

POISONED, POTENT, PAINTED

Arrows as an index of San personhood

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own, unaided work. It is being submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other University.

(Larissa Marie Snow)

_____ day of _____ 20 _____ in _____

Abstract

This thesis takes an ontological approach to southern African Later Stone Age rock art research and interpretation. Using modern Kalahari San ethnographies and myths, as well as the nineteenth Century Bleek and Lloyd Archive of /Xam oral narrative, the diverse beings that compromise the San world and peoples' relationships to them are explored, with particular focus on how material objects facilitate these relations. Following Alfred Gell's writings, the technological aspects of rock art production are investigated in order to demonstrate the action-oriented nature of paintings and how rock art served as an important physical manifestation of transient and transformative persons, both human and non-. Marking a break from hermeneutics, the notion of symbolic images is replaced with agentive art works whose materiality is infused with social significance. Following on from this, a ubiquitous object in San life and rock art is examined, revealing how seemingly mundane things can be significant, not in spite of, but because of the work they accomplish. For the San, poison arrows used to hunt large game animals were material objects par excellence; by procuring vital meat and potency they engendered inter-person and interpersonal relationships and were consequently instrumental in achieving full personhood. Poison arrows are examined in terms of how they cemented relations between spouses, affines and trading partners; how they were agentive and appropriate technology for interactions with game and rain animals; how anti-social figures deployed sickening arrows, and how the San held colonists, whose humanity was up for debate, in their sights. So salient are arrows, the San even conceived of their interior life force in this objectified form. This thesis makes a wider contribution towards understanding how personhood is constituted by and dispersed through objects and the central role of material things in enmeshing people with the vital elements of their environment.

For my parents and for Nellis

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The winds of change

In 2007 Thomas Dowson wrote an article for the South African Archaeological Bulletin entitled ‘Debating shamanism in southern African rock art: time to move on...’ Notice this was not a question, but a recommendation imploring a new angle of approach. In this article he raises a number of valid points and concerns that have plagued the discipline, namely that the shamanism debate was at an impasse and that the place of shamanism in indigenous worldviews, particularly in rock art studies, has been simplified and overstated (2007:49). He highlights that shamanism is just as much a construct of Western intellectualism as it is as cultural construct of certain of non-Western societies. And in a *volte-face* from his early work with David Lewis-Williams (Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1988), he asserts that the analytic fiction of ‘anatomically modern humans’ and their cognitive system does not account for the origin art production. There was no single moment where art was ‘invented’ out of other practice; ‘shamanism has long since been used to provide a reality to this fiction’ (2007:51). Alternatively he proposes, after Tim Ingold (2000), that art is the result of skilful human beings engaging with their diverse environments in different ways. This shift towards experience and immersion in reality moves discourse onto new theoretical ground, away from issues of cosmology towards questions of ontology.

Hermeneutic theory and shamanism

Any discussion of theory in relation to southern African rock art must take as its starting point the most substantial and prevailing development within the field over the last thirty-odd years: the hermeneutic approach developed by Patricia Vinnicombe (1976) and David Lewis-Williams (1981) in their seminal published theses *People of the Eland: rock paintings of the Drakensberg Bushmen as a reflection of their life and*

thought and *Believing and Seeing: Symbolic Meanings in Southern San Rock Paintings* respectively. This interpretive theory has been thoroughly and numerous described in rock art literature (cf. Blundell 2004 for a comprehensive overview) and prolifically applied by subsequent researchers, so I shall be brief in my explanation, before taking it as my point of departure.

Classically, ‘hermeneutics’ refers to the theory and methodology of interpreting religious scriptures or otherwise oriented wisdom-imparting texts. Hermeneutic theory, when applied to rock art research, primarily uses ethnographic analogy to interpret the multi-layered metaphors and San cosmology contained in painted imagery. In developing this theory Vinnicombe and Lewis-Williams delved into the archive compiled by Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd in the 1870s in collaboration with /Xam San informants. Hailing from the northern Cape Colony but imprisoned in Cape Town, these individuals, notably //Kabo, Diä!kwain and /Han≠kass’o, eventually came to live with Bleek and Lloyd at their home in Mowbray in order to compile a full record of the now extinct /Xam language and customs, which Bleek and Lloyd recognised as being terminally threatened by colonial expansion. This singular ethnography of nineteenth century San people of the Northern Cape contains over 12,000 pages of /Xam language, customs and folklore (McGranaghan 2014) and is now a cornerstone of rock art interpretation.

The second strand of evidence crucial to the interpretive framework is the sole *in situ* explanation of paintings from a San person to a European; that is Qing’s explanation of the paintings at Sehonghong and other sites in Lesotho to Joseph Millerd Orpen in December 1873 (Challis *et al.* 2013: 332). Although their conversation was mediated by translation difficulties and some linguistic ambiguity, this testimony helped form the foundation of rock art interpretation. Indicative of the similarities and widespread continuity of San mythology from geographically disparate San communities, Qing’s testimony introduced the possibility of using more extensive ethnographies in interpreting southern African San rock art, such as those collected from the Kalahari region from the 1950s onwards by researchers like Lorna Marshall (1961, 1999), Polly Wiessner (1977), Richard Lee (1979), Richard Katz (1982), Megan Biesele (1993) and Mathias Guenther (1999).

The hermeneutic approach marked a radical departure from uninformed colonial approaches and uninformative empirical studies of rock art. At last researchers had a means of interpreting meaning contained in San paintings as opposed to simplistic quantitative or narrative explanations. Although removed in time and space, a strikingly similar southern African cosmology (with the trance dance as the central religious ritual) is evident from these ethnographies and acts as a basis for understanding past San rituals and beliefs, and their reification on stone (Lewis-Williams 2015). Crucially, by virtue of this rooting in ethnography, interpretations formed by this theory-cum-methodology are purportedly more congruent with the emic beliefs of the art-makers themselves and the communities in which they were embedded.

Later Lewis-Williams, together with Dowson (1988), incorporated a cognitive and neuropsychological approach to explain why not only the San but also modern humans from the Upper Palaeolithic and beyond make rock art. They argue the universal structure of the human brain results in a predictable progression of mental imagery during altered states of consciousness (such as those experienced by shamans during the trance dance) (Lewis-Williams 2002). Evidence of altered states presents in parietal art as entoptic shapes: spirals, grids, dots, zigzags and nested catenary curves. However, critics have expressed concern over the ‘obsession’ with identifying entoptics, claiming it has led to superficial arguments for ubiquitous examples of shamanism worldwide (Layton 2000) (cf. Blundell 2004 for a critical overview). Nevertheless, the trance dance and individuals’ experience of altered states of consciousness continues to occupy a governing position within the hermeneutic approach, and calls for a more detailed synopsis here.

The trance dance is seen as central to the cosmic and corporeal production and reproduction of San society. It is during the trance dance that shamans, *n/omkxaosi* amongst the Ju/’hoan and *!gi:ten* in /Xam, translated as owners-of-potency, (other terms include ritual specialists or medicine men, though women can also be owners-of-potency) enter a state of trance through intense concentration, hyperventilation, auditory-driving and prolonged rhythmic movement (Lewis-Williams 2002). This is further facilitated by the potency-activating clapping and singing of women, who sit in a ring while the would-be trancers dance around them. Rattles worn around the

dancers calves accentuate the rhythm of their stamping feet. They also carry fly-whisks to flick away arrows of sickness directed at them by malevolent spirits of the dead. As a shaman enters an altered state, potency or *n/om*, an electricity-like force, is said to boil in their stomach and up through their spine, a painful process that can cause them to double over. Skilled and experienced shamans able to control this process then perform a number of tasks including healing the sick, harnessing rain animals, transforming into animals associated with *n/om*, controlling game and out-of-body travel. This is a distilled description of the dance's general framework as recited by rock art researchers. The practice and purpose of the dance was not geographically or temporally static and San communities accept even individual idiosyncratic experience, as we will see later on.

Many aspects of the trance dance are depicted in parietal art: processions of human figures, figures bent at the waist with their arms back, seated clapping figures, pointing figures (a gesture that transfers potency to others) (George 2013), figures bleeding from the nose which can result from boiling potency, therianthropes, thin red lines or threads of light used for trans-cosmological travel, and potency-rich animals (Vinnicombe 1976; Lewis-Williams 1981; Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1989; Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2004a). The application of diverse ethnographies has allowed researchers to contextualise these images within San religious practice and situate their significance accordingly. As a result, the paintings themselves went from being viewed variously as 'art for art's sake' or mere narrative happenings to being understood as highly charged, potent images with religious importance. This shamanistic context of rock art production remains the main explanatory lens employed by researchers in southern Africa.

Moreover, devotees to this approach have responded robustly to criticism (namely the alleged improper and over-application of the term 'shamanism' and its relatively conservative and homogenising portrayal of what supposedly constitutes San society) by addressing semantics, and continuing to develop regional and historical specificity through their investigations (Campbell 1987; Blundell 2004; Mallen 2008; Challis 2012, McGranaghan 2012). Echoing San ethnographies, this approach also welcomes polysemy, multiplicity of meaning, ambiguity, and idiosyncratic contributions to rock art. The delight in, and even search for ambiguity, is pervasive feature of San

cosmology and lived experience (Parkington 2003:142).

However, as Robert Layton cautions, ‘the shamanistic hypothesis is a voracious beast which can all too easily devour the world’s hunter-gatherer rock art’ (Layton 2000:184). The centrality of the trance dance in San society and a concentration on the ritual activities of shamans in the art is widely accepted by researchers and well understood. So well understood in fact, it is my fear the discipline is in danger of replicating endless parroted interpretations of trance scenes that, while theoretically sound, are somewhat one-dimensional. Perhaps it is time for a shift in perspective, to zoom out rather than in to a new level of enquiry. The main focus of the hermeneutic approach has been to understand San religious beliefs and practices; exposing and deciphering cosmology reified in art. Can we further contextualise this cosmology and situate it beneath a greater theoretical umbrella? What is being suggested is a shift from scrutinising the San worldview to the San *world*; from belief to *being*; religion to *metaphysics*; cosmology to *ontology*.

Ontology in a nutshell

Ontology refers to the study of the nature of being, becoming, existence or reality. It attempts to unpick the basic categories of beings, or types of entities, that exist in the world, and their relations with each other. The ontological approach I am advocating is entirely complimentary to hermeneutics and can in fact contribute to a more emic understanding of the nature of San religious practice and art production. Indeed, art which is the product of shamanism can only be understood in terms of *the theory of being* that generates such customs (Layton 2000:170, my emphasis). In essence, the ontological approach aims to situate shamanistic practice within the workings of past San peoples’ own reality and existence, which may well differ from outsider experience and thus requires attention.

The same reservoirs of ethnographic information that have informed our awareness of cosmology can be mined for clues to ontology if we look in the right places: how people define what it is to be a person, their relations with other people, their relations with other categories of beings and indeed how they categorise the various things that occupy the world. If we can come to a greater understanding of ontology, we can also

understand shamanistic practice from a more specific experience of reality. It is the schema behind the rituals and beliefs, which the hermeneutic approach has already done so much to contextualise that is of interest here. For example, we know when shamans enter a state of trance they are able to transform into other potent animals such as antelope or felines, often depicted in rock art as therianthropic figures. But what is it about the relation between humans and certain animals that facilitates and makes possible this very real transformation? That is a question asked by the ontological approach.

Moreover, by focusing on peoples' experiential knowledge that guides their religious practice rather than the practice itself, an ontological approach decentralises the 'sublime' aspects of society. These same principles inform everyday lived experience as well, illustrating how the occult and mundane intermingle and are very much on a par with one another, rather than separate or hierarchical spheres of action. This seems to be a salient feature of San society (McGranaghan & Challis 2016), which has been somewhat lost by overtly focusing on shamanistic ritual and trance, particularly in relation to rock art. However, the last thing I wish to suggest is that we do away with hermeneutics and its enormous contribution to the discipline. The ontological approach is born out of the hermeneutic approach, taking its cue of using ethnography to decipher San ontology and how this exists on painted surfaces. And in the end, the ultimate aim of archaeological discourse is to use rock art as a line of evidence to understand the *people* that produced it, rather than merely using ethnography to understand rock art. Likewise, the central aim of the ontological approach is to understand past peoples' lived reality and the nature of different beings that inhabited their universe.

Locating and previewing

What are the implications of bringing an ontological and material approach to San rock Art? Building on a fast-growing body of scholarship by southern African rock art researchers (McGranaghan 2012; Skinner 2017; Mullen 2018; Challis 2019) in the following chapters I demonstrate how the San world was full of non-human persons, some social and others anti-social, and how people managed their relationships with these entities and each other through the use of agentive objects, namely arrows. Such

technological choices were not arbitrary; they relate to a wider ontological scheme and were imbued with social significance because of and beyond their utility. San assemblages of human and non-human agents can be established ethnographically and, as we shall see, are present in rock art, which can further illuminate the complex relationships that existed between different types of persons and things. I hope to demonstrate that it is the sum-total of an individual's relationships, their skill in cultivating social ties and navigating difficult or dangerous relations, that contribute to becoming a fully-realised, agentive person. By using material and ontological theory we gain a further understanding of the agentive nature of rock art images themselves, which are about materially manifesting less tangible but certainly experiential aspects of San reality.

The majority of rock art sites discussed in this thesis are located in the north Eastern Cape, Drakensberg of South Africa, an area historically known as Nomansland (Fig. 1.1). In previous years it has also been named East Griqualand, Ciskei, Transkei, North Eastern Cape, and today, most often, north Eastern Cape (Mallen 2008). This area has been the focus of intensive research for two main reasons: Firstly the rock art in this area is renowned for its preservation, detail, refinement and breadth of imagery; it holds, as Lewis-Williams says, 'an embarrassment of riches.' Secondly, this area was a zone of intense contact, particularly during European colonial settlement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. As worlds collided diverse peoples were interacting with each other in new and innovative ways, forging new practice and identities, and this area was home to some of the last known painters.

In bringing a new theoretical perspective to bear, it is advantageous to continue work in this area to compare the results of previous interpretations; what new information or insight can an ontological approach produce? Also, frontiers are fertile ground for examining constructions of being and personhood, which is often best explained in relational terms. As a result this area offers plenty of opportunities to ask ontological questions.

In the next chapter I examine ontological theory in more depth and explain why it is a necessary change in perspective. In the third chapter I develop a theory *cum* methodology based on notions of materiality in order to interrogate the significance of

San material culture, including rock art. The fourth chapter transports us to the San ontological world and examines the relationships between humans and non-human beings and how these were mediated by technology. In the fifth chapter we move to what would previously be referred to as ritual practice and demonstrate spurious separation between ‘mundane’ and ‘sacred’ domains of action. The sixth chapter take us to the frontier where notions of identity were both distilled and dispersed. Finally I trace connections between the three ‘thinking-strings’ (McGranaghan 2012:173) that run through this thesis: technology, ontology and environment.



Fig. 1.1. Map of southern Africa showing the location of Nomansland, circled in red, taken from Google Earth.

Chapter 2

Revealing Relations

While the theologians in Valladolid were debating whether or not Indians had a soul, those same Indians, on the other side of the Atlantic, were experimenting on the conquistadors by drowning them to see if they would rot - a nice way of determining that they did indeed have a body; that they had a soul was not in question.

(Latour 2009:1)

The Ontological Turn: Naturalism, Perspectivism and Animism

The ontological turn, now *de rigueur* within the humanities, began as a backlash by anthropologists against ethnocentrism and what Evans-Pritchard already maintained eighty years ago: that magic and belief are not opposed to science and reason but are both logical extensions of observation and experience (Evans-Pritchard 1937). In an attempt to overturn the discipline's colonial heritage, ontologists have rejected classical anthropological concepts such as 'belief', a term which has the effect of reducing alterity to irrationality (Rival 2012:129). By replacing investigations of belief with inquiries into being, ontologists take seriously the idea that different peoples can occupy different realities. Through recognising and understanding indigenous metaphysics, the richness of the "multiverse" overcomes the poverty of the "universe" (*ibid.*). In essence, ontological studies acknowledge the existence of alternative forms of knowledge and experience, exposing as many natures as there are cultures and restoring validity to other peoples' worlds. In the words of Bruno Latour (2005:23), "the search for order, rigor and pattern is by no means abandoned, it is simply relocated one step further into abstraction so that actors are allowed to unfold their own differing cosmos, no matter how counter-intuitive they appear." This representational sensitivity goes beyond mere cultural relativism with its underlying tone of condescension; it allows a multiplicity of worlds to exist.

In questioning what principles, substances and inhabitants their informant's world is made of, anthropologists working in regions from Amazonia to Siberia have had to expand the possibilities of what constitutes a person. In many communities being human is not necessarily the primary condition of personhood. Things considered inert or without subjectivity in Western thought are, elsewhere, social beings and are sometimes even endowed with an interiority, intentionality or soul. As a result, non-human entities such as plants, animals, spirits and objects possess agency and are considered to be volitional persons themselves, entangled in the web of human relations. Indeed, life is overwhelmingly thought of as a relational process (Rival 2012:139). The study of native ontologies aims to reveal the nature of relationships between humans and non-humans; the specificities of proper social behaviour required not only when dealing with one's own kind but also other beings. Through focusing on specific relationships and interrogating their meaning we can begin to understand the greater metaphysical principles that constitute people's worlds and inform their actions.

The ontological turn was born largely out of critical discourse regarding the Cartesian nature-culture dichotomy so prevalent in Western thinking. Indeed, before interrogating the abstract principles that govern other peoples' worlds, it is prudent to first interrogate our own. Why is it that we impute consciousness to such a narrow category of biological beings, namely our own species *Homo sapiens*? 'Society' and 'nature' do not describe domains of reality, but are two categories formally institutionalised in the 17th century (Latour 2005:110). Labelled naturalism, this mode of identification has been typical of Western ontologies since Plato and Aristotle (Descola 1996:88). While understood as being made of the same basic molecular structures as other organisms, humans are distinguished from non-humans by their possession of a mind, soul, subjectivity and moral conscience (Descola 2009:153). Thus a state of humanity is reserved only for humans, who have a unique interiority. Everything else, despite shared materiality with humans, can be objectified, and nature is an autonomous domain separate from human cultural institutions.

However, naturalism quickly encounters a paradox. The Linnaean system of nomenclature, dividing up the natural realm into its various sub categories, squarely

places humans in the animal kingdom. Yet our supposed inner ‘moral dignity’ elevates us above nature while non-humans are defined tautologically by their lack of humanity (Descola 2009:154). In asking ‘what is the generic difference between man and animal?’ versus ‘what makes humans animals of a particular kind?’ (Ingold 1994:19), naturalism downplays the animality of the *Homo sapiens* species and champions our exclusive state of humanity. In short naturalism as an ontology is the messy intermingling of the scientific and philosophical principles of the Enlightenment; order and reason are found in the fabric of the world (i.e. ‘the laws of nature’) above which humanity is elevated due to its possession of a singular soul. While often producing explanations of reality that are in fact nature-culture hybrids, naturalism cannot conceptualise them as such because of the supposed polarity between these two categories (Descola 1996:89).

Our increasingly detailed scientific grasp of the ‘natural world’ and the physical principles that govern it is often taken as evidence supporting our dualist ontology. Modern science would like to think it has become adept at describing and explaining the inner workings of an ultimate reality. Yet, as Latour has demonstrated in his sociological study of science and technology, even scientific facts are socially constructed *artefacts* (Latour 2005). In taking the laboratory as his ethnographic field and scientists as his informants he swiftly dismantles the nature-culture dualism. He argues that labs are the epitome of artificial (i.e. social-cultural) places with a documented rise and history, yet the products of these sites are never doubted as objective, certified results. The facts we take as correlating to reality are actually fabricated artefacts; the outcomes of processes that merge human activities and non-human entities which can be described as ‘social’. Scientific facts do not objectively exist outside the instruments that measure them and the minds that interpret them, thus what we take as ‘natural’ is also always culturally informed. Importantly, fabrication does not imply falsity, but it does require us to consider how we contrive to acquire knowledge of our reality. As Latour says, the ‘construction of facts’ describes the phenomenon of artificiality and reality marching in step; as facts are constructed, reality is made (Latour 2005:90).

While initially controversial, Latour’s analysis of our own intuitions of knowledge creation has greatly aided the ontological turn. None of the previous strategies

anthropology has adopted to account for discrepancies between ‘modern’ and indigenous epistemologies is really satisfying (Descola 2009:148). Even cultural relativism, undoubtedly a progressive development within anthropology, has its limitations in that it still purports the existence of a singular and universal nature. What people then make of this nature is either mere ‘symbolic’ interpretation of Western scientific (i.e. true) fact, or as the search for causality, applauded for its rationality but still firmly situated in the realm of magic. This approach leads to an understanding of other peoples’ beliefs but sees the Western objectification of reality as one that ‘non-modern’ peoples would be unable to achieve and theirs as a clumsy prefiguration of what the West has already achieved (*ibid.*). Informants are branded as less rational, less objective, less reflexive, less scientific and less academic than those doing the studying (Latour 2005:97). In contrast, through dissolving the nature-culture dualism, an ontological approach presents peoples’ worlds not as built upon interpretive flexibility or weak empiricism, but upon a very real experience of a particular reality. The aim is to make sure that the diversity of realities is not prematurely closed by one hegemonic version of what Latour calls ‘one kind of matter of fact’ claiming to be what is present in experience.

While Latour attempted to dissolve the nature-culture dichotomy entrenched in Western thought, anthropologists have been engaged in a parallel task. In particular, researchers working in Amazonia have been hugely influential in the shift towards studying native ontologies as opposed to symbolism and belief. For the greater part of the twentieth century, the dominant theoretical paradigm in this region has, of course, been structuralism. Pioneered by Claude Lévi-Strauss, structuralism views culture as a product of the “fundamental structure of the human mind”. Through reducing culture to psychology, and psychology to the biological processes of perception, Lévi-Strauss maintained that unconscious associations made in the human mind produce categories of cognition and classification (Turner 2009). Also greatly influenced by Saussurean semiotics, he believed that myths function as a kind of language, containing blueprints for all the formal ways humans organise themselves and their actions. These cognitive categories and corresponding modes of organization are rendered as binary oppositions: hot and cold; raw and cooked; affine and consanguine.

There is no doubt that structuralism remains one of anthropology's more elegant and stimulating theoretical approaches. Its use of indigenous myth and cosmology to locate patterns of cultural configuration marked a huge leap away from functionalist and evolutionary explanations. Its neat binaries seem to efficiently explain human patterns of relation and their transformations the world over. Lévi-Strauss was also the last major anthropologist to attempt to answer the discipline's original driving question, ironically: what is the nature of humanity? Yet ultimately, structuralism's binaries are too neat to encompass the full complexity of human experience. Its tendency to reify general conceptual categories such as 'nature' and 'culture' and treat these constructs with the same authority as ethnographic evidence means its analyses, revealing as they may be, are always part abstraction (cf. Turner 2009 for a detailed account of the 'crisis of Late Structuralism').

Though eventually failing in its quest to reveal fundamental structures, structuralism opened up the possibility of more radical theoretical exploration. In *The Savage Mind*, Lévi-Strauss concludes that the human mind is constituted by our ability to perceive the sensuous forms of the natural world through our naturally given faculties. Therefore human culture is ultimately a product of one kind of nature interacting with another; culture is reduced to nature. Crucially, natural sensory and cognitive faculties are not exclusively human possessions, but are qualities of mind we share with other beings (Turner 2009:13). If natural mental processes form the foundation of human culture and subjective consciousness, it follows that other natural beings likewise in possession of such faculties can also enjoy a subjective consciousness, intentionality, and even a cultural identity. This logical extension of Lévi-Strauss's argument paved the way for the emergence of two ontological "isms," perspectivism and animism. Both allow 'natural' beings to be cultural persons. If this seems like an abstract philosophical experiment, keep in mind many peoples have not felt compelled to objectify nature in the same way as Western naturalism, making it methodologically risky to continue to distinguish between culture and nature when obtaining and interpreting ethnographic data (Descola 2009:147).

Formulated in critical dialogue with Lévi-Straussian structuralism, perspectivism is a theory-of-relation coined by Edwardo Vivieros de Castro. He argues that the distinction between nature and culture cannot be used to describe domains of non-

Western cosmologies without first undergoing rigorous ethnographic critique (Vivieros de Castro 1998). Drawing on Amerindian ethnography, perspectivism effectively turns naturalism on its head. As opposed to a universal nature and singular human spirit, Amerindian conceptions overwhelmingly suppose a spiritual and cultural unity between all beings, while outward corporal form is the primary distinguishing quality. Animals thus share an interiority with humans, and have an intentionality or subjectivity identical to human consciousness. Moreover, they subjectively identify themselves as human and engage in the same cultural activities. For example, a jaguar consuming the blood of its prey sees itself as drinking fermented manioc beer while a tapir wallowing in mud is actually visiting a great ceremonial house. Likewise, animals see their bodily attributes (fur, feathers, claws, beaks etc.) as body decorations (i.e. cultural instruments).

Bodies take on particular significance in this context. Because bodies are like a kind of clothing or envelope housing a universal soul, great care is taken to elaborate bodies through decoration and modification. This is not seen as the culturalisation of a natural substrate, but rather as the production of a distinct social body, differentiating it from other human collectives as well as from other species (Vivieros de Castro 2009:480). Bodies are not given, they are made by methods of continuous fabrication throughout a person's lifetime, with emphasis placed on specific features linked to proper social behaviour and achieving full personhood (Turner 1995). A being's body is thought of not only in terms of form but also disposition, what it eats, how it communicates, where it lives, whether it is gregarious or solitary, a way of being that constitutes a *habitus* (Vivieros de Castro 1998). Tellingly, Amerindian words for 'human being' do not denote humanity as a category of species, but refer to the social condition of personhood, allowing for diverse types of bodies to be social persons (*ibid.*).

It is this social body that determines one's perspective, and just as it is possible to change clothes, it is possible to transform into another body. It should be noted that perspectivism does not usually involve all animal species and can also incorporate intangible beings such as spirits. In particular, emphasis is placed on beings that occupy crucial roles in a chain of predation. The relational status of predators and prey is a fundamental dimension of perspectival inversion (see Århem's 1996 *The*

Cosmic Food Web). (This is also similar to Rane Willerslev's 2004 & 2011 description of Siberian Yukaghir hunting practice.) As Vivieros de Castro states, perspectivism has an essential relation with shamanism and the valorisation of the hunt since "hunting ideology is above all an ideology of shamans" (Vivieros de Castro 1998:472). At its core, hunting is not only about ensuring the physical reproduction of one's community, but also its spiritual reproduction, and maintaining the equitable circulation of souls through the universe. Shamans mediate this process of predation and exchange through their bodily transformations into other types of beings. They alone are able to achieve this perspectival shift and safely return to their own perspective (Riviere 1999).

Perspectivism has also been described by Vivieros de Castro as multinaturalism. Every species is seen by every other as an animal but sees itself as a cultural human being, meaning that for every species the boundary between nature and culture is differently drawn. Thus each species sees a different "nature" than all others (Turner 2009:25-26). Accordingly, he argues that perspectivism goes beyond mere relativism. Beings, differentiated by their outward bodily form, do not merely have different viewpoints of the same world *they see different worlds*. While Western naturalism purports the existence of a single nature and many cultures, perspectivism proposes a universal culture but many different natures. Indeed the main critique of perspectivism is that it maintains, though reverses, the conceptual nature-culture opposition. However, its rejection of ethnocentrism remains a feather in its cap. It overturns the Saussurian formula that 'the point of view creates the object' and replaces it with the notion that 'the point of view creates the subject', taking seriously the Amerindian endowment of agency and intentionality to non-humans (Vivieros de Castro 1998).

The excitement perspectivism provoked in the anthropological community marked a great step towards unfolding indigenous ontologies. But its strict adherence to multinaturalism remains a sticking point. The theory's inherent anthropocentrism does not fully correlate with the ethnography (see Turner 2009:21-22). While there is ample evidence in Amazonian myths, cosmology and ritual practice to suggest that plants, animals and even some inanimate objects possess a spirit, there is limited evidence to suggest that animals actually identify as human. They may have the

capacity (if not always the inclination) to enter into social relations with humans but it does not mean they consider themselves to be human. Terence Turner argues this error stems from Vivieros de Castro's misreading of indigenous myths, which in actual fact describe how humans and animals came to be different. Nevertheless, the subjectivity of non-humans remains an undeniable property of many communities, a quality also identified by Philippe Descola who likewise noticed that the nature-culture dichotomy was an inadequate or misleading tool to account for the ways in which his informants were talking about and interacting with their physical environment (Descola 1996:82). As a result, Descola set about reinvigorating Sir Edward Burnett Tylor's classical anthropological term: animism.

Although adopting his terminology, Descola is quick to dispel any hint of Tylor's evolutionist bent that viewed animism as a primitive state from which the great civilizations have long since liberated themselves (Descola 2013:28). The past denigration of animism stemmed from the naturalist assumption that nature is a transcultural and transhistoric domain of reality. Any deviation from this was labelled supernatural and generally seen as lacking rational thought (Descola 1996:83). Like Vivieros de Castro, Descola argues the nature-culture opposition hardly qualifies as an anthropological universal. And, in a similar vein to Latour, he points out the artificiality of taxonomic artefacts. The different ways people have succeeded in categorising humans and non-humans challenges the idea of a 'natural species' altogether. Indeed, while Vivieros de Castro pushes for a multinatural world, Descola attempts to dissolve nature as a relevant category entirely. He sites diverse ethnographies that emphasize how the environment is not a domain distinct from the wider principles and values that govern social life (Descola 2013:14). Humans often enter into social relations and arrange formal alliances with so-called 'natural' beings like plants and animals, which are considered to have a subjectivity, intelligence, personhood and culture; what Descola calls the 'domestication of nature'. As a result, the material and social boundary between natural and cultural domains disappears, or at least becomes porous (Turner 2009:15).

Animism treats certain elements of the environment as persons endowed with cognitive, moral and social qualities analogous to those of humans, thereby making it possible for communication and interaction between classes of beings that at first

sight seem very different (Descola 2013:31). In other words, animists recognise the world is full of persons, only some of which are human (Sahlins 2014:281). Unlike perspectivism, it does not assume a homogenous internal form shared by all beings. Rather, distinct spiritual forms correspond to different beings. But like perspectivism it claims not to be relativist because in rejecting the existence of a single objective nature there is no ‘universal natural order’ to contend with. Descola suggests a new landscape where the distinction between nature and society, human and non-human is determined not by substance or representation, but by institutionalised *expressions of relations* between entities whose ontological status and degree of agency vary according to the positions they occupy vis-à-vis each other (Descola 2009:150, my emphasis). In essence, animism is a way of patterning relations with all kinds of entities that possess specific social qualities and therefore must be approached with appropriately social modes of mediation and behaviour (Descola 2009:149).

This new animism is careful to stress its totally non-dualist attitude and emphasise the continuity between humans and non-humans in communities worldwide. ‘Natural beings’ are, in many places, real social partners. Their possession of a reflexive awareness creates a ‘theatre of subtle sociability’ in which humans cajole them into systems of exchange (Descola 2013:5-6). New animism also stresses the processual and relational status of personhood. Personhood is not denoted by an intrinsic substance but is a product of relations and interactions. Individual and collective identities develop out of establishing and maintaining successful social relations during the course of a lifetime and potentially beyond (Descola 2013:27). As a result, things have no stable or fixed identity. Taxonomic reality is contextual and relative; things are defined not by their essence but by the positions they occupy in relation to one another (Descola 2013:10). This notion of relational identity and personhood is the crux of new animism. It is not so much concerned with problematising the animacy of non-human entities, which it identifies as a widespread ethnographic phenomenon, as interested in the very real *social relations* that form between human and non-human beings.

Like perspectivism, Descola notes the close affinity between animism and shamanism. A common shamanistic inheritance is to attribute souls to plants, animals and other features of the environment (Descola 2013:20). Classically, shamans are

mediators between humans and spirits with whom he or she can, at will, enter into contact by means of a voyage of the soul (in a trance or dream) that enables him or her to mobilise their help in such a way as to prevent or ease the misfortunes of humans (*ibid.*). Or in other words, individuals who have mastered the techniques of ecstasy can communicate with non-human beings and harness their powers. However, Descola takes pains to refute the idea that animism, as a prevailing conception of the world, is a product of shamanism. To say that each and every form of deliberate mediation with natural or supernatural entities stems from shamanistic practice reduces shamanism to a totally empty concept. He also argues that researchers have credited shamans with exaggerated roles in their respective societies. Equally important are the more mundane, everyday interventions between different persons (human- and non-). These intersubjective relations are maintained and consolidated on a personal level by every member of society and often beyond the control of ritual specialists.

While brimming with examples from the Americas, Asia and Oceania, Descola's (2013) *Beyond Nature and Culture* is short on ethnographic illustrations from Africa. Here the boundary between nature and society, human and non-human seems more defined. However, he suggests this is more of a relic of African scholarship than a reflection of reality. Classical monographs have emphasised the clear-cut opposition between the village and the bush; the centre of social order versus the wild, untamed and dangerous periphery (Descola 2013:26). This oft-repeated motif is partly a product of the intellectual habits that have characterised African anthropology. These tend to encourage ethnographers to pick out expressions of certain realities that have been rendered familiar by regional scholarly tradition, meanwhile neglecting phenomena that do not easily fit this interpretive framework (*ibid.*). However as paradigms shift, canons of analysis also change, shedding new light on neglected aspects of culture previously believed to be well understood. The ontological turn has the potential to do just that for African studies and, as I hope to show, our approach to San rock art and the conclusions we can draw from it.

Let us now briefly return to the anecdote at the opening of this chapter. The Spanish conquistadors approached their colonial subjects from a naturalist's experience of the world, seeing the people they encountered as biological specimens whose humanity

was up for debate. Meanwhile, in true perspectival fashion, the Amerindians never doubted the subjectivity of the Spaniards, their concern was what type of body they possessed. Lévi-Strauss ironically noted, ‘the Spaniards might have been strong in the social sciences but the Indians had been conducting their research according to the protocol of the natural sciences’ all along (Latour 2009:1). What this best demonstrates is that there are many radically different ways of experiencing and inhabiting the world. Ontological approaches allow these worlds to be deployed freely and without being measured against a single standardised world. As Vivieros de Castro rightly states, ‘anthropology is the theory and practice of permanent decolonisation’ and while the discipline is largely decolonised, its theory is not yet decolonised enough (Latour 2009). The ontological turn marks a positive step in that direction.

However, ontological approaches are also in danger of re-enacting anthropology’s original sin: exoticising other modes of living and painting a picture of extreme alterity between cultures. It is equally important to keep in mind that native ontologies may not be as radically different from our own as they appear (Rival 2012:138). To present animism as the antithesis of modern scientific knowledge is to overlook the ecological and biological knowledge indigenous peoples possess without needing to objectify nature as a domain of reality separate from human society. Indeed, native knowledge of environmental management and eco-cosmologies are increasingly relevant in a world where ecological preservation is fast becoming the issue of our time. We need a cultural revolution in the way we think about nature and indigenous groups around the world are increasingly spearheading this revolution. It is becoming grossly apparent that naturalism’s nature-culture opposition is merely a cognitive construct that does few favours for the future of the planet and ultimately the human species. Embracing alternative ontologies may offer a solution.

Objects are persons too: networks, meshworks, nexuses & assemblages

The most important facet to glean from perspectivism and animism is not necessarily the details of what or who is endowed with a ‘soul’ (cross-culturally a slippery concept at best), but the greater realisation that non-humans can be valid and productive social partners (just as it is possible for other humans to be terrible social

partners). This is why they have been termed ‘relational ontologies’. They expand anthropological investigations into new realms of social action. The relationships people form with other entities can be as crucial to the construction and maintenance of culture and society as those formed between humans. To overlook these relations or to classify them simply as symbolic is to deny important aspects of peoples lived experience and reality. What relational ontologies propose is that we expand the social arena to accommodate new types of persons and social interactions wherever necessary and according to the ontology of those we hope to understand. These systems of relation have been described variously as networks, meshworks and nexuses, but all share in mapping the connections between humans and non-humans.

The first term, network, is born out of Latour’s work on the sociology of science, or put in ontological terms, how naturalists manage their relationships with non-humans. Just as this research led him to dispose of the term ‘natural’ it likewise caused him to rethink the definition of ‘social’. This critique produced the theory for which Latour is best known: Actor Network Theory (ANT). Simply put, ANT is the ‘sociology of associations’. ANT theorists argue that ‘social’ does not refer to fixed human institutions (i.e. philosophy, economics, law or the arts) but instead can be found in the moments where different entities are temporarily assembled before dispersing again. Latour argues the need for this radical redirection goes back to one of sociology’s founding fathers, Emile Durkheim who, “in confusing cause and effect, abandoned the task of explaining society and settled for its establishments”, foregrounding what should have been the backdrop of sociology (Latour 2005:13; Miller 2005). By replacing the term ‘social’ with ‘associations’, society is construed as a trail of connections between heterogeneous elements rather than the institutions framing human actions. The social is not a particular domain of reality, “a thing among things”, but a *network* of relations holding collectives together (Latour 2005:13).

Crucially, ANT extends the list of actors and agencies assembled in a network; agents can take any form so long as they are responsible for altering a state of affairs, or in other words, are associated in a way that they make others do things (Latour 2005:107). As a result we must thoroughly explore the possibility that non-humans are active participants in networks as opposed to simply standing as expressions of

human power. Non-humans not only include things more readily conceived of as living: biological organisms like plants and animals, but also things often considered inert and purely material: *objects*. In ANT it is the assembling of and connections between heterogonous actors that momentarily reveals ‘the social’. These networks rarely consist of direct human-to-human connections without objects actively mediating relations. It is difficult to account for objects’ agency because carrying their effects while being silent is what they are good at (Latour 2005:79); what Daniel Miller refers to as the ‘humility of things’ (Miller 1987: 85-108). Objects are important not because they are blatant, but often precisely because we do not ‘see’ them and are insensible to their influence (Miller 2005). They have a talent for fading out of focus, remaining peripheral to our vision, and yet govern our behaviour and identity (*ibid.*).

Objects’ past second-class status in the social sciences was due not only to their assumed muteness, but also because researchers feared being accused of fetishising the material world over the more important realm of ‘the social’ (Miller 2005). Objects were understood as superficial projections or semiotic representations of a foundational society and its social relations (Ingold 2007:5). However, as Miller has pointed out, it is precisely studies that quickly shift focus from object to society in their apparent embarrassment at being “caught gazing at mere objects” that retain the negative connotations of the term ‘fetishism’ (Miller 1998:9). The 1970s and 1980s marked a turning point in material culture studies. Bourdieu’s now classic analysis of the Kayble house demonstrated just how integral the material world is in establishing and reinforcing social activities while Arjun Appadurai’s (1986) *The Social Life of Things* marked an entire volume dedicated to following objects as they circulate between people and different contexts. He writes ‘in many historical societies, things have not been so divorced [as in contemporary Western thought] from the capacity of persons to act’ (Appadurai 1986:4). People imbue material things with power, personhood or animate qualities, just as they do other elements of the so-called ‘natural world’. And just like other non-human agents they are understood as capable of affecting the outcome of social scenarios and interfering in the affairs of humans.

Given that objects do not meet the biological definition of ‘life’ this is perhaps more perplexing and harder to accept than this chapter’s earlier propositions. But Latour

reminds us of the hybrid nature of reality, mostly denied by Western naturalism, in which it is impossible to separate what is “natural, law-like and unchanging from what is human, interpretive and sometimes capricious” (Miller 2005). In essence, seemingly ‘inert’ material forms can have consequences for people, extending agency beyond human action. From the 1990s onwards, anthropologists and archaeologists have sought to understand objects’ efficacy by focusing on the materiality of things, adding to earlier work tracing object biographies and their consumption in different contexts. Through slowing down and dwelling on the more mundane, sensual and material qualities of objects, we are able to unpick the more subtle connections with cultural lives and values objectified through these forms, in part because of the particular qualities they possess (Miller 1998:9). This shift towards materiality stresses things’ ability to affect direct change in the world not as secondary or subordinate to human action and is at the heart of contemporary material culture scholarship.

Indeed, the notion that material forms are inert and un-living, or only agentic in as much as they are extensions of human agency, has been widely critiqued. On the more radical side of the spectrum, Tim Ingold argues that things are alive not because people have bestowed on them ‘a sprinkling of agency’ but by virtue of their intrinsic material properties (Ingold 2006, 2007). He claims material-culture theorists have downplayed the mutability of materials resulting in things that are “stifled and stilled”; matter is congealed and crystallised into solid objects that capture our attention over and above their material composition. Yet their material components are persistently mingling, reacting, resisting, disintegrating and dematerialising as active constituents of a world constantly in formation and decay (Ingold 2007:10-11). According to Ingold, in overlooking physical materials, the world of objects can be brought back to life only “in the dreams of theorists by conjuring a magical mind-dust” labelled agency. Alternatively, he suggests agency exists in materiality, rather than animating principles being somehow additional or external to the material object: “we do not need to look beyond the material constitution of objects to discover what makes them tick” (Ingold 2007:12.)

Ingold views this understanding of materials as consistent with non-western ontologies where there is no clear division between objects and subjects. Contrary to

traditional Tylorian explanations of animism, things are active and alive not because they are possessed of spirit, but because their substances are in a state of continuous flux. Material things, like people, are subject to processes of creation, transformation and decay over the course of their existence. Moreover, people have a practical engagement with the world in which materials do not merely exist but *occur* and *unfold*. Hence, just as Descola stresses the processual and relational nature of personhood, so does Ingold for a world full of things. “The animacy of the lifeworld is not the result of an infusion of spirit into substance, or of agency into materiality, it is the dynamic, transformative potential of the entire field of relations within which beings of all kinds, more or less person-like or thing-like, continually and reciprocally bring one another into existence” (Ingold 2006:10). Ingold refers to this field of relations as a ‘meshwork’, or a web of interconnected lines along which things are in a continuous state of becoming and various degrees of mutual entanglement (Ingold 2006, 2007, 2008).

However, before we get completely ensnared in Ingold’s meshwork, there is a possible caveat to his take on materiality. While objects undeniably have individual material properties subject to change and flux, materiality as a concept is concerned with looking beyond the physical properties of things to the *meaning* that *people* attribute to them (Tilley 2007:17 my emphasis). Christopher Tilley argues that decontextualizing materials from their socio-historical contexts reduces things to technological processes devoid of meaningful social interpretation (Tilley 2007:18). Moreover, all materials have various physical properties, but only some of these are significant to people; a significance not necessarily correlated to their physical make-up. As Tilley says, the “sensuous world of material things has effects on the way people think and behave, but not in any simplistic or deterministic sense” (Tilley 2007:19). This echoes Miller’s contention that the phrase ‘mutually constituted’ is much overused to describe the relationship between persons and things (Miller 2005). Both Tilley and Miller are concerned with why some properties of things end up mattering over others. For Tilley, objective agency rests in a thing’s ability to enable and constrain human conduct, what he refers to as affordances, rather than residing purely in a thing’s material constitution.

While it may seem that Ingold and Tilley are at odds with one another, they are both concerned with how materials are practically experienced, and share a phenomenological approach to materiality. According to Ingold, subjects come to know the world through immersion and perception. The only valid way to dissolve the nature-culture dualism, that so hinders our understanding of indigenous ontologies, is to write ethnographies that restore the original truth and primacy of direct experience (Rival 2012:130). Laura Rival neatly summarises his stance, which is also distinctly ontological:

“Life and social relations, like understanding, are emergent properties of interactions between organisms. Given that life is the emergent property of a relational system in which everything is in perpetual flux and movement, it would be wrong to differentiate, as Western scientists do, between organic and non-organic life... As the distinction between object and subject gets blurred, ‘nature’ dissipates in an encompassing ‘environment’ composed of humans, non-human persons, material objects and the dynamic relations between all these constitutive elements. The objective and subjective lives of people, species, and things form the total dance in which relational subjects ‘become with’. Being human involves the process of becoming with non-humans, and ‘becoming with’ the exploration of the unfolding relatedness of humans with non-humans” (Rival 2012:130-131).

Peoples’ practical engagement with a world comprised of animate and unstable substances, which are experienced as living and agentive, is Ingold’s primary concern. This is not so different from Tilley’s notion of affordances in which the experience of materials structures peoples’ lives, actions and their understanding of the world (Tilley 2007:19). Where it deviates is in collapsing Western dualisms into a ‘heterogeneous monism’ (Rival 2012:131) devoid of nature and culture, subject and object, but full of ‘relational lines of growth and movement’ (Ingold 2006).

Materials and mechanisms

When Ingold speaks of theorists ‘conjuring a magical mind dust labelled agency’ (Ingold 2007:12) he is largely and, as we shall see, perhaps unfairly railing against Alfred Gell and his seminal work is *Art and Agency* (1998). Like Latour’s network and Ingold’s meshwork, Gell uses the term nexus to describe the texture of social

relationships in which objects and people intermingle. For Gell, persons or social agents, defined by their ability to wilfully initiate a causal sequence of events, are in certain contexts substituted by objects. Material things act as an ‘index’ of their owner/maker’s power to act and influence a state of affairs. Gell borrows the word index from Piercean semiotics where it refers to a natural sign, allowing the observer to make a causal inference about the intentions or capabilities of another person (Gell 1998:13). Thus material indexes permit ‘the abduction of agency’; the agency of people can be inferred through the objects they employ (*ibid.*). In contrast to Ingold, Gell permits for objective agency only as a matter of inference, not as an intrinsic property of objects themselves (Miller 2005). Consequently indexes can only be seen as secondary agents; they borrow, mediate and transfer their agency from an external source. Yet, in a similar vein to Marilyn Strathern’s (1988) notion of dividual personhood, an index can become so invested with personhood that it becomes a partial- or distributed-person itself (Gell 1998: 20-21).

Like Latour and Descola, Gell is interested in challenging institutional categories and dichotomies: specifically that between art and artefacts. Gell opens *Art and Agency* by identifying the need for a purely anthropological theory of art; one that rejects aesthetic and semiotic definitions, focusing instead on what objects *do* within their specific social contexts. This progressive approach to art grew out of his earlier paper ‘Vogel’s Net: Traps as artworks and artworks as traps’ (Gell 1996) in which he argues interpretive, institutional and aesthetic definitions of art all fail to satisfactorily explain the phenomenon of art in general, especially when assimilating geographically and temporally disparate traditions. Gell avoids talking about art in terms of symbols and meaning, instead emphasising agency, intention, causation, result and transformation: “art is a system of action intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it” (Gell 1998:6). Gell’s focus on transformation and his action-centred approach to agency is not at all dissimilar to Ingold’s discourse and, in harmony with Latour, anything qualifies as an art object so long as it is acting as a ‘social agent’ or objectified person in a nexus of relations.

While *Art and Agency* may seem relatively restrained in its attribution of secondary agency to objects, I believe this has more to do with the circumstances surrounding its publication than with Gell’s theorising. It was published posthumously and lost some

of the innovation present in his previous writing. As Nicolas Thomas (Gell 1998: vii) states in the Forward, ‘What we have is the full draft of a book, most of which was written over a period of only a month... there are certainly forceful passages that would have been qualified, points that would have added or elaborated, and sections that would have been better integrated with the whole, had Gell had the opportunity.’ Situating *Art and Agency* alongside his prior works is illuminating and reveals a strong concern for both the materiality of objects and their contextualisation in social settings, combining Ingold’s focus on materials with Tilly’s interest in meaning. He demonstrates an inherent link between the physical construction of things and the less tangible social paradigms in which they are embedded. Crucially, his definition of agency is also much more linked to action than to intention, which removes the secondary nature of objective agency (see Layton 2003:451 for a more in depth discussion).

In ‘Vogel’s Net’ he shows how seemingly mundane artefacts such as hunting equipment and traps, can be understood as agentive art objects due to the care and context of their making: “These devices embody ideas, convey meanings, because a trap, by its very nature, is a transformed representation of its maker, the hunter, and the prey animal, its victim, and of their mutual relationship, which among hunting people, is a complex, quintessentially social one. That is to say, these traps communicate the idea of a nexus of intentionalities between hunters and prey animals, via material forms and mechanisms.” (Gell 1996:29). Gell uses the example of a New Guinean Anga eel-trap (Gell 1996: 33-34). Eels are not only a valued source of nourishment, but also a source of spiritual vitality associated with the Anga’s founding ancestor, whose penis detached because it was superfluously long. The fabrication of these traps is revelatory. Made of strips of tree bark rolled into a cylinder, the trap is reinforced with cane binding hoops that are far stronger, more numerous and more carefully made than necessary to restrain a few eels. The trapdoor is also much sturdier than needed. These traps, by way of their material form and fabrication (eel-like and extra-strong), objectively embody ancestral power and presence, which is further emphasized by their utility in catching eels, *not in spite of the fact they actually accomplish work* (*ibid.*, my emphasis.)

In Gell's anthropological definition, art is orientated towards the production of social consequences. These consequences arise directly from the technical systems involved in the making of art objects (Gell 1992:44). Critiquing the over-idealised distinction between 'functional' artefacts and 'meaningful' artworks, Gell (1992) stresses that art first and foremost begins with technical processes, an idea he first voiced in his essay 'The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology'. The agency, or social efficacy of an object, is derived from the skilled technical process they objectively embody (Gell 1992:44). In other words, the power of objects stems from the clever manipulation of materials and the complex, often meaningful processes involved in their making, use, disuse and perhaps even wilful destruction. Gell uses the example of Trobriand prow-boards on Kula canoes. These intricately carved and strikingly painted prow-boards are designed to 'dazzle' overseas Kula partners to offer more valuable shells and necklaces than they would normally be inclined to do (*ibid.*). The prow board is a physical token of the prowess, or index of the agency, of the canoe owner, who has access to the services of an exceptionally skilled carver with superior carving magic (Gell 1992:46). Gell explains this magic as the 'occult transubstantiation' of artist's materials into other things; artists seem to perform miracles of transformation through their technical abilities (Gell 1992:51), an idea that will be explored further in the following chapter.

It is perhaps his use of terms like 'enchantment', 'magical' and 'occult' that evokes ire from the likes of Ingold, but really they are both concerned with examining the material constitution of things in order to understand the source of their agency. In fact Gell does well what Ingold perhaps downplays, and that is to contextualise objects within the wider social milieu that gave rise to them, which often includes procedures that might classically be deemed ritual or magical. This is not bringing things to life with a sprinkling of magic; it is doing what any good anthropologist does by situating things within wider social practice. For example, Gell notes that the skill involved in carving canoe prow-boards is not merely one of physical ability but also involves internalising more abstract concepts central to Trobriand life. The idea of unimpeded flow is particularly important to Trobrianders: the swift flow of canoes through the water and the flow of Kula objects around the islands, encapsulated by the predominance of a curvilinear carving style informed by 'an aesthetic of sinuous lines' (Gell 1992:55). During their final initiation rite, apprentice carvers undergo

procedures designed to open up their mental channels so that forms may flow freely between them and their carvings. For example they ingest the blood of a snake famed for its slipperiness. These outwardly abstract ‘magical’ practises are inseparable from the technical procedures involved in art making and contribute to the social efficacy of associated objects.

Gell’s work is important because through examining how art operates cross-culturally he allows for the enfranchisement of artefacts, which might otherwise be dismissed as insignificant or somehow lower-order objects. By focusing on the processes involved in a thing’s making, and how it secures individuals in a relational nexus of intentionalities, we are able to suspend the erroneous divide between mundane and sublime material culture and human activity. As Gell points out, ‘the notion that technique is dull and mechanical, as opposed to true creativity and authentic values represented by art is a by-product of the quasi-religious status of art in Western culture’ (Gell 1992:56). Trobriand prow-boards are not merely part of a canoe used for ocean transit, they are essential in establishing political authority through Kula exchange, just as Anga eel traps are at once an effective piece of hunting equipment, the physical presence of the ancestors made manifest in the present and a way of harnessing ancestral power. Dismissing ‘artefacts’ as mundane tools fails to recognize how they objectify wider social values, practices and relationships, often through their functionality not despite it, just as previous approaches to ‘art’ fail to give primacy to how it galvanizes social action.

By now the common theme of this chapter should be quite apparent: dissolving categories like art and artefact; nature and culture; subject and object; human, non-human and thing. Just as with the nature-culture binary, the division between the material (object) and the social (subject) world is a cultural artefact. Enquiries into materiality by the likes of Latour, Ingold and Gell has resulted in the emergence of post-human theorizing, where the biological definition of life is erased entirely in order to ‘finally achieve the dissolution of the ontological difference between living organisms and things’ (Rival 2012). From a philosophical standpoint posthumanism or ‘vital materialism’ is compelling and exposes the ‘more-than-human assemblages’ of which our contemporary globalised society is comprised (Bennett 2010). For theorists like Jane Bennett (2010), the excess of plastics polluting the ocean and

garbage piling up at landfills cries out for a renewed focus on objects and the need for an object-oriented ontology. Again, the moral of the story is that maintaining rigid Western constructs such as subject and object may not be doing us or the environment any favours and we would be better off acknowledging our relationship with objects and how they inform and resist our actions and intentions. Understanding how past people related to and through the things in their environment is a pertinent place to begin these types of investigations, particularly people whose ontologies were oriented towards a ‘social environment’ comprised of humans and non-humans alike.

Chapter 3

Art and Agency

Looking at a work of art is like encountering a person; one encounters a person as a thinking, co-present being by responding to his or her outward form and behaviour - similarly one responds to an artwork as a co-present being; an embodied thought.

(Danto in Gell 1996:25)

Towards a social definition of art

Parietal art in southern Africa often resembles art as Westerners know it: painted images on roughly flat vertical surfaces that conform to a stylistic tradition. But as the previous chapter touched on, how we define art, what qualifies as an art object, and how we should understand art has been a matter of much debate. Out of all the many theorists introduced in the previous chapter, Alfred Gell's attention to art as a concept and category makes him immediately relevant to rock art research. He identifies three responses to the question of what is art, aesthetic, institutional and semiotic definitions, and finds all three unsatisfactory. Instead Gell calls for an anthropological theory of art and subsequently it becomes clear art is best defined and understood not by what it *is*, but what it *does*. Hence his claim, as discussed in the previous chapter, that anything can be considered an art object as long as it is acting as a 'social agent' or objectified person in a nexus of relations.

In the aesthetic approach an art object is defined by certain superior and appealing qualities made intentionally by an artist who, in eliciting an emotional response from the observer, demonstrates their exceptional skill and vision (Gell 1996:15). Gell points out that this theory is still widely held by the general public who tend to think that visual attractiveness, or beauty, is something they can recognise automatically (Gell 1996:16). But of course value systems and what is perceived as aesthetically good is both culture-bound and time-bound. Just as art-historians suggest that to appreciate the art of a particular era we should try to recapture the 'way of seeing' of

artist and audience, experts on ethnographic art like Sally Price (1989) and Howard Morphy (1994,1996) suggest culture-specific aesthetics or ways of seeing can be applied to the evaluation of indigenous or traditional objects. Art objects can be identified and appraised based on the qualities most valued by the culture that produced them. Importantly, aesthetic qualities extend beyond sensory characteristics to abstract and moralising principles, for example how the concept of flow is integral to Trobriand woodcarving as discussed in the previous chapter.

According to Gell, aesthetic definitions are unsatisfactory because, despite cultural contextualisation, they still overlook the social context of art production and consumption. Gell argues that aesthetic preferences cannot by themselves account for the existence of art objects. It is social context that actually compels people to make art in the first place; it affects how art circulates and operates in the physical world and, importantly, in connection with other social processes and institutions. In essence aesthetics may explain why something is made a certain way and the form it takes, but it does not explain why it was made at all. Gell says, “The project of ‘indigenous aesthetics’ is essentially geared to refining and expanding the aesthetic sensitivities of the Western art public by providing a cultural context within which non-Western art objects can be assimilated to the categories of Western aesthetic art-appreciation. This is not a bad thing in itself but it still falls far short of being an anthropological theory of art production and circulation” (Gells 1998: 3). In essence, aesthetics alone does not account for the production and circulation of things in a particular social milieu so cannot be a primary way of defining and understanding art, and certainly not without contextualising aesthetics within the value-system of that social milieu.

The recognition of indigenous aesthetics and the enfranchisement of traditional art was born out of the institutional theory of art that says whether something is art or not is dependent on whether it is accepted as such by an art-world (Gell 1996:17). Representatives of the art-world i.e. artists, critics, dealers and collectors, have the power to determine what is art by legitimising whatever they co-opt, even if it was not originally made to circulate as such. This differs from what Gell calls the interpretive theory. Although it also has the merit of not distinguishing art by any external quality it only recognises pieces produced within the zeitgeist of an art-historical tradition for example conceptual pieces like Marcel Duchamp’s famous urinal or Damien Hirst’s

formaldehyde-preserved shark (Gell 1996:16). The main problem with this theory is that it operates within the implicit framework of Western art-history (Gell 1996:20). While from an institutional perspective, the agents who determine what things qualify as art often end up falling back on tropes and themes of the canon, inconsistently reverting back to aesthetics in their bestowal of art-status. Gell believes “the desire to see the art of other cultures aesthetically tells us more about our own ideology and its quasi-religious veneration of art objects as aesthetic talismans, than it does about these other cultures” (Gells 1998: 3).

Western art-world figureheads who ‘discovered’ African art-objects legitimised aesthetic interpretations and enfranchised African art, elevating ‘artefacts’ to high culture art-objects (Danto 1989). The aura and oeuvre of powerful, largely male, individuals of the art-world such as Pablo Picasso, Constantin Brancusi, and Walter Battiss (especially where rock art is concerned) has had a lasting legacy on how African art is consumed, collected, displayed and (mis-)appreciated, while forgetting that these individuals’ own practice evolved out of larger cultural movements and reactions to their own social milieu. Despite art-historian Arthur Danto’s claim that, ‘in liberating himself from his own representationalist traditions, Picasso liberated the art of Africa from those same traditions,’ (Danto 1989), the appropriation of African art forms was not revealing some essential aesthetic to the rest of the world as much as challenging the Western art-world status-quo with a different point of view. And of course it was Picasso’s own legacy that was enshrined when he ‘liberated the art of Africa’ while art that was siphoned out of Africa by European collectors now fetches large sums at international auctions and art fairs. (A wooden neck-rest from the Luba-Shankadi of Congo recently sold for €1.7 million at Sotheby’s in Paris and in 2017 the African ‘tribal art’ sector at auction was valued at €38.8 million.)

Rock art as a discipline has had its own art/artefact debate over how best to frame and understand painted and engraved images (cf. Thomas Heyd’s chapter ‘Rock Art and Aesthetics’ in David & McNiven’s 2019 volume). It is baffling to see articles that still advocate assessing rock art on the basis of its aesthetic merit; qualities murkily defined and often Eurocentric in their confines (Heyd 2003). Heyd (2003:43) claims that “not to consider marks on rock from the aesthetic point of view, when they are offered as such, constitutes a kind of neglect” but is unable to convincingly argue that

they were made to be aesthetic offerings at all. We cannot reduce a wide scope of social and emotional responses to aesthetic feelings without generalising aesthetics to the point of meaninglessness (Gell 1998:6). Unintentionally, Heyd is far more successful at problematising aesthetics as a culture- and context-bound concept which when imposed can “lead to distortion in the understanding of rock art, and cause the subversion of the identity of its makers” (Heyd 2003:44).

Aesthetic approaches to rock art are mainly presented by artists and art-historians, whose disciplines are still defined by an interest in aesthetics and an appreciation of quality (Phillips 1994). For example artist Pippa Skotnes identifies the problem of viewing and schematically reproducing rock art panels using the principles of standard Renaissance composition and expectations, urging us to re-orient our gaze away from the standard Vasarian frame (Skotnes 1994). While perhaps a step in the right direction, this still operates under the assumption that overall composition holds latent and deliberate meaning or that rock art is made primarily to be looked at. Just because we expand our view of the ‘canvas’ does not mean composition as an aesthetic quality becomes un-problematically applicable to rock art analysis. Even those purportedly attempting to reframe our gaze use phrases like ‘lead the eye’ (Solomon 1994) once again introducing conventions of Western art history. A better suggestion from artists and art historians is that studies of rock art need to further investigate artistic praxis; the intersection of process, material and mind involved in art making which cannot be alienated from the final result.

Misguided attempts to appreciate rock art from an aesthetic standpoint I believe are trying to validate the unknown artists and the cultures that produced it. However this has quite the contrary and unintended consequence of patronising the original makers and elevating Western art above what is comparatively and problematically termed ‘primitive’ or ‘traditional art’. Aesthetic evaluation is like granting permission to join an exclusive high-ranking club or ‘Art Cult’ (Gell 1992:42) where the concept of aesthetics continues to hold great value. This is despite the fact that the contemporary Western art-world itself has largely done away with aesthetic appraisals of art. If anything, the current state of the art world reinforces Gell’s assertion, discussed in the following section, that anything can be art so long as it changes the current state of affairs. Highly rated artists often occupy the role of activist and social commentator

and the impact of their work relies on equal-parts concept and construction. It is not enough for something to be well made or acclaimed aesthetically; it must be oriented towards social action to really be praiseworthy.

So simple aesthetic evaluation is both passé in the contemporary art-world and rock art discourse. While from an institutional perspective, art-historians who turn their gaze towards rock art are hobbled by their devotion to aesthetics over social consequence. Moreover, while it is fascinating to see how non-Western objects are assimilated into the globalised art-world of galleries, museums, auction houses, collectors, critics and artists, its own social arena worthy of anthropological study, we must also be critical of the baggage attached to such endeavours. This baggage includes the romantic desire to salvage and celebrate ‘primitive’ artistic and cultural forms in the face of overwhelming Western modernity (Phillips 1994) and the degree to which what we see in African art is actually a reflection of ourselves; “our needs and fantasies thrust upon Africa” (Vogel 1991).

Art as a system of action

While Gell is quick to dismiss aesthetic, institutional and interpretive theories of art, he is also concerned with the arguably more radical task of dismantling the view that art is a matter of meaning and communication or that art is in any way like language (Layton 2003:450). “I entirely reject the idea that anything, except language itself, has ‘meaning’ in the intended sense... art objects are not, except in special cases, signs themselves, with ‘meanings’; and if they do have meanings, then they are part of a language (i.e. graphic signs), not a separate ‘visual’ language” (Gell 1998:6). If Gell’s total rejection of art as communication seems extreme it is because he was reacting against earlier structuralist semiotic anthropology which discussed systems of all kinds as quite literal syntax-laden languages and viewed art as the ‘language of visual forms’ (Gell 1998:164). Gell mostly takes issue with these linguistic models and concedes that art-like relations between people and things does involve some form of semiosis, but the way meaning is constructed and conveyed differs from semiotic communication. In rejecting the idea that art is some kind of visual code, Gell refuses to discuss art in terms of symbols saying:

In place of symbolic communication, I place all emphasis on *agency, intention, causation, result, and transformation*. I view art as a system of action, intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it. The ‘action’-centred approach to art is inherently more anthropological than the alternative semiotic approach because it is preoccupied with the practical mediatory role of art objects in social processes, rather than with the interpretation of objects ‘as if’ they were texts (Gell 1998:6).

The previous chapter briefly explored Gell’s notion of an index: a material thing that allows people to infer the intentions or capabilities of another person. Laden with the agency of its employer, an index motivates a response or interpretation from others, people Gell refers to as patients. Gell calls this process ‘abduction’ and likens it to the inferences we make about social others, which are not necessarily logical or natural, but are more like ‘hedged’ inferences into ‘another mind’ (Gell 1998:15). Hence to encounter an index is to encounter a person; the consequence of their social agency in objectified form. In line with the previous chapter, Gell (1998:9) reminds us that anthropology has always been concerned with the “radical defamiliarisation and revitalisation of the notion of ‘persons’”. However he does stress that the agency attributed to indexes is inherently and irreducibly social; that is to say objects emerge as agents only in specific social contexts and in conjunction with intentional human associates (1998:17). For Gell, agency is always relational and contextual; indexes derive their agency from their ability to carry intention and create action when enmeshed in a texture of social relationships (Gell 1998:22).

All artefacts are potential indexes, even the simplest tools index the agency of their makers and users, though Gell concedes they “may not be very ‘interesting’ as a candidate object for theoretical consideration in the ‘anthropology of art’ context” (Gell: 1998:16). “Many indexes are crude and uninteresting artefacts, whose importance rests solely on their mediatory function in a particular social context... they have no significance as ‘works of art’ because nobody attends to their making as a particularly salient feature of their agency” (Gell 1998:68). This distinction is important. As touched on in the previous chapter, Gell considers art to be a component of technology where skilled technique involved in an objects

making is integral to its agency and effectiveness as an index (Gell 1992). The complex processes and manipulation of materials captivates and confounds understanding, enchanting through technical means and revealing social disparities in its wake (Gell 1992:46; 1998:71). Artists perform a kind of ‘transubstantiation’ of raw materials into other things, producing both striking visual and social effects (Gell 1992:51). Art objects are particularly powerful indexes because they “mediate a technology to achieve certain ends, notably to enmesh patients in relations and intentionalities sought or prescribed by agents” (Thomas in Gell 1998:x). In essence, technique not only confers status and prestige on art objects, it is also the source of their social efficacy.

It becomes doubly evident that the process of art making is significant because, as Gell points out, there is a homology between the techniques involved in art creation and the technicalities of social life more generally (Gell 1992:56-57). The procedures and materials involved in making art mirror wider concepts and practices at play in the construction and maintenance of social relationships. Gell highlights how we are “utterly dependent on technology in every department of life” (*ibid.*) and instead of rejecting technique as mundane we should rather interrogate it to better comprehend the intricacies of social life. Indeed in many parts of the world, “there is an insensible transition between mundane activity, which is necessitated by the requirements of subsistence production, and the most overtly magico-religious practice” (Gell 1992:59). Essential ideals and insight into social practice are located in technical processes, and artistic production in particular invites closer scrutiny to decipher how social relations are constructed via art.

At last we have arrived at our anthropological theory of art. Art is best defined not by any intrinsic form or expert endorsement but by what it does, its ability to act as an agent and mediate social relationships not in spite of but due to the technical virtuosity involved in its making. Far from being diametrically opposed to art, technology is crucial to its social efficacy since socially salient concepts are implicated in the processes and materials involved in art making. Anything can be art so long as it ensnares people in a nexus of relationships and its construction compellingly contributes to its ability in doing so. Consequently art is a material

source primed for untangling the complexities of social relationships and the agency of persons bound together through art.

Mired in meaning: the origins of current rock art discourse

Quite contrary to how Gell would have it, since its emergence as a rigorous academic discipline, the project of southern African rock art has largely been concerned with elucidating meaning: what the paintings meant to the people that made them and how we can best interpret them. These inquiries, which have provided much of the framework for current research, emerged at just the structuralist semiotic moment Gell rails against. An early paper by David Lewis-Williams (1972:60) describes painted images as part of a ‘graphic syntax’ and how ‘representations can be placed next to one another’ to form meanings in much the same way as words in a sentence, though without being bound by sequential logic: “McLuhan has shown how clusters of images and symbols are comprehended by the subconscious simultaneously. When the symbol is separated from a sequential unit, it becomes poly-allusive. Untrammelled by any limiting logical sequence, the symbol can operate on its full semantic range” (*ibid.*). To discover the ‘full semantic range’ of San imagery Lewis-Williams first, after the manner of Lévi-Strauss, used myths recounted by Qing to Orpen before discovering the wealth of information in the Bleek and Lloyd archive further corroborated by more recent Kalahari ethnographies.

The language employed in rock art research often reflects this early concern with visual syntax and semantics. Images (‘signifiers’) are written about in terms of metaphors and polysemic symbols, supposedly able to evoke a multitude of (‘signified’) associations and meanings for the people who made and used them (Lewis-Williams 1998:88). One great example of this polysemy is the eland, the most frequently depicted animal in many parts of southern Africa (see Lewis-Williams 1981 & 1990:75-83 for a comprehensive overview). Ethnographically the eland is considered the most potent of all animals and is constantly evoked across all aspects of social life, implicated in everything from the trance dance and rain making (shamanic practice), to boy’s and girl’s initiation rites and marriage. Hence the eland is a key symbol whose meaning cannot be reduced to a neat

phrase. It encapsulates a semantic spectrum; ‘summarises unsummerisable components’; ‘expresses an inexpressible essence’ (Lewis-Williams 1998:88). However, not all eland associations are evoked at once and always. When the eland symbol, an actual eland antelope or the eland concept, is deployed in certain contexts parts of its meaning are highlighted, ‘focused polyselmy’, (Lewis-Williams 1998:89) and other parts remain in the background, subdued but still contributing to its power (Lewis-Williams 1990:82).

While the eland symbol carries meaning across many aspects of San social life, Lewis-Williams became convinced that when depicted in rock art its focused polysemy is primarily a matter of shamanic concern. He could find no paintings that convincingly relate to other domains such as initiation or marriage rituals. Instead “indisputable, ethnographically explicable painted details” restricted eland imagery to shamanistic activities and beliefs (Lewis-Williams 1998:89). The notion that the rock face itself was a ‘veil’ between this world and the spirit realm, a point of cosmological breakthrough, further restricted images placed on the walls to a shamanistic context (Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1990). Like the stained glass windows of a cathedral, whatever is depicted in the windows, no matter how secular it may seem, is given a religious context (*ibid.*). In essence, the *painted eland* itself is not a polysemic symbol; the rock face contextualises and delimits the meaning of paintings, restricting them to the shamanic realm.

This hermeneutic model of rock art interpretation was certainly a breakthrough in many respects. It moved the discipline on from quantifying images to qualifying them. Most importantly, it attempted to situate the art within the cosmology of those who made it, supposedly offering a more emic perspective that honours the complexity of the San worldview. However, its greatest achievement, ostensibly revealing the meaning of rock art, is not unproblematic. On one hand, ‘meaning’ is used imprecisely; variously conflated with ‘interpretation’, ‘context’, ‘intention’ and ‘truth’ (Solomon 1999:51). Even Lewis-Williams admits it is difficult to agree on the meaning of ‘meaning’ (Lewis-Williams 1990:75). It is therefore sometimes challenging to know exactly what we mean when we say we understand the meaning of rock art. The notion of semantic meaning has grown legs and wandered off into new territories without rethinking the initial supposition.

On the other hand, so caught up in its quest for meaning, it does not stop to question whether this is why people painted at all. The idea that a rock art panel can be ‘read’ and interpreted in a similar way to the religious art of the Renaissance overlooks the wider social context of art production in both instances and the instrumental purpose of art everywhere (Gell 1996:23). Much of our insider knowledge about /Xam beliefs comes in the form of myths, which we tend to think of as didactic information conveyors. The oral nature of San society reinforces the communicative dimension of myths, even when the message is purposefully ambiguous, as is often the case (Guenther 1986, 1989, 1999, 2006). Initially these fragmentary myths (Orpen 1874) were all researchers had in order to try to understand the rock art, and this notion of verbal communication was unquestioningly translated to the visual even when it became clear the paintings were not illustrating myths. There is no doubting the significance of the images, but to what ends were they being deployed? Was communicating meaning of primary concern to the painters of the past or was the rock art doing something else? Understanding meaning may be incredibly helpful but it is still only half of the archaeological picture.

Because hermeneutic theory asserts the context of art production is primarily cosmological, and therefor related primarily to religious beliefs, rites and practices, images are always couched in shamanistic terms. As a result, more mundane socio-economic practice, such as hunting, is seen as secondary to shamanic practice and is accordingly addressed as subordinate; everything circles back to the central role of the shaman. This prioritisation of belief over other socio-economic and material aspects of life cannot easily be sustained (Solomon 1999:51) especially when ethnography suggests the San themselves drew no such divide. Daily life was perfuse with the actions, concepts, things and beings evoked during the trance dance. This separation of ‘church and state’ is a modern Judeo-Christian hangover. For the San, rather than being separate or hierarchical spheres, the occult and mundane intermingle (see McGranaghan and Challis 2016) to the point we need to rethink and reframe some aspects of the San lived experience and its rock art counterparts currently couched in purely shamanistic terms.

Researchers like Anne Solomon (1989, 1992, 1994, 1999) and John Parkinson (1996, 2003) have attempted to shift the discourse away from shamanism to wider socio-economic practice such as the construction of gender roles. This introduces the idea of multivocality, the same image may have different meanings for different social groups, as well as unstable and contested meanings open to historical change and ‘semantic contingency’ (Solomon 1999:53). Occupied with attempting to overcome the pervasiveness of shamanistic interpretations, these alternatives fall into the same semiotic trap in their concern with meaning. Meaning “open to change and negotiation of semantic possibilities” (*ibid.*) is still a concern with translating the visual into the verbal and thinking of rock art primarily as a literal mode of communication. Heated arguments over how to best read the art and interpret its meaning (see Lewis-Williams 1998 and Solomon’s 1999 debate over Qing’s testimony) never question whether art is indeed a matter of meaning at all.

The progress made by Lewis-Williams in providing researchers with a more emic way of interpreting San rock art has truly been invaluable. It sometimes seems the total clarity of his argument and impenetrability of his theory is what frustrates and encourages detractors, rather than any actual gaps in evidence or lapse of reasoning. The structuralist semiotic origins of his theory and methodology set the discipline off in pursuit of meaning, and thanks to he and his followers’ rigorous research, we have now more or less exhausted the sort of information we can get from this approach. We continue to add elaboration to polysemic symbols and how images relate to shamanic practice without focusing on what the art actually does more widely. However I am not suggesting a simplistic or arbitrary shift from structure to function. Gell’s assertion that art is ultimately oriented towards action and social consequence bears further scrutiny. Also, while ethnography and rock art suggest beyond doubt that the San had a shamanistic worldview, cosmology is only one layer of San life just as meaning is only one aspect of rock art. While belief and meaning stem from cosmology, action and agency are very much in the realm of ontology. These are not competing conceptions but two sides of a coin that together bring us closer to a holistic understanding of San reality.

Social consequence: rock art and agency

As we have seen, a particularly salient feature of an art object's agency is 'the making of'; materials, procedures and concepts brought together through technical skill. Accordingly, we begin our investigation into the agency of rock art with how it is made. Lewis-Williams (1995) has also written about the production and consumption of rock art. He begins not with its technical making but with what he calls 'the acquisition of imagery', and suggests that people obtained content to paint from altered states such as trance visions and dreaming. However this forgets his own suggestion that what people see in altered states does not appear *ex nihilo* and is informed by their 'natural' environment and social constructs. He also rightly mentions viewing other rock art as a mode of acquisition, but of course before art is viewed it has to be made and this seems like the more logical starting point, especially given the significance of making to its social efficacy, which is what we are in pursuit of here.

The practice of making rock art carried on well into the European colonial contact period, shown by fine line style images of guns and ox wagons. Unfortunately we have scant evidence about how paint was made and no direct accounts from artists themselves. One record comes from Marion Walsham How (1962), who in the early 1930s conversed with a seventy-four year old southern Sotho man named Mapote who had learned to paint with the San. Mapote was a son of the chief Moorosi who also took San wives.

When How produced some red pigment that a friend had given her some time before she met Mapote, he declared it to be authentic San pigment known as '*qhang qhang*'; it 'glistened and sparkled' in contrast to commercially available ochre which was dull by comparison. *Qhang qhang* was dug out of the high basalt mountains... The transformation of this highly prized pigment into paint was, according to Mapote, accompanied by ritual procedures. He said that a woman had to heat the *qhang qhang* out of doors at a full moon until it was red hot. It was then ground between two stones until it was a fine powder... after some commercial ochre (How deemed her piece of *qhang qhang* too precious to be used) had been ground into a powder, Mapote asked for another highly significant ingredient for his paint: 'the blood of a freshly killed eland'. *Qhang*

qhang, he said, was the only pigment that the San mixed with eland blood; other pigments were mixed with other media. If the blood were not fresh, it would coagulate and not soak into the rock... Mapote then set about painting an eland (using small brushes made from feathers and tiny reeds] because, as he put it, 'the Bushmen of that part of the country were of the eland' (How 1962 in Lewis-Williams 1995:146-147).

The importance of eland blood in the paint was later corroborated by an informant known as 'M', an elderly woman of partial San descent whose father had been a shaman-artist and whose paintings she could still identify (Jolly 1986; Lewis-Williams 1986). According to her the eland blood infused the paintings with potency, acting as a reserve or well that could be drawn from (Lewis-Williams 1995:148).

Gell reminds us that art making shares homologies with social life more generally which further contributes to its agency, and this is clearly demonstrated in the process of paint making. There are a number of central substances, processes and ideas that recur between different arenas of San life, which will be discussed throughout this thesis. These substances include pigment, fat, poison and potency, which undergo literal and figurative processes of heating, boiling and cooling and are evoked across many different social contexts.

In terms of paint processing, heating the ochre or mineral substrate 'until it is red hot' was an important technical process. Roasting ochre transforms limonite, a common iron-ore mineral compound, into hematite. This amplifies the intensity of the pigment colour; earthy tones become more vivid reds, increasing the spectrum that can be produced from natural ochre. Interestingly, modern paint colour names such as burnt umber and burnt sienna reference this process of heating to initiate colour change. There is evidence to suggest this technique was used widely among rock art making societies. Late Holocene hunter-gatherers living around Babine Lake in British Columbia used open hearth fires to reach temperatures of 750°C to 850°C to transform the ochre rich lake sediments to a vibrant red. Importantly, this heat treatment process also converts the non-crystalline iron

oxide minerals to crystalline forms resulting in increased colourfastness, stability and resistance to degradation (MacDonald *et al.* 2019).

Intense heating is of course also a crucial part of the trance dance in the activation of potency. Potency ‘boils’ in the stomach of a shaman until it is hot enough to travel up their spine and out through the back of their head, resulting in an altered state of consciousness and its associated abilities (Katz 1982). The power of shamans’ super-heated potency together with the alchemic colour transformation of super-heated ochre and subsequent pigment fastness show heating was an important process associated with both change and survival; a way of positively and powerfully altering the state of material and immaterial affairs.

Mapote’s claim that women were responsible for heating the ochre reveals a further homology between art production and the trance dance. Typically at the centre of the dance is a fire around which those harnessing their potency or seeking altered states dance. These can be men or women but Kalahari ethnographies suggest men are primarily the dancers. Women sit in a ring around them, clapping and chanting medicine songs. The clapping action, rhythm and potency of these songs, not the fire, are what help activate and heat the dancers’ potency so that it may boil. This suggests that women may have been responsible for heating the ochre because they are in a unique position to activate the potency within the material. However, women do not have a straightforward relationship with potency. While in these instances it seems they are instrumental in its activation, at other times they make potency go ‘cold’ and denature it, as we shall see in the next chapter.

From a material perspective, the inclusion of eland blood in the paint mixture is significant. Technically speaking it provided the substrate to suspend the powdered ochre, allowing for the liquid application of paint. The importance of freshness for fixing the paint to the rock suggests it may have also added to the durability of the paintings. It also implies that painting took place very shortly after a successful hunt, meaning the processes of meat acquisition and art production were intrinsically linked. The successful hunting of a large game animal was also cause to fulfil social obligations through the sharing and

distribution of meat. This building of community cohesion climaxed with the trance dance since large game animals not only supplied an abundance of meat they also provided a large dose of potency contained in their fat, which was an especially potent and admired substance (Lewis-Williams 1990). As we can see, there is an innate relation between subsistence practice, artistic production and religious performance; the three cannot be separated out into discrete areas.

Finally, the central material of interest is what Mapote calls *qhang qhang*, true Bushman ochre, which comes from the high mountains and glistens and sparkles. I have left it till last because it leads us nicely into a discussion about what rock art does. The ferruginous minerals used by the /Xam as pigments are well documented (McGranaghan 2012). *To:* and *lka:ǀ* referred to red haematite and *lhara* most likely designated specularite, also known as specular haematite (*ibid.*:278). A black stone, specularite was said to ‘sparkle’ or ‘shimmer’ and was found in association with red haematite (*ibid.*:442). Precolonial specularite mining is known archaeologically from areas north of the Orange River (Humphreys and Thackeray, 1983:100-107), but the exact source of the /Xam minerals is obscure, with accounts merely mentioning a ‘mountain’ (McGranaghan 2012:278). It was apparently collected directly rather than traded, and the pigments were all acquired from the same source (*ibid.*).

Specularite was highly valued for its lustrous material qualities, having the same sheen as fat. The /Xam would rub mixture of fat and ground specularite on their skin to become ‘handsome’. As Mark McGranaghan (2012:163) so eloquently describes, “Heads anointed with a mixture of specularite and fat were the apogee of physical handsomeness, creating a state of being sparkling (*wawaitān*, Bleek 1956:252) or shimmering (*!k"arrakān*, Bleek 1956:507). Importantly ‘handsomeness’ not only described physical appearance but also the competent performance of tasks and appropriate management of social relations (*ibid.*:163-4). For someone to be truly handsome they had to look the part and act the part. Also fat was known as ‘handsome’ food and transferred this trait to the consumer (*ibid.*).

Since it was red, the *qhang qhang* ochre How presented to Mapote was most likely red haematite, not specularite, though pigment analysis has shown both were used to make paint (*Bonneau et al.* 2017). Clearly from Mapote's reaction not all red haematite was deemed equal and pieces that presented lustrous characteristics were preferred for pigment making. The association between the physical properties of pigment and the moralising social principle of handsomeness has important and novel implications for how we understand the agency of rock art images. Social bodies are made by applying pigments to surfaces, be that human skin or rock face. The use of sparkling ochre to make paint conferred the idea of both physical corporality and social handsomeness onto the rock art images. Dull ochre was an improper and less suitable paint material because it was not connected to any social ideals of physical or behavioural aptitude. This suggests that the images themselves were social beings capable of acting handsomely and that sociability was not seen as an innately human quality but was conferred much more widely and in equal terms to different beings.

By taking a closer look at the substances and processes involved in paint making and their interconnectedness across different contexts it becomes clear the San were not actually painting visions at all, they were painting persons. Art was not merely a visual archive of things experienced and actions taken while in an altered state of consciousness; this falls into the same trap as old-fashioned narrative explanations, just transporting the field of action to a more esoteric plain. Through the technical processes involved in painting and the significant materiality of the paint itself, the trance realm was physically manifested. Paint was transubstantiated into very real agents of San reality; the immaterial was made corporeal for all to experience, infused and animated with the stuff of life.

The idea that rock art images are more than mere pictures is not revolutionary by any means. As Lewis-Williams (1995:147) already identifies, the potent ingredients caused some paintings to be powerful 'things-in-themselves', particularly as reservoirs of potency. However, he is primarily concerned with how certain images sanctioned human-to-human 'social relations to which they

pointed' (*ibid.*), rather than the potential personhood of the images themselves and peoples' relationship with the art.

Again evoking the notion of handsomeness and proper sociability, M said that if a 'good' person placed their hand on a depiction of an eland, the potency contained in the painting would flow into the person (Lewis-Williams 1995:148).

Conversely if a bad person touch it they would become stuck to the rock and shrivel up. Whenever images have to be touched, rather than merely looked at, it implies there is inherent agency in the material index (Gell 1998:32). Also notice M does not specify that the person must be a shaman, only that they must be good, and certainly not bad. This is consistent with the Kalahari San and /Xam's deep concern for social niceties and maintaining interpersonal harmony, and it seems this extended even to the art.

By virtue of their potent and socially construed materiality it is clear the images were agentive things-in-themselves, but this is only half of the picture. For the San, the beings encountered while in an altered states of consciousness were not mere mirages, they were very real interactive social beings; the materiality of painted manifestations is a testament to this. As the previous chapter thoroughly established, social agency is not defined in terms of basic biological attributes, such as inanimate thing versus incarnate person, but is relational. Agency is not defined by what a thing or person 'is' in itself; what matters is where it stands in a network of social relations and in the vicinity of human activity (Gell 1998:123). Researches have focused on how the rock art may have mediated relationships between humans. This is mostly, though questionably, explained in terms of establishing shamanistic power and reputation (Dowson 1994; Blundell 2004; cf. Mullen 2018 for an interrogation and rebuttal). But the agentive nature of the images themselves suggests they were not only indexing shamanic power, they were indexing the power and personhood of other social beings, those depicted in the rock art, that the San relied on to survive.

The agency of paintings stemmed from their material ability to index the agency of their non-pictorial counterparts, the other very real beings, human and non-, of the San social world. In art terms Gell (1998:26) refers to these as 'prototypes':

entities held, by abduction, to be represented in the index, often by virtue of visual resemblance, but not necessarily. Resemblance can be detailed, vague, or abstractly related to the prototype; the important aspect is that the image triggers its recognition. There are various types of social agency/patient relationships linking indexes and their prototypes (cf. Gell's 1998:29 art-nexus diagram for all the theoretical relationships between artists, agents, indexes, and recipients). In some instances agency abducted from the index situates the prototype as an agent, as in commissioned portraits. In other circumstances the prototype may be made into a social patient via the index for example in 'vult sorcery'. For example in the discipline's early days rock art researchers speculated the paintings were a type of sympathetic magic in which prototypes would be linked in a patient-like relationship through the art.

The materiality of the images strongly suggests the beings depicted were social agents themselves, indexing the agency of their prototypes, be they eland, rain animals, spirits of the dead or other monstrous creatures. An important implication of the revelation is that trance was not the only way to encounter the important beings of the San spirit world; people could find them in a rock shelter, and if they were 'good' and behaved appropriately, could interact with them. Providing people acted handsomely, interventions through rock art could potentially be a more everyday and individual occurrence, rather than exclusively the domain of trance and the transcendent shaman. Bad or 'ugly' people could also interact with them but would have to suffer the consequences. Not everyone was able to or sought to achieve an altered state of consciousness but rock art provided them with a parallel experience and democratised access to the spirit realm.

Applying Gell's theory of art and agency moves rock art out of the purely shamanic religious arena and into a wider social-relational field. This is coherent with the importance Kalahari San and the /Xam place on maintaining interpersonal connections and social conviviality more generally. As the following chapters will explore, personhood was developed through accumulating and navigating social relations and was not defined by any fixed or intrinsic quality but by an individual's extended network. This network was comprised of both

human and non-human persons. Indeed, mastering the ability to relate to non-human beings was essential in fostering interpersonal relationships and ensuring collective prosperity. In essence, any one individual was the sum total of their relations, distributed over biographical time and space, with other persons (Strathern 1988; Gell 1998:222). Within this relational understanding of personhood, rock art was another agentive being in itself, and as we shall see, also served to map past and future relationships with the beings of the San universe, presenting us with a sort of constellation of San ontology.

Without evoking aesthetics, it is also possible to see evidence of this relational ontology in the stylistic choices made by San painters. Style is more than just the formal qualities of an artwork; it is an abstract account of the attributes of artworks in light of their capacity to thematise and make essential cultural parameters cognitively salient (Gell 1998:159). Importantly, style is not germane to individual works of art but needs to be considered in light of a whole corpus (Gell 1998:162). The classic corpus of San rock art is stylistically homogenous, suggesting widely shared values, and characterized by an incredible attention to detail and naturalistic rendering of its subjects. The minutiae and accuracy of anatomical details that went into painting of eland, as an example, reveal their deep scientific knowledge of the animals. They even captured eland movements and behavior learned from hours of intense observation and enthusiastic sharing of elaborate hunting stories. Contrary to first impressions, the San's extensive knowledge of their environment only emphasises the idea that some beings, particularly those depicted in rock art, were seen as social persons or at least agentive beings. There is some evidence to suggest they may have even been painting specific individual animals rather than indistinct 'stock images' (Pearce In Press). Moreover, seemingly natural animals sit alongside quite fantastical creatures such as rain animals, therianthropes, distorted human bodies and other composite monstrous beings. The rock art suggests there was a continuum between what we would consider two separate worlds of natural and social, mundane and arcane, where sociability was the defining quality of things.

The stylistic coherence of the rock art corpus also suggests that it can be viewed as a kind of distributed object. That is, at a macro level all the sites relate to one

another and are at once retrospective and prospective, reaching back into the past and pointing towards an unrealized future (Gell 1998:256). Rock art sites exist, “not as a network of temporal relations which can be totalised in a single synoptic mapping; but only as a ‘file’ consisting of a whole series of such mappings corresponding to different temporal (and spatial) points of vantage; each one of which generates a distinctive distribution of retentional and protentional relations” (*ibid.*). In essence, past/existing sites and paintings may have informed future paintings but not in any simplistic or temporally translucent way.

This view can perhaps frame how we interpret continuity, additions and revisions people made to rock art sites. For example, through their pigment analysis and radiocarbon dating project Adelphine Bonneau *et al.* (2017a & 2017b), have shown that people returned to the same rock shelter over several millennia and subtly added to the images in ways that, without directly dating the pigment, would otherwise not be obvious. In doing so people brought temporally distant images into the present and vice versa, distributing their own personhood in the process. In other words, rock art mediates and transmits agency between past and future. Though paintings were made at specific time-space coordinates, conceptually, they were *temporally dispersed*, “an object at no specific time or place, but moving through time and place, like a thunderstorm” (Gell 1998:226).

Chapter 4

The San Ontological World

The state of ontological ambiguity and instability was how things were back in mythic time; it was the ontological status quo, the inchoateness and ferment of a world in which beings and states had not yet set, as they were to in the Second Order. Yet, not altogether, as there are in that order also instances and interstices of ontological blurring, of beings and borders, albeit never as a permanent state of affairs but as a never-ending potentiality.

(Guenther 2015:288)

Establishing the basis of San ontology

As a branch of archaeology, rock art research greatly benefits from its access to rich ethnographic material as a source for its interpretations. Though it may seem incongruous to place historic /Xam material and more modern ethnographies from the Kalahari alongside Later Stone Age rock art, there is a well-established theoretical and methodological basis for this approach. Certainly, the Kalahari Revisionist Debate made it clear traditional hunter-gatherers from that region are not ‘living fossils’ and have actively been in contact with farming communities for the last two thousand years (Solway and Lee 1990; Wimsen and Denbow 1990; Sadr 1997). While we cannot automatically assume that their ways of living can be directly mapped onto archaeological material, there is strong evidence to suggest a continuity of belief and practice over much of southern Africa and to a significant time-depth (Lewis-Williams 1998). This pan-San worldview has been questioned and critiqued for its stasis and conservatism (Solomon 1999), nevertheless there do seem to be pervasive and enduring features of San life, as evidenced by the trance dance as well as recurring themes and characters in mythology and folklore. Without discounting the interaction and change that has taken place over the last two millennia, it seems continuity is a feature of San ideology rather than an artificial product of research methodology.

The same resources used to establish the shamanic/cosmological aspects of rock art production and consumption are equally valuable when it comes to determining the ontological basis of the San world and subsequently of the art. Ethnographies, myths, and stories are all repositories of data offering insight into who and what was considered an agentive being and how personhood was defined and conferred. As we shall see, the San world is characterised by great ontological ambiguity and instability (Guenther 2015); frequent moments of connection and transformation between humans and non-humans that is both phenomenologically experienced and materially expressed across a variety of social contexts.

In order to understand the foundation of San ontology we first need to understand how the world order came to be as laid out in origin mythology. While there are variations between Kalahari San groups and /Xam creation stories, they frequently ‘recycle basic thematic building blocks’ (Low 2014:167). Quite common is the belief in dual divinities: an ethereal creator god and a more terrestrial trickster god (Guenther 1999:61). Both remain involved in worldly affairs to varying degrees and in different ways with the trickster sometimes rivaling the creator whose role is making lesser gods, the earth, water, watering holes, the sky and things of the sky such as rain, wind, lightening, sun, moon and stars, plants, animals and finally humans. The creator is called ≠Gao N!a for the Ju/’hoansi (Marshall 1999), //Gǎũwa for the Naro (Guenther 2015) and /Kaggen for the /Xam (Bleek 1923), which is also the name of the /Xam’s mantis-trickster protagonist in myth and legend, demonstrating the ambiguity suffusing San religion. As Guenther (1999:64) summates, “He is comprised of varying and opposite ontological and moral traits, and different linguistic groups, bands and individuals may hold diverse and contradictory conceptualisations or beliefs about this divine being, and extend feelings of ambivalence towards him (and, on the rare occasion, her).” Indeed myths often describe the central figures as characters on shaky moral ground themselves. Naro storytellers describe //Gǎũwa’s shortcomings as lechery, gluttony, vulgarity and greed (Guenther 1999:166). /Kaggen is not much better; in /Xam stories he is often an old, somewhat foolish and petulant man (Guenther 2015:284).

Another origin story commonality is that when animals and humans were initially created they did not follow the current schema of man and beast. This is perhaps best illustrated by /Xam mythology, which breaks down into two distinct times, the First Order of existence, when humans and animals, both members of the Early Race, were not fully differentiated, and the Second Order denoting the present state of affairs. In some accounts the status of animals and people were reversed from the First to the Second Order so that today's people were once animals and vice versa. However this oversimplifies the way Early Race beings are conceived of. Mathias Guenther (2015:284) describes how the Naro 'dwelled on the consummate ambiguity of these beings':

On one hand, they *were* people, members of the Early Race, I was told, persons who hunted and gathered, married, lived in families, sheared and quarreled... yet some, though not all, of these early people were also each an animal, a puffadder or a jackal or lion, an aardvark, mantis, ichneumon, lizard, tick or beetle. Then as now Aardvark dug tunnels, Puffadder brooded on her clutch of eggs in a hollow in the desert sand, Carabib Beetle chases scorpions out of their holes, Mantis spread wings to get away from a scrape. Yet notwithstanding such anatomical and behavioral animalian traits, they did not look like animals at all; they looked like humans, yet weren't because they were animals.

The /Xam too fluctuate between emphasising animalian traits in some stories and human, social-moral, mental-emotional characteristics in others. Early Race people have a 'penchant for transformation'; humans metamorphose into animals or plants, stellar bodies, and meteorological phenomena such as wind or rain and vice versa (Guenther 2015:284). Even seemingly inanimate objects can turn back to the animals and plants they are comprised of. /Han=kass'o famously told Bleek a story of the rain, also a divine god called !Khwa who, angered by a transgression involving a maiden, turned her people into frogs, their arrows into reeds, and their karosses and quivers back into springbok (Bleek 1933:300). These ontological transformations may be temporary or permanent, reversible or irreversible, complete or incomplete, voluntary or involuntary (Guenther 2015:285).

/Kaggen in particular is defined by his transformative powers and ontological ambiguity in both early times and the ethnographic present when /Xam informants were collaborating with Bleek and Lloyd. He is also known as the Mantis, an insect-man but he ‘neither *is* nor *is not* a praying mantis’ (Lewis-Williams 1980:20) and takes on other forms, favoring antelopes, especially eland and hartebeest, which according to Dia!kwain, are both ‘things of the Mantis’ (Bleek 1923:10). A truly chimerical figure, when in his winged mantis-man form he does not have insect-type wings but rather the wings and feathers of a bird (Guenther 2015:287).

It was not /Kaggen but the old and wise Anteater-woman who was responsible for bringing about the Second Order in which the ontological identity of humans and animals became fixed (Guenther 1989:32). But even in this notionally rigid world there are exceptions. For example, hares and quaggas retained human bodily elements, as Guenther (*ibid.*) says ‘like an ontological vermiform appendix’, which must be excised and discarded by the hunter. Some animals also retained human behavior such as the springhare, which both menstruates and breast-feeds in a sitting position. Likewise some Ju/’hoansi will not eat elephant meat because they say it has both ‘people’s flesh and bush-animals flesh’ along with human-like skin and, in the case of female elephants, breasts (Biesele 1993:149-150). So while in theory the ontological ambiguity and flux of Early Race people was cleared up and fixed, it remains a feature of everyday life and there is ‘an abiding sense of human-animal relatedness as both contain each other’s essence’ (Guenther 2015:283).

This notion of a shared life force between humans and non-humans is of course at the very core of new animism. Described as ‘intentionality’ or ‘interiority’ by Viveros de Castro and Descola respectively, it is important for conferring personhood to a being, living or dead, human or animal, material or intangible. For the San, personhood is twofold, both processual, developed throughout a person’s lifetime, and also an essential quality shared with non-human beings. This quality is conceived of as ‘breath’ or ‘wind’. According to the Ju/’hoansi when god created animals and humans he “commanded them to breathe. Without breath they would not live” (Marshall 1999:19). Moreover wind serves as an invisible form of connection that allows vital potency to be transferred through the environment and between beings (Low 2014:169). A person with ‘strong wind’ can be both a powerful healer and a

dangerous source of sickness (*ibid.*), maintaining the ambiguity that pervades the San world. Crucially wind is intimately associated with smell, and as we shall see, certain odorous substances have important and instrumental qualities. Like scent, wind is something that wafts from inside, across space, and into others (*ibid.*:170).

While wind is intrinsic to beings, personhood is conceived of as a relational process between humans, animals and other beings including the environment itself. At birth the weather, which of course has a strong correlation with wind, is noted and people are said to have influence over those specific meteorological conditions throughout their life. Amongst the Ju/'hoansi this weather-bond is known as *n/ow*, a concept also salient with the /Xam. Individuals born during the rains could alleviate drought by burning their hair on a fire and urinating on it to form rain clouds (Guenther 2015:297). Both the /Xam and the Ju/'hoansi also believed that certain animals, primarily large game animals, had this *n/ow* sense, which could interact with that of a human, forming another relationship between humans and non-human persons (*ibid.*). Young children are protected from potent 'eland wind' by wearing a necklace of eland skin. As children grow they are gradually introduced to the powerful and potentially dangerous things of life so they can establish appropriate relationships (Low 2014:169). For example the Ju/'hoansi wash young children in the rain to introduce them to the rain, and young people are smeared with eland broth as an introduction to eating potent eland chest meat (*ibid.*). These incidental and formalised introductions to non-human entities are just as crucial as inter-human relations in achieving full personhood and developing an individual's own particular identity.

Potency is of course one of the most vital elements of the San cosmological universe and it is easy to mistakenly conflate potency with a kind of shared interiority as per new animism models. This is the trap Thomas Dowson (2007) falls into in his attempt to describe the workings of San ontology. Dowson rightly identifies that animals and other non-human agents were a source of potency and that it was not the sole preserve of shamans. However his description of potency as a circulating life force between humans and other beings, who both actively engage with one another to ensure its proper circulation, does not sit well with ethnographic material. For one, this insinuates potency is a finite resource that must be respectfully obtained and recycled, and while this is the case for some hunting communities, particularly in Lowland

South America, it is not the case for the San. For example, some sources of potency, such as beehives, can be personally owned, breaking patterns of communal resource sharing (Marshall 1976:129). Moreover, although at times it can be substantiated, potency is more of an efficacious phenomenon than a thing in itself (Low 2014:170). Overall Dowson's argument "relates poorly to what people actually think and do and leaves little room for the variety of ideas, behaviors and practices tolerated by and intrinsic to these pragmatic, egalitarian hunter-gatherers" (*ibid.*:165).

Dowson was the first to make a valiant attempt at applying ontological theory to rock art, dislodging discourse from its shamanistic impasse, so we can perhaps forgive him for his theory's imperfect fit. In fact by missing the mark he illustrates an important point about ontological models more generally. Descola's new animism is predicated largely on the dualist idea of a shared interiority versus a differentiated physicality. This dichotomy tends to oversimplify the diversity of 'animisms' which is as multiple and varied as animist groups themselves. For the San, ontological affinity and alterity between beings is experienced within *both* 'soul and body' (Guenther 2015:306), and moreover is liable to instability and transformation in different social contexts, as we will see. This complicated ontological scheme refuses any easy description or classification; the devil is very much in the details. The main limitation to new animism thus far has been the problem of fit between its basic model and the diversity of animistic expressions. As Dowson demonstrated, we should not try to shoehorn material into models but rather encourage nuanced assessments of ontological schemes that elucidate the specificities of these relational systems.

According to Guenther (2015:307), one of the reasons for the dichotomous nature of Descola's writing is that he pays "only scant attention to the myth world of Amazonians, mentioning 'unusual stories' about therianthropic humans and non-humans from myth-time only in passing." Once one starts to examine these stories it becomes clear that there are many parallels with the San: the non-differentiation of humans and animals, the inversion of identities at the moment of speciation, and the prevalence of metamorphosis (*ibid.*). By excluding mythic time and relying only on the arrangement of 'real life', Descola constructs as far less ambiguous and even structuralist Amazonian ontology. This separation of myth and reality is potentially quite spurious indeed. Researchers' distinctions between mythic narrative, personal

experience and the interstitial categories of legend and dreams do not necessarily reflect emic divisions (McGranghan 2012:18). Highly fluid, ambiguous, and characterised by a willingness to entertain alternative experiences and explanations, San narrative traditions undermine any approach heavily based on categorization or objectification (*ibid.*). Guenther (2015:299) stresses how reality often reiterates and reinforces myth and there are frequent moments of intersection between these two worlds.

This conceptual division between the ordinary and extraordinary, or mundane and profane, has affected research attitudes and is partly why it has taken so long for ontological approaches to gain momentum. The focus on San subsistence strategies, seen as representative of an original lifeway, initially took on a prosaic ethno-evolutionist bent. Hunting and gathering was said to exemplify pragmatism and ‘Bushman the original scientist’ (Heinz 1978:148). “A long heritage of intimate experience, coupled with remarkably keen powers of observation of fine detail, has enabled the !ko to evolve a highly efficient working taxonomy which in several respects functions more satisfactorily than our own” (*ibid.*:150). Even Low (2014:167) describes hunting as unsentimental and, above all, a pragmatic matter of survival. This contrasts greatly with /Xam accounts in which the hunting-ground was steeped with the stuff of myth and magic. Guenther (2015; 2017) attributes this discontinuity to academic context and framing. In contrast he points out how seemingly ordinary, practical activity, such as hunting, intersects with myth and ritual; both reiterate and reinforce the characteristic fluidity of San ontology.

This same conceptual divide has hindered rock art interpretations. Having established the art does not offer a straightforward depiction of day-to-day activities, how do we interpret seemingly mundane images such as those that seem to relate to hunting? The shamanistic interpretive framework has not been able to advance a convincing interpretation of these depictions (Dowson 2007:52). San hunting ethnography, explored in the following section, reveals it to be an activity rife with ontological flux which is addressed ritually and corporeally experienced by all beings involved, human and non-. Between Guenther and Low’s insights we arrive at two reflexive modes of San epistemology, learning through narrative and knowing by experience. Ontological fluidity experienced while hunting contributes towards grounding the

‘extraordinary ontology’ of myth within reality. In other words, daily experience verifies and validates knowledge passed down through a ‘vibrantly oral culture’ (Guenther 2006). As a result we need to reexamine our concept of mundane activity for it too can be infused with magic.

Poison arrows: Enchanted hunting technology

Hunt-evoking scenes of human-animal interaction in San rock art are overwhelmingly concerned with a very specific type of hunting: bow hunting of large game animals such as eland and hartebeest with poison arrows. Depictions of trapping and hunting small game, like gathering, plant-life and small animals more generally, are conspicuously absent from South African rock art. This immediately suggests that hunting large game was more than a matter of basic subsistence. Rich in fat, large game animals, eland in particular, were powerful carriers of potency. Subsequently big-game hunting was as much a ritual process as a practical activity and relies on moments of ontological connection between hunter and quarry. The ethnography is abundant with such examples. I hope to add to this by showing how one’s ontological position was also negotiated materially. Poison arrows, used to hunt large game animals, are compelling examples of Gell’s enchanted technology. The outcome of skilled technical processes and at the epicenter of social practice, arrows allow for the ‘occult transubstantiation’ of poison into meat and potency. They were also crucial tools for managing relationships with game, and establishing and extricating human personhood from other ontological potentialities.

In ethnographic descriptions from the Kalahari region (see Marshall 1976, Lee 1979, Wiessner 1983; Wadley *et al.* 2015) poison arrows are traditionally made out of three components: a main shaft about 30 to 45cm in length made from a heat-straightened and knocked reed, a link-shaft about 5cm long made of bone and a bone or stone point. Sometimes another small collar of reed is used to attach the point to the link-shaft. Sinew and plant-based bindings along with resin adhesives are used to secure the components. San arrows are slight, insubstantial things (about 15 grams in weight according to Lee 1979:133) and of course function not through causing heavy internal trauma to their target but by introducing poison into the blood stream. The link-shaft is designed to uncouple from the main shaft so the stricken animal cannot easily

remove the arrowhead, giving the poison time to work. As a safety measure, sometimes the arrow point can be reversely inserted into the main shaft while not in use. Poison is not applied directly to the tip of the arrowhead but to its shank; for it to better adhere, the shank is often tightly wrapped with sinew glued down with plant gum. There are various active ingredients used to make poison such as juice from the bulb of the *Boophane disticha* plant or the innards of Chrysomelid beetle grubs, primarily *Diamphidia negro-ornata* and *Diamphidia vittatipennis* (see Bradfield *et al.* 2015 & Wadley *et al.* 2015 for a comprehensive list).

Arrows are carried in a quiver made from a sleeve of heavy bark capped by a cover of hide at either end. Lorna Marshall (1976:137) describes how many hunters also wear a special belt that binds a number of arrows to their waist; fanned out so that the hunter can swiftly seize one in the moment. A quiver typically contains ten to fifteen finished arrows. Men also store a number of blank unfinished main shafts, spare arrowheads and link shafts, and living *Diamphidia* pupae in their quiver, which doubles as a portable workshop (Lee 1979:135). Some Kalahari San also carry everything, quiver included, in a hide hunting bag.

The arrow is of course only one half of the equation and is put into flight via a bow. In the Kalahari, bows are made from a carefully chosen flexible wooden shaft, (of the bush *Grewia flava* or *Grewia bicolor*) carved smooth then repeatedly heated in hot sand and gently curved against the knee (Lee 1979:129). Sinew thongs are tightly bound at both ends to support the bowstring, which is twined from long strips of sinew from the back mussels of large animals. The bowstring is attached to the bow while still wet; it shrinks as it dries, creating a functioning bow with a pull of about 9 kilograms; knockdown power for only the smallest of antelope like a steenbok or duiker and taking such small game with poison arrows is regarded as overkill (Lee 1979:214).

Unidentified Prisoners at the Breakwater Prison made a series of arrows for Bleek and Lloyd, which were sent to the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford in 1875 (Deacon 1992:4). Although not the most classic examples due to the limited materials available, some are tipped with glass slivers, they prompted /Han=kass'o to describe /Xam arrow making (L.VIII.26.8293-8302; 8315-8334). Being water-dependent and

not dispersed throughout the arid Karoo, reeds were harvested on specific ventures, bound together and stored in an abandoned porcupine hole. The papery outer skin was scraped off and those that needed straightening were heated over hot embers and passed through a broken digging-stick weight or grooved stone. These stones are also used in the Kalahari to help straighten arrow reeds. Unlike Kalahari examples, /Han#kass'o describes how the nocked reed was also occasionally fletched; a feather was attached to the main shaft above the nock using gum and sinew. A lump of heated resin was also used to secure the arrowhead to the wood or bone link-shaft; the point was pressed into the gum while still warm and malleable. One of the stone points from this collection conforms to a Later Stone Age lithic-type known as segments (Deacon 1992:5). These are about 10-15mm long and crescent shaped with a sharp straight side and a curved blunt side (Deacon 1984).

/Xam poisons were commonly admixtures of various substances and different poisons were used to hunt different animals (Stow 1905, McGranaghan 2012:271). Apart from plant- (*Boophane disticha* and *Euphorbia virosa*) and insect- (*Orthoptera* abdomen) derived poisons, the /Xam also utilized combinations of snake venom, saliva and gall from Cape cobras and puffadders (Deacon 1992:6; McGranaghan 2012:271). As McGranaghan points out, correct poison manufacture was a complex process that relied on local and specific knowledge. For example, the number of venom glands used was determined by whether the snakes had been taken from a 'strong' place or a 'bad' one. To produce the best poison one had to know where to find 'powerful' places and how to adeptly procure the snakes themselves. In the Karoo and the Kalahari, some poison ingredients were not available everywhere and were gifted or traded between geographically distant groups (McGranghan 2012:271-272, Wadley *et al.* 2015). So while some poisons were associated with different animals, they were also associated with different San populations. (For an exhaustive list of known and potential poison ingredients see Chaboo *et al.* 2016 and Wadley *et al.* 2018.)

Both ultimately oriented toward accessing a reserve of potency, poison making and paint making share similar technical procedures, from the acquisition of ingredients to their heating and mixing, and the addition of enhancers and fixatives. Evocative of women's' gathering work though strictly a male activity, the base ingredients need to be dug out of the earth. In the Kalahari Chrysomelid larvae are found buried at a

depth of 30-60cm beneath infected *Commiphora* (corkwood) spp. or *Sclerocarya birrea* (marula) trees that serve as their host plants (Lee 1979:134, Wadley *et al.* 2015). Often occupying holes in the ground, snakes too are subterranean dwellers. On my most recent fieldtrip we became acutely observant of an occupied puffadder hole along our daily path. Other plant-based additives, bulbs and tubers such as *Asparagus exuvialis*, also have to be unearthed. These bulbs are roasted to soften them so that their juice can be extracted. *Asparagus exuvialis* is added to poison to stop the animal from urinating, hastening the effects of the poison. If the animal does urinate, only a small amount of blackish urine is discharged, and this helps the hunters to track the wounded animal amongst the spoor of the herd (*ibid.*). The clear liquid *Asparagus* sap is reduced over the heat and changes colour to brown, then to dark orange-brown, as it boils and reduces (Wadley *et al.* 2015). It can be stored on the end of a stick in a hardened form. Powdered scrapings are removed from this congealed substance into a bone mortar to which the carefully squeezed out, bright orange innards of the Chryshomlid grubs are mixed. Other enhancing plant saps, such as *Acacia mellifera* bark extract, is added. This strengthens the poison and keeps it from drying out and flaking off the arrowhead. When *Acacia mellifera* liquid is added to the poison it bubbles and foams and is said to likewise cause the victim to foam from the nose and mouth, quickening its death (*ibid.*).

From the poison to the arrows to the bow, socially significant qualities are conferred across hunting-kit components. The stones used to straighten the reeds imparted a 'smoothness' that allowed the arrows to fly 'nicely' (LL.VIII.14.7235), implying that within a technical trueness of trajectory lay a kind of socially objectified agreeableness; smooth arrows behaved themselves. The completed bow is rubbed with fat, which functionally prevents the wood from drying out, cracking and breaking (Marshall 1976:145, Lee 1979:209). But of course fat is also a potency-rich 'handsome'-conferring substance. Lee (1979:145) describes how rubbing the bow with blood of a freshly killed antelope ritually strengthens it, though we can also see this as a technical procedure because of the material efficacy of potent blood. Like Anga eel traps, arrows and associated paraphernalia can be seen as one of Gell's (1996:36) 'practically' embedded art objects; their significant materiality and instrumentality is central to their great social efficacy and importance. Hunting practice cannot be set in opposition to more 'spiritual' social arenas (cf. Guenther

2017), which as we will see in the next chapter are equally concerned with accomplishing practical results. And if arrows are artworks, hunters, through technically transforming material components into meat and potency, are ‘occult technicians’ themselves.

This magical status of hunters and occult nature of big-game hunting is plainly evident in San hunting practice; the rituals, prescribed behaviors and ontological blurring that takes place over the course of a hunt. Marshall (1976:152-155) and Lee (1979:149-151) describes how the Ju/’hoansi throw oracle discs to divine potential trajectories and outcomes of a hunt. As Lee (1979:149) says “hunting being an unpredictable business, the hunter needs all the help he can get” and makes use of magical aids to compliment his hunting equipment and knowledge of game.

Comprised of five or six stiff leather disks, men consult them before starting on a hunt as to which direction they should take or what may transpire. They are carried in men’s hunting bags and also consulted mid-hunt when advice and encouragement is needed. Enthusiastic and detailed discussion about all aspects of hunting is a favorite pastime of Ju/’hoan men and all gather around when the oracle disks are thrown. The atmosphere is cheerful, full of banter and laughter, with all men expressing different readings of the disks. This lack of anxiety and reverence sets a surprising tone for magical activity and is perhaps why hunting has been framed as primarily prosaic.

While there are no divining specialists when it comes to the democratic oracle disks, some individuals were thought to have special talents of game-control. For example, some /Xam were said ‘own’ certain animals such as springbok; this ownership could be either an innate God-given gift or a deliberately cultivated relationship. Relating to a person’s *n/ow*, a hunter may know he has the gift because animals seem to behave in a predictable fashion when he approaches them (Low 2014:170). Ontologically, co-material association could be created by rubbing part of the animal into cuts made on a person’s body or by wearing a part of the animal, such as a springbok cap (*ibid.*) so that the animal’s essence becomes incorporated into their being. Snake doctors build up immunity by rubbing a mixture of snake poison into cuts on their body “so that they have the wind of the snake, are in a sense a snake, and will not therefore be harmed by snakes” (*ibid.*).

These animal-human connections are phenomenologically experienced during a hunt. /Xam hunters felt presentiments, “palpable sensations in the body that connected the person to another, absent or distant, oftentimes approaching being, either a friend or a relative or, in the case of the hunter, a game-animal” (Guenther 2015:296). //Kabbo called these physical manifestations *!gwe*, ‘tappings’ or ‘Bushmen’s letters’ (Bleek & Lloyd 1911:331). *!Gwe* are experienced as movements, palpitations, or ‘beatings of the flesh’ (Bleek 1875:17) through the body and correspond to significant bodily traits of the animal being perceived. To those who understand them they signal ‘which arrow they better not use’ (*ibid.*) and what kind of game is approaching. For example ‘springbok sensations’ are felt at the ribs, face and eyes, corresponding to the black areas and markings of springbok. Guenther emphasises how close to therianthropic transformation this experience comes, “so intensively felt is this partial or incremental merging of hunter and antelope” as they come into range of one another (Guenther 2015:297). “The man feels the black hair on his ribs as though he was wearing the animal’s skin; but it is his own skin” (Canetti 1981:341).

Presentiments also work the other way around. Chris Low (2014:167) describes how, in order to prevent future game from sensing the presence of hunters, the Ju/’hoansi first cut out the neck meat of an antelope because that is where an animal feels the ‘wind’ of the hunter. As mentioned earlier, wind and scent are what categorise /Xam ontological identity and can dictate the direction in which an individual’s personhood develops (cf. McGranaghan 2012:134-144). As the old adage goes, ‘you are what you eat’; the characteristic odours of game animals reflected the smell of their ‘stomachs’ (LL.II.11.1127), relating to their dietary habits, rumen and scat. For example babboons were said to smell like people because they are omnivores and share a similar digestive tract to humans (McGrangahan 2012:135). This together with their human-like anatomy, use of medicinal plants, and speech-like communication made them ontologically slippery beings (Challis 2012, 2014). Characters in Early Race narrative all had their own distinct scent and the concept of both personal and human scent was especially salient in interaction with non-humans. In terms of hunting, animals were known to have superior olfactory abilities; they could understand the wind and were highly attuned to the sensory information it conveyed (McGranaghan 2012:143). ‘Walking about careless of one’s scent’ while hunting would give away one’s ontological identity, alerting the quarry and ruining the chance of a successful

ambush (LL.VIII.16.7407-7408). Since poison arrows only have a range of about twenty meters, the greatest difficulty lies in getting close enough to fire an effective shot.

Once an arrow has successfully hit its intended target and depending on how long it takes for the poison to prove fatal (which could be several days) the hunting party may return to camp at night and continue tracking in the light of day. During this time there are a number of avoidances to which the Ju/'hoansi hunter who shot the animal is expected to adhere (Marshall 1999). The hunter should not urinate, or it will cause the animal to likewise do so, resulting in the poison being discharged from the body. The hunter must be still and quiet and avoid saying the name of the animal otherwise its tracks will fade. And he should not add wood to a fire or cook his own food as a flaring fire gives the animal strength. The /Xam have similar prescriptions called *!nanna-se* (Hollmann 2007). Adding to these, smelling the scent of cooking food (incorporating it within one's own scent) when sharing identities with a wounded animal was troublesome: if the animal got wind of this food smell it could escape the effects of the poison (LL.V.6.4421-4422). After shooting gemsbok, hunters were forbidden from picking up springbok meat or smelling the scent of their viscera or the gemsbok would escape (LL.V.17.5312-5316). These avoidances highlight the corporeal connection created between hunter and prey through the material index of the arrow. As McGranahan (2012:139) summarises, "in stalking and shooting an animal, hunters necessarily became increasingly entwined with its identity, closing an ontological 'gap' that was potentially detrimental to hunting success."

The greatest indication that hunting was more than a prosaic activity, or perhaps I should say that 'the everyday' was also infused with myth and magic, is the unpredictable potentiality that /Kaggen will make an appearance on the hunting ground (Guenther 2015:295). As creator of the great buck, he also acted as their protector, deceiving hunters in various ways by tricking them into breaking one of the aforementioned proscriptions. In particular he helps his favorite antelope species, the eland and hartebeest, which according to Dia!kwain are 'things of the Mantis' (Bleek 1923:10), to escape or recover. In Early Race stories /Kaggen exploits his transformative nature to trick hunters and this same ontological ambiguity was not limited to the mythic past. The Maluti San know this trickster-mantis figure as Cagn,

who they say ‘is in the bones’ of elands (Schmidt 2013:77). Their physicality is infused with his personhood and identity. Hunting large antelope thus involves especially meticulous attention to proper rules and decorum.

If there is any doubt remaining as to the magical nature of hunting large-game, we need only return to the mutability of San oral tradition. As already mentioned, talking about hunting, dissecting the details of recent hunts, recounting past hunts, discussing future ones, was a favorite pastime. These stories were recounted to the point of taking on myth-like qualities. “In this process of fabulating, legendising, and mythologising especially memorable hunts or sightings of strange beings hunting narratives may both assume the textual and textural content and contours of First Order myth and recall that Order back into people’s consciousness” (Guenther 2015:300). In essence, real-life hunting experiences reinforced the stuff of myths, bringing those happenings forward into daily life. While the humans and animals of mythic times are not the same as those today, they are still subject to the same moments of uncertainty, blurring and connectedness that characterize the San ontological world.

Making persons and managing relations

Shooting a large game animal creates an ontological connection between human and animal, as illustrated by *!nanna-se* prescriptions and avoidances. The poison arrow is the material agent responsible for closing the gap between hunter and prey, temporarily linking the two in a consubstantial relationship. However once the animal finally succumbs to the poison and is successfully tracked the meat belongs not to the man who shot the animal but to the owner of the arrow itself. Since arrows are swapped within groups and farther afield between long-distance *hxaro* trading partners, these two are not necessarily one in the same. The arrow-owner would either receive a large portion of the meat or was entitled to the important social duty of meat distribution (Wiessner 1983:261). This means that skilled hunters are not constantly responsible for distributing meat and the social stress (though potential personal gain in starting the distribution off in the direction of his own kin and affines) it entails (Marshall 1961:238). Moreover to be seen as too energetic a hunter would begin to draw the envy and resentment of others (Lee 1979:249). Taking periodic breaks after

several successful hunts as well as the arrow-meat ownership custom allows a skilled hunter to enjoy some of the reciprocal obligations he has built up (*ibid.*).

The communal sharing of resources is a deeply engrained social practice. Even relatively small animals such as warthog were distributed around the hunting party and their immediate family members (Marshall 1976:133). To be seen as greedy, stingy or a hoarder of resources was extremely anti-social, and for the /Xam it equated to predatory and monstrous behavior (McGranaghan 2014). The meat of big animals was distributed so that everyone received a portion. From a practical standpoint it means nothing spoils or goes to waste and from a social standpoint it prevents jealousy, ill will and corresponding hostility and ill health from infecting the camp (Marshall 1961). The custom of sharing is so salient and so thoroughly performed, that 'it has all but extinguished the concept of not sharing' (Marshall 1976:133).

In order to identify whose arrow killed the animal /Xam men engraved them and rubbed red pigment into the etched designs called *†kettan* (Bleek & Lloyd 1911:361). (They also made fine incisions around the points of the bow after killing a hyena or baboon, chronicling specific animal encounters (McGranaghan 2012:267). According to Polly Wiessner's (1983) appraisal of Kalahari arrows, these marks are casual personal expressions, lacking continuity or any kind of rigid parameters. Though, in line with their status as *hxaro* objects, men sometimes expressed close relationships by marking their arrows in a similar fashion as friends or relatives (*ibid.*). These individualised arrows have about as many idiosyncrasies as do their makers (Silberbauer 1965:56). Though the designs may have been largely insignificant, the process of making them, cutting and rubbing, mirrors the significant process of marking the body in the boy's initiation ritual, which is central to the construction of personhood.

John Marshall's film *A Rite of Passage*, shot in 1952-1953, documents thirteen year-old /Ti!kay's initiation after he shoots and kills his first wildebeest. His first successful hunt marks the beginning of his social maturity; a young man is considered an acceptable son-in-law only once he can procure meat necessary to maintain social relationships. During this ceremony, the arrow that made the kill is burned clean, re-sharpened and used to make small cut marks on important parts of /Ti!kay's body

(Fig. 4.1): his arm so that it will be flexible and strong when wielding a bow, his chest to instill the passion to hunt, his back which corresponds to calming the withers of future game so they will not flee in fear, and between the eyes to help the boy see game quickly and clearly. /Ti!kay's father then rubs a mixture of boiled fat from the killed animal and ground-up !gaowa pod, one of the ingredients in arrow-poison that may have amplified its efficacy, into the cuts. The marks on his body heal as a number of tiny tattoos, reminders to go out and hunt, not sit idly at camp.



Fig. 4.1. /Ti!kay's being 'marked' with the arrow he used to kill his first wildebeest. The mixture of fat and !gaowa rubbed into the cuts is visible on his chest. Digitised film stills from John Marshall's (1972) *A Right of Passage*. Images courtesy of DER.

The /Xam go even further in their modification of the body; some boys would have the top joint of their little finger of the right hand cut off in infancy because a man grasps the arrow and bowstring with this hand (Bleek & Lloyd 1911:329). For the /Xam,

hunting was central to fulfilling masculine social responsibility, and proficiency with bow and arrows was highly valued (McGranaghan 2012). This skill was tied to the socially admirable trait of bravery. In an Early Race story, Leopard was granted permission to marry the Rhinceros' daughter because he was a 'bow-man' rather than a *li:-sa*, a coward (LL.VIII.5.6481-6482). As McGranaghan (2012:175) explains, "It was a trait that people hoped to inculcate, refusing to feed children jackal hearts specifically because this might cause them to become cowards. A similar term was *kwerre*, for a person who was a bad shot or was not 'strong'; those who did not know how to deal properly with subsistence resources were weaklings or 'feeble-minded' rather than sensible, or strong." A man's hunting equipment was also intimately associated with his being. After death, bows and arrows were taken by male relatives (LL.II.13.1295), "suggesting (through the salience of individual relationships in determining their disposal) a strong personal affiliation between hunters and their material culture" (McGranaghan 2012:267).

For men, poison arrows appear to have been instrumental in the attainment of full San personhood, both from a relational and material perspective. Before becoming a full adult capable of maintaining human social relationships, men must first become adept at using this technology, embodying relevant skills and techniques including how to relate ontologically to game. During initiation arrows are used to physically alter the body, making openings through which both potent animal fat and poison-element can be incorporated. The informant M also described how the same mixture of blood and fat used to make pigment is used in scarification rituals (Jolly 1986; Lewis-Williams 1986). This sharing of substances creates a physical bond not only between hunter and prey, enabling successful future interactions, but also between person and object. Marked like their owners, arrows become material extensions of San personhood and this is crucial for hunting success. A successful and skillful hunter experienced a useful ontological connection with his prey, but also maintained the distance necessary to prevent its escape (Willerslev 2007; McGranaghan 2012:199). The aim of hunting is to relate to prey, not become it. Arrows, as quintessential markers of human-ness, were used to maintain this distance. They provide an element of ontological clarity to the at times ambiguous hunting relationship. In the human-animal entanglement they indexed both San agency and personhood.

Poison arrows from the past: archaeology and rock art

In comparison to their ubiquity in rock art, archaeological evidence for the use of poison arrows in southern Africa is more fugitive. As we have seen, the manufacture of poisons and adhesives necessary for such technology requires the multi-stage alchemical processing of diverse materials (Rusch 2020), and is framed as an indicator of cognitive complexity, meaning researchers are always eager for early evidence. While Chaboo *et al.* (2019:52) erroneously state that ‘few paintings are more than a few hundred years old in southern Africa’, it remains true the vast majority of sites are not yet directly dated. The dating that has been done in the Maclear District, where most of the sites in this thesis are located, span from 2998–2381 cal BP to within the last 250 years to present; out of 22 sites where black pigment has been directly radiocarbon dated, over half of these sites are at least 1000 years old (Bonneau *et al.* 2017a&b). Though not directly dated themselves, the oldest dated site does include a depiction of poison arrows; unsurprisingly this date is far outstripped by other archaeological evidence.

Use-wear and microresidue analyses of microlithic stone tools suitable as inserts for arrows indicate bow hunting may date to about 64000 years ago (Lombard & Pargeter 2008; Wadley & Mohapi 2008; Lombard & Phillipson 2010; Lombard 2011; Bradfield and Lombard 2011). This date seems to be corroborated by a single bone point found in the Howiesons Poort period at Sibudu, South Africa; importantly this resembles twentieth-century San arrowheads (Backwell *et al.* 2008). Morphological congruency with San poisoned arrows is also cited as evidence that 43000-year-old bone points from Border Cave, South Africa, and 35000-year-old bone points from White Paintings Shelter, Botswana, may have been intended to be used with poison (Robbins *et al.* 2012). This interpretation is supported by the presence of incised decoration on some of these points, which resemble the marks of ownership that the Ju/’hoansi and /Xam applied to their arrows (Wadley *et al.* 2018). If we assume that the bone arrowhead and link-shaft are the diagnostic feature, then these first appear regularly in the archaeological record from about 20000 years ago (Deacon 1984, 1992), and it is broadly accepted that people hunted with poisoned arrows in southern Africa throughout the Holocene (Bradfield *et al.* 2015).

Because poison degrades over time, and excavated poisonous plants are often also used for medicinal and adhesive purposes, evidence of direct association of poisons with hunting weapons is scant (Wadley *et al.* 2018). At Border Cave a lump of poisonous *Euphorbia tirucalli* fibers mixed with beeswax was directly dated to 35140 $\pm$ 360 years ago; this mixture may have been used as a dual-purpose adhesive for hafting poisoned weapons (d’Errico *et al.* 2012a). Traces of a ricin-based poison on a wooden applicator found at Border Cave dating to 24000 years ago is the oldest securely dated poison associated with arrow points (*ibid.*). However the castor bean plant, *Ricinus communis*, from which ricin derives is not thought to be indigenous to southern Africa and there is uncertainty about whether it was present on the landscape at this time (Evans 2012; d’Errico *et al.* 2012b). Alternatively the crab’s eye creeper, *Abrus precatorius*, is indigenous across much of South Africa; its seeds contain the toxin abrin, which is similar in structure and properties to ricin and has been recorded as an arrow poison ingredient in other parts of Africa (Bradfield *et al.* 2015). The Border Cave applicator can be cautiously accepted as early evidence for the use of poison arrows, and also perhaps a poison ingredient not recorded ethnographically as used by the San (*ibid.*), a reminder that ethnographic data does not always corroborate the archaeology.

From a rock art perspective, painted human figures are frequently in possession of their hunting equipment. But as Dowson (2007:52) notes, contrary to popular belief there are comparatively few depictions of humans actually engaged in hunting, though to this I will add, ‘hunting’ as we tend to conceive of it. At Ndedema Gorge in the KwaZulu-Natal Drakensberg, Harold Pager (1971) identified only 29 hunting scenes among 3909 individual paintings. Of those 29 hunt scenes only seven show men shooting at animals, and only one animal is depicted as having been hit by an arrow. These paintings have proved difficult to grapple with; how are we to resolve apparent ‘scenes of daily life’ within a hermeneutic theory that rejects such explanations?

Before the predominance of shamanistic interpretations, these scenes were thought to represent a functional form of Frazer’s ‘sympathetic magic’ made to mitigate the uncertainty inherent in hunting. However this kind of classic anthropological theory tends to be over-generalised and does not sit well with San ethnography (Willcox

1956; Vinnicombe 1972; Lewis-Williams 1982). Nevertheless Thackeray (1983, 1986, 1993, 2005a, 2005b) has continued to revive this terminology, suggesting that humans sought to control game through ritually imitating their behavior and appearance. Images of people wearing animal skins with painted stripes supposedly mirrored the wounding of prey; the dying shaman foretold of the dying eland. Sympathy has also been invoked as the feeling and recognition of animals as moral, sentient beings (Guenther 1988; Dowson 2007). Guenther (2015:295) calls the ontological connectedness between hunter and prey a ‘sympathy bond’. This affirmation of the personhood of animals best characterises the notion sympathy involved in San hunting, insofar as it is relevant at all. Low (2014:165) points out that hunting holds no moral dilemma for living San groups because the relationship between animals and people was fixed by God, who also gave them the knowledge of poison (Marshall 1976:152). Though this has the overtone of a contemporary evangelical climate change denier, with whom the San would possibly not identify, it does illustrate their unsentimental approach to hunting.

Interpretations of rock art couched in sympathetic terms generally relate poorly to the intricacies and specificities of San practice and experience. By using emic terminology and associated understandings, McGranaghan and Challis (2016) succeed at bringing us much closer to an appropriate interpretation of ‘hunting scenes’, which extend beyond the act of shooting at an animal. They replace sympathetic control with ‘taming magic’; “a suite of ‘nice’ behaviours designed to inculcate or maintain desirable relationships between human and non-human persons” (*ibid.*: 580). In explaining the rock art at Sehonghong to Orpen, Qing famously said, “the men with rhebok’s heads... they tame elands and snakes”. ‘Tame’ is understood in opposition to ‘wild’; behaviorally expressed as stillness, peace and quite versus quivering, restlessness and chatter. In the/Xam early times game used to be tame, †*ku:ka*, and behaved as if domesticated, approaching people without fear and allowing themselves to be stroked (*ibid.*). In the current world order this is no longer the case and, as we have seen, humans must foster familiar relationships with animals and behave appropriