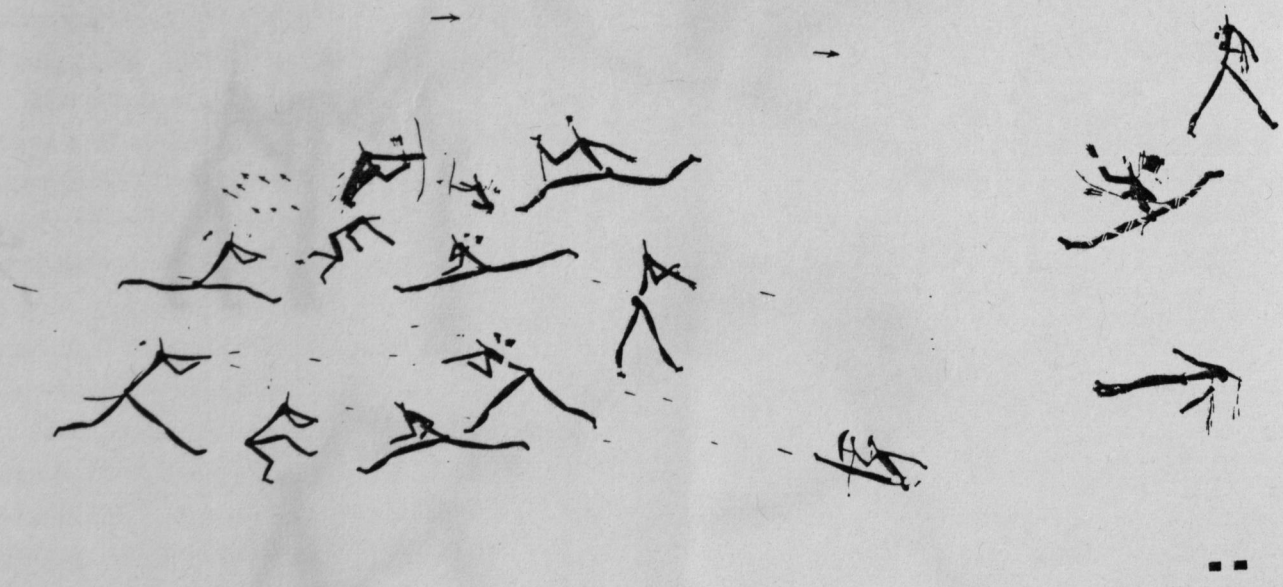
Figure 1 Battle Cave. Colours: red, white and ochre. Scale in centimetres.

1910; Vinnicombe 1976: 24), and the white colonists in hunting the raiders down (Vinnicombe 1976: 33). In the view of many colonists complete destruction of the indigenous peoples was the only course. In two and a half centuries the Khoikhoi were virtually exterminated, and the San survived only in the remote and inhospitable Kalahari Desert. The Bantu-speakers were somewhat better equipped to resist, despite bloody frontier wars.

The depiction of this conflict in San rock art is graphic and highly detailed. Many weapons are realistically portrayed. In addition to the San bows, arrows and quivers there are broad-bladed iron spears, short stabbing spears, knobkerries, battle-axes, rifles, powder-horns and so forth. In some paintings the shape of the Bantu-speakers' shields can be used to identify the group (Tylden 1946).

The fascination of so detailed a record has tended to support the belief that San rock art is principally realistic. Apart from a few obviously fantastic figures, the art seems to be an accurate record of stone age life and its confrontation with herders, farmers and colonists (Willcox 1978: 63). Working from this assumption, some writers have used the art as an ethnographic source from which various artefacts and weapons can be inferred (Stow 1905: ix; cf. Woodhouse 1984: 244). More recently this view has been challenged. Numerous painted features suggest that, rather than being a narrative of daily life, it is essentially shamanistic, that is, associated with the activities of medicine men, being essentially hallucinatory and portraying the world of trance experience (Lewis-Williams 1981a, 1983a, 1984, 1986).

It is the purpose of this paper, through an examination of three selected paintings, to ascertain which of these positions is better able to explain conflict paintings. Each painting illustrates a different form of conflict: a fight between two groups of San, a San



raid upon Bantu-speakers' cattle and, lastly, a fight between San cattle-raiders and a pursuing white commando. I begin with the celebrated painting at Battle Cave (Fig. 1).

This painting apparently depicts a fight between two groups of San, even though they are both armed with broad-bladed battle-axes — a Bantu-speaker's weapon. One figure has his battle-axe carefully tucked under one arm. More traditional San weapons, such as the bow and arrow, are also depicted. Several figures hold arrows ready for use while clouds of arrows fly through the air. Many of the arrows clearly show their sectioned construction and the different types of arrow-head, slender bone and barbed metal, are faithfully reproduced. One figure is extracting an arrow-head from his arm, the shaft having fallen away. On the left hunting equipment lies abandoned.

This apparent realism has prompted writers to interpret this painting as an actual event (Rudner and Rudner 1970: 153). Indeed, the abiding impression is that the painting records an attack upon the shelter itself (Willcox 1956, 1978, 1984a). Willcox (1956, 1978, 1984a) goes on to infer that the attack was beaten off because all the casualties are on the 'attacking' side and the successful defenders had to remain in possession of the shelter to commemorate their victory.

The sole evidence for this interpretation is the painting itself, yet a closer look at the scene reveals features that are not easily explained by a literal interpretation. On the left of the painting a figure is clearly pointing, a fairly common posture in the art. A literal view sees a 'keen warrior, leaping forward' (Rudner and Rudner 1970: 152), but this posture recurs in the art so often and over such a wide area that one is led to believe it was more significant (for depictions in paintings see Lewis-Williams, in press). To explain this significance I turn to the San medicine dance. Medicine men pass supernatural potency, or *n/um* (Marshall 1969: 350–3), to aspirant trancers by shooting

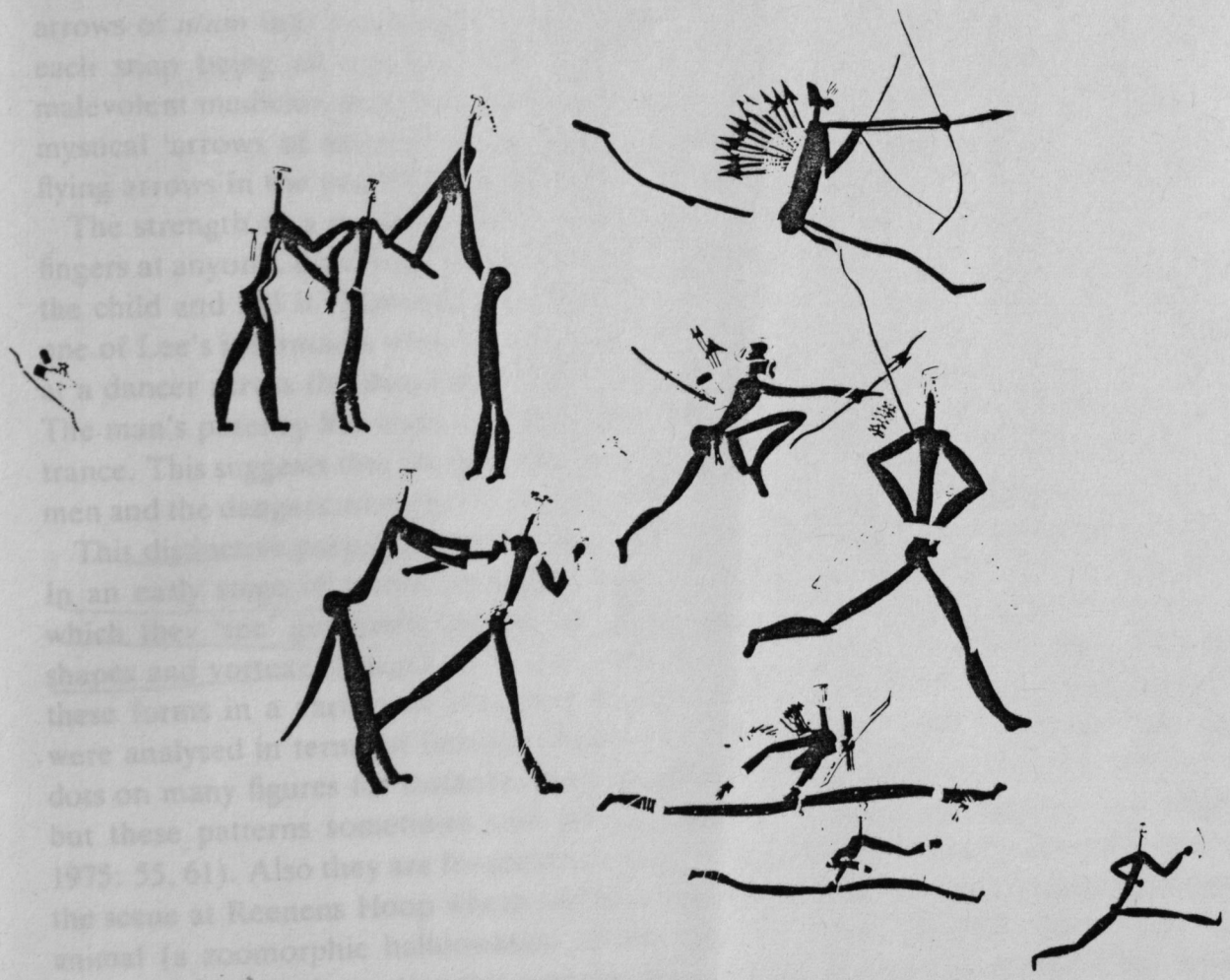


Figure 1A Battle Cave: left section.

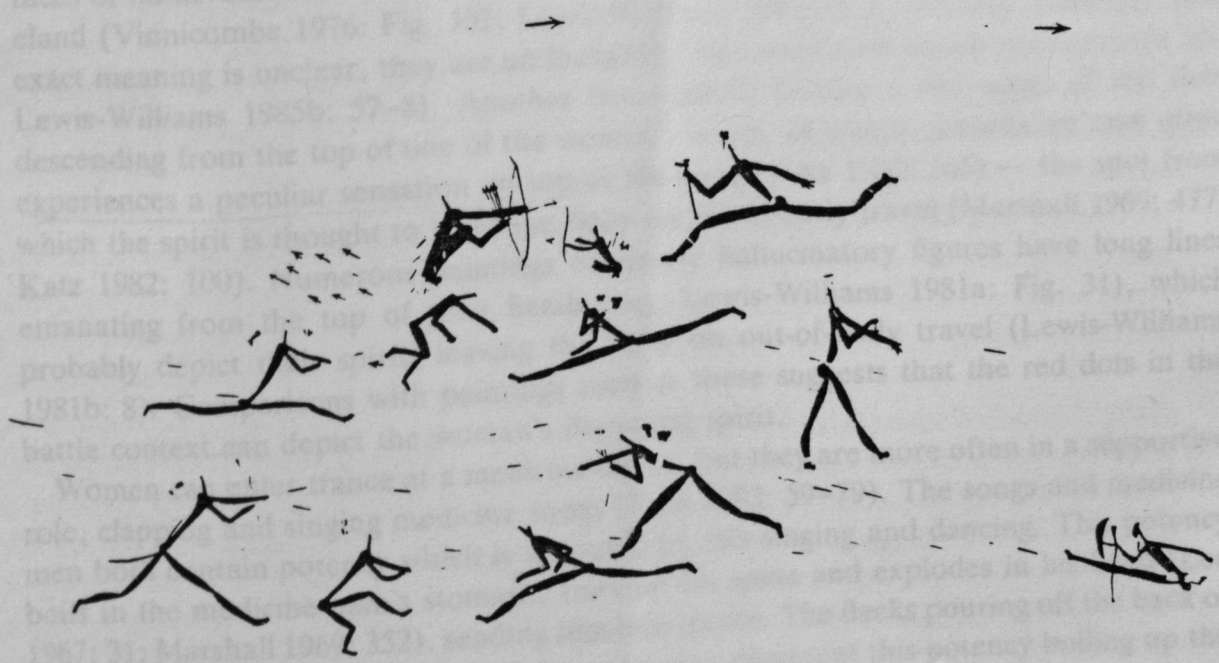


Figure 1B Battle Cave: central section.

arrows of *n/um* into the student: 'The teacher snaps her fingers at the student's gabesi, each snap being an arrow' (Katz 1982: 168). Apart from this benevolent practice, malevolent medicine men, the *//xi:ka!gi:ten* (Lewis-Williams 1981b: 5), could also shoot mystical 'arrows of sickness' into people (Bleek 1935: 7). It is possible that the many flying arrows in the painting are not real, but rather portray these 'arrows of sickness'.

The strength of a medicine man's potency is such that he must not point or snap his fingers at anyone, especially a child, in case 'a fight' should travel along his arm, leap into the child and kill it (Marshall 1969: 351–2). This danger was graphically illustrated by one of Lee's informants who, in the middle of a dance 'stops, turns and points his finger at a dancer across the dance fire. The dancer falls over immediately' (Katz 1982: 263). The man's potency has leapt into the other dancer, sending him immediately into deep trance. This suggests that the pointing finger is a posture closely associated with medicine men and the dangers inherent in the power of their potency, whether used for good or ill.

This distinctive posture is not the only indication of trance experience in the painting. In an early stage of trance, medicine men experience a neurological phenomenon in which they 'see' geometric shapes, or phosphenes, such as zig-zags, dots, nested U-shapes and vortexes (Siegel 1977: 138). Recent work indicates that San artists depicted these forms in a variety of situations (Lewis-Williams 1985a: 49–53), which formerly were analysed in terms of familiar objects (c.f. Woodhouse 1985). The white lines and dots on many figures for instance, have invariably been interpreted as body decoration but these patterns sometimes trail off the body in a deliberate manner (e.g. Pager 1975: 55, 61). Also they are frequently found in explicitly hallucinatory contexts, such as the scene at Reenens Hoop where similarly 'decorated' men are shown pursuing a rain-animal (a zoomorphic hallucination of the rain, cf. Lewis-Williams 1985a: Fig. 11). Rather than body decoration this suggests that the lines and dots on several of the Battle Cave figures are phosphenic in nature (Lewis-Williams 1985a: 52–3).

These figures also have red lines painted on their faces. Similar lines appear on the faces of numerous medicine men (e.g. Lewis-Williams 1981a: Fig. 19, 20, 28) and even eland (Vinnicombe 1976: Fig. 102; Lewis-Williams 1985a: Fig. 16) and, although their exact meaning is unclear, they are undoubtedly associated with trance performance (cf. Lewis-Williams 1985b: 57–8). Another non-realistic feature is the series of red dots descending from the top of one of the women's heads. In trance, a medicine man often experiences a peculiar 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: 477; Katz 1982: 100). Numerous paintings of clearly hallucinatory figures have long lines emanating from the top of their heads (e.g. Lewis-Williams 1981a: Fig. 31), which probably depict their spirits leaving the body on out-of-body travel (Lewis-Williams 1981b: 8). Comparisons with paintings such as these suggests that the red dots in the battle context can depict the woman's departing spirit.

Women can enter trance at a medicine dance, but they are more often in a supportive role, clapping and singing medicine songs (Katz 1982: 59–79). The songs and medicine men both contain potency which is activated by this singing and dancing. This potency boils in the medicine man's stomach, rises up his spine and explodes in his head (Lee 1967: 31; Marshall 1969: 352), sending him into trance. The flecks pouring off the back of the squatting figure in the centre of the scene may represent this potency boiling up the

Figure 1C Battle Cave: right section.

spine. Such potency can be seen, and even handled, by medicine men in trance (Katz 1982: 106, 115). During the dance, part of the women's role is to restrain men whose potency threatens to become uncontrollable (Biesele 1978: 926). Such a situation might be depicted on the left of the scene where two men are being restrained by their womenfolk.

Thus although the painting is at first glance realistic, there are certain postures, such as the pointing finger, and hallucinatory features like the white lines and dots on several figures, the red lines on their faces, the red dots descending from the woman's head and the flecks pouring off the man's back that suggest that a literal interpretation of the scene is inadequate and that an explanation must be sought within the realm of trance experience.

One possibility is that the painting is a 'crystallised metaphor' (Lewis-Williams 1983a). The potency activated during trance is always strong, but it can become so strong that it is dangerous (Marshall 1969: 351). Despite major linguistic differences, the modern !Kung and extinct southern /Xam used the same word, */a*, to mean both a 'fight' and a dangerous quantity of potency (Lewis-Williams 1985a: 73; Marshall 1969: 351). A possible explanation therefore is that the painting depicts 'a fight' as a San metaphor for highly concentrated potency. Another, perhaps better alternative is that the painting portrays a hallucinatory fight between groups of medicine men. The southern San groups recognised a category of medicine man who maliciously shot 'arrows of sickness' into their enemies (Lewis-Williams 1981b: 5). The modern northern San attribute this role to

the lesser god Kauha and his messengers, the spirits of dead !Kung (Katz 1982: 102; cf. Marshall 1969: 350), but the concept is the same. It is the responsibility of the medicine man to 'confront these spirits and battle with them to save the people from sickness and death' (Katz 1982: 103) and it is possible that this painting depicts such an encounter.

An encounter of a different sort is depicted in a conflict painting at Steepside (Fig. 2) that appears to be a realistic portrayal of a cattle raid. The San raiders are armed with the bow and arrow and carry large quivers slung over their shoulders. The seated man can be identified as Basuto by the shape of his shield (Tylden 1946, van Riet Lowe 1946). He is holding a knobkerrie or club and his broad-bladed iron spears lie next to him. The cattle are therefore apparently owned by Bantu-speakers, unlike those at Beersheba which are, as we shall see, almost certainly owned by white colonists. The artist's attention to detail extends to the portrayal of a cow's udder, albeit with one teat too few.

As with the Battle Cave scene there are other features that are indicative of trance experience. In the centre a seated figure apparently holds its head. Although ostensibly realistic, it has been shown that this 'hand-to-nose' posture is highly significant. As Lewis-Williams (1983b: 542–3) has shown, the meaning of this frequently painted posture concerns a medicine man's supposed ability to sniff sickness out of a patient, a process referred to as 'snoring'. The San word translated as 'snoring power' in literal contexts means 'nose' (Bleek 1956: 352). 'Snoring' or curing was accomplished by medicine men in trance and as an informant explained: 'His nose goes into a man's body. . . . It is his nose which works the spot underneath. . . . His nose sews up the mouth of the man's wound' (Bleek 1935: 34). This, along with other passages (e.g. Bleek 1935: 21), suggests that the nose was closely associated with trance and was used metaphorically to signify the ability or power to enter trance.

A third posture supports this non-literal interpretation, demonstrating another aspect

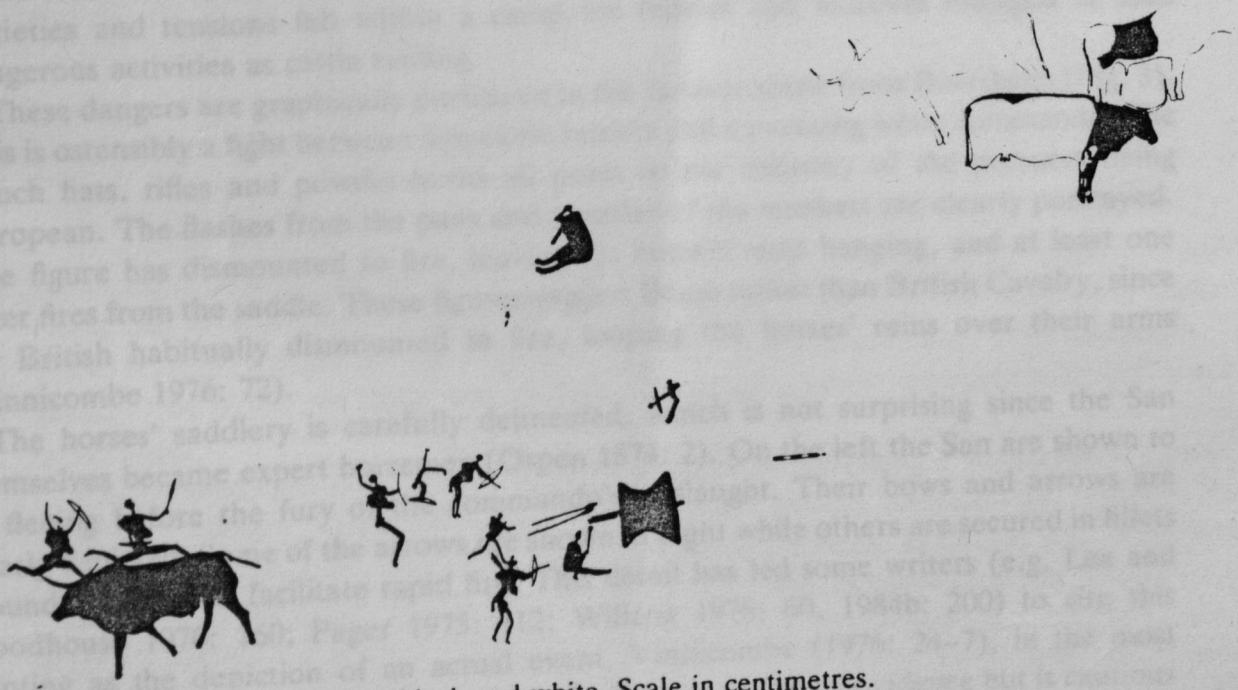


Figure 2 Steepside. Colours: black and white. Scale in centimetres.

of trance experience. Entrance into trance can sometimes occur suddenly, with the medicine man leaping violently or even somersaulting before collapsing into unconsciousness (Lee 1967: 76; Marshall 1969: 376). Such a phenomenon may be illustrated by the somersaulting figure in the midst of the San raiders (cf. Lewis-Williams and Loubser, 1986: 271–5). Support for this interpretation comes from an apparently somersaulting figure from the site at Leeukraal (Lee and Woodhouse 1970: Fig. 49). This figure is in the arms-back position, a highly significant posture closely associated with medicine men and trance (Lewis-Williams 1981a: 88). What appears to be a straightforward depiction of a cattle-raid once again contains elements indicative of trance performance.

Thus, following on from Battle Cave, we are probably dealing with a hallucinatory vision. One possibility is that medicine men are stealing the cattle while on out-of-body travel. An analogous situation is recorded in the ethnography: a medicine man, on out-of-body travel in the form of a lion, killed a farmer's ox — an episode that ended tragically with the farmer shooting the medicine man (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). Another possible explanation is provided by another aspect of out-of-body travel. During trance, medicine men on out-of-body travel often journey to distant camps to make sure that people they know are safe and well (Lewis-Williams 1982: 436; Bleek 1935: 15–18; Katz 1982: 187). When they return from these journeys, the medicine men share their experiences with the rest of the camp (Lewis-Williams 1982: 436). This painting possibly depicts such a journey by a medicine man, not in this case to a distant camp, but on a cattle raid. Such journeys would have become increasingly important in relieving the anxieties and tensions felt within a camp for friends and relatives engaged in such dangerous activities as cattle raiding.

These dangers are graphically portrayed in the famous scene from Beersheba (Fig. 3). This is ostensibly a fight between San cattle raiders and a pursuing white commando. The slouch hats, rifles and powder-horns all point to the majority of the pursuers being European. The flashes from the pans and muzzles of the muskets are clearly portrayed. One figure has dismounted to fire, leaving his horse's reins hanging, and at least one other fires from the saddle. These figures suggest Boers rather than British Cavalry, since the British habitually dismounted to fire, looping the horses' reins over their arms (Vinnicombe 1976: 72).

The horses' saddlery is carefully delineated, which is not surprising since the San themselves became expert horsemen (Orpen 1874: 2). On the left the San are shown to be fleeing before the fury of the commando's onslaught. Their bows and arrows are clearly depicted. Some of the arrows are shown in flight while others are secured in fillets around the head to facilitate rapid fire. This detail has led some writers (e.g. Lee and Woodhouse 1970: 160; Pager 1975: 112; Willcox 1978: 60, 1984b: 200) to cite this painting as the depiction of an actual event. Vinnicombe (1976: 24–7), in the most thorough examination of the painting, weighed up the historical evidence but is cautious in associating the painting with any documented raid, even though she believes it to depict an actual event.

As so often happens, this widely held interpretation overlooks highly significant features. A figure to the right is bleeding from the nose with two large, feather-like

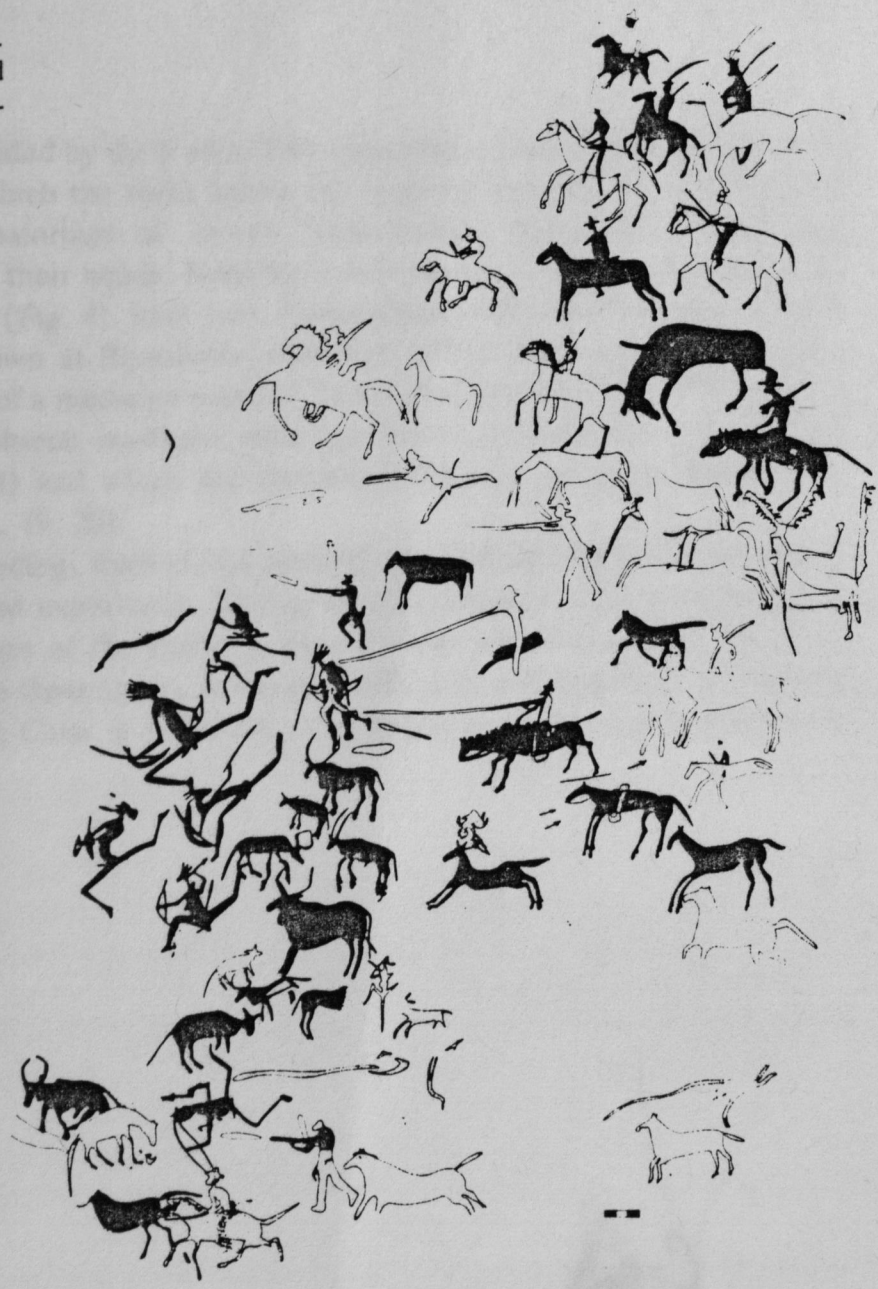


Figure 3 Beersheba. Colours: red, black and white. Scale in centimetres.

appendages issuing from the top of the head and a large feather-like tail. Whilst the nasal blood and even the head appendages might be seen as realistic, the tail clearly cannot. These features cannot be explained in the same manner as the rifles, bows and so on. To explain this figure we must turn to San ethnography about medicine men and trance experience.

When a medicine man enters trance he does so by activating a supernatural potency which the modern !Kung call *n/um* (Marshall 1969: 350–3). Amongst the southern San this was commonly accompanied by nasal bleeding (Bleek 1935: 19, 34). Arbousset (1846: 246–7) describes Maluti San collapsing in trance 'covered in blood, which pours from the nostrils'. A similar phenomenon was described by Orpen's San informant Qing (Orpen 1874: 10). Nasal bleeding is one of the most characteristic and common features of medicine men in the art (e.g. Lewis-Williams 1981a: Fig. 19, 20) and this feature alone indicates that the painting is linked to trance experience.

Further evidence is provided by the feather-like appendages issuing from the top of the head, the position from which the spirit leaves the body on out-of-body travel. As we have noted, numerous paintings of clearly hallucinatory figures have long lines emanating from the top of their heads. Most have only one line, but others, such as the painting at Cullen's Wood (Fig. 4), have two. Comparisons with paintings such as these suggests that the lines drawn at Beersheba, although rather more elaborately drawn, depict the departing spirit of a medicine man (cf. Lewis-Williams 1981b: 8). The figure is also holding two sticks, objects medicine men use chiefly for balance while dancing (Lewis-Williams 1981a: 78) and which are frequently depicted in dance scenes (e.g. Lewis-Williams 1981a: Fig. 19, 20).

These details, nasal bleeding, feather-like appendages and dancing sticks, all signify aspects of trance belief and experience. During trance, medicine men sometimes see spirits hovering at the edges of the firelight, firing 'arrows of sickness' into the camp (Katz 1982: 215). Although these spirits are traditionally seen as being other malevolent medicine men, as at Battle Cave, it is possible that during a period of almost constant

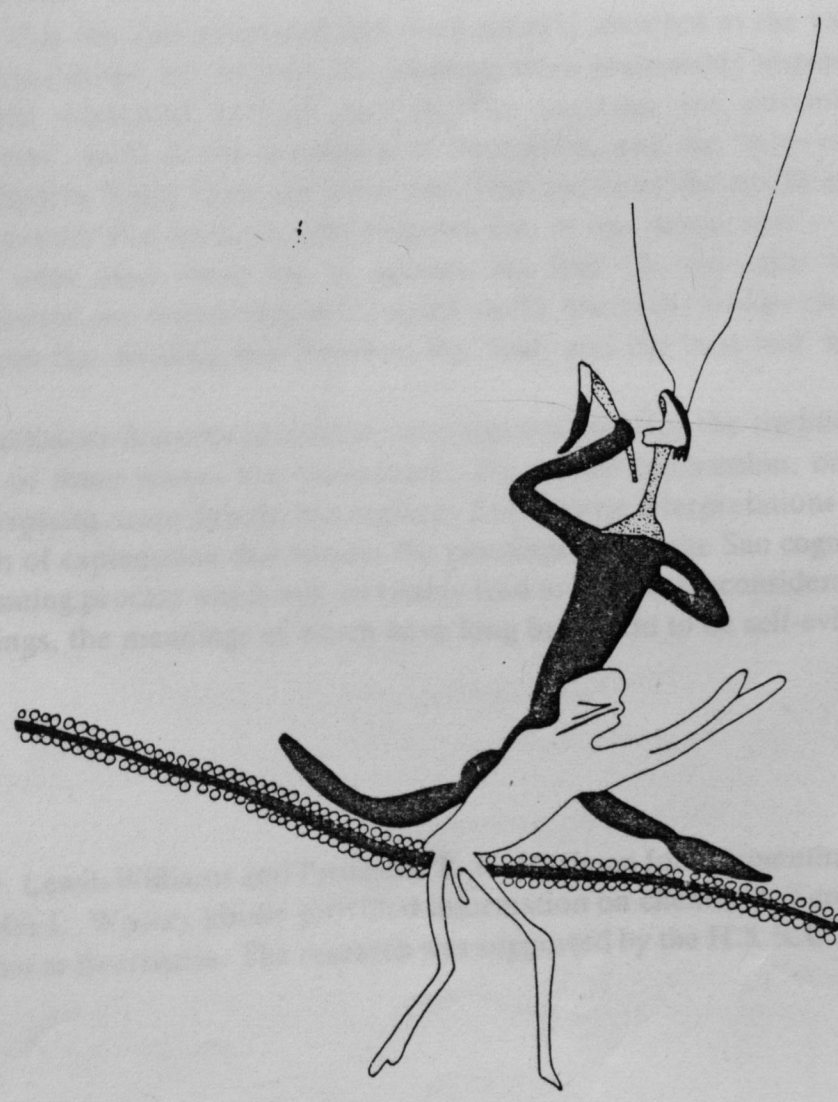


Figure 4 Cullen's Wood. Note line of potency the figure is running on and superimposed figure with red lines on its face (for a more detailed discussion see Lewis-Williams 1981b: 8). Colours: red and white.

stress and anxiety these threatening spirits may have taken on the form of the San's most implacable foe, the white colonists. Certainly today, amongst the Ghanzi San, their dislike and fear of white farmers has become incorporated into the trance dance (Guenther, pers. comm.). It is the medicine man's responsibility to drive off harmful spirits, and a re-enaction of this hallucinatory battle, either verbally or graphically, may well have gained an added impact amongst spectators if it were described in terms of the deadliest form of conflict known to the San.

The three paintings I have discussed raise important issues for the interpretation of San rock art. Scenes such as these have provided much of the evidence for the assumption that the art frequently depicts actual events, a cornerstone of the traditional view of the art. I have shown, however, that some of these so-called narrative paintings contain postures, metaphors and hallucinatory features which are explicable by, and consistent with, San beliefs about trance performance. There are, however, other paintings, also depicting conflict, that do not contain these elements. Possibly they were omitted because the shamanic nature of the art was known to all. Alternatively, these paintings may contain as yet unrecognised indications of trance. Paintings apparently without explicitly hallucinatory features are therefore not necessarily unrelated to medicine men and trance experience; the contrary is probably the case. Clearly we can no longer subscribe to the view that there is a category of paintings which 'comprises clearly recognisable and detailed scenes which there is no reason to doubt depict actual events' (Willcox 1978: 60).

This is not to deny that the San witnessed and were actively involved in the various forms of conflict depicted in the art. Indeed the paintings were presumably inspired by events the artist either witnessed or took part in. The paintings are certainly an interweaving of the 'real', such as the horsemen at Beersheba, and the 'non-real' as typified by the hallucinatory figure from the same site. This questions the reality of the 'realistic' elements depicted. For instance, the weapons are, in one sense, real — such weapons existed and were used either by, or against, the San. On the other hand, mystical 'arrows of sickness' are found only in the spirit world, but look just like the real ones. In some instances the dividing line between the 'real' and the 'non-real' is not obvious.

The non-real, hallucinatory features in conflict paintings indicate that the traditional, literal interpretations of these scenes are inadequate. The trance explanation, on the other hand, not only explains more details, but replaces Eurocentric interpretations with a unitary testable form of explanation that locates the paintings within the San cognitive system. This is a continuing process which will inevitably lead to a radical reconsideration of a great many paintings, the meanings of which have long been held to be self-evident and incontrovertible.

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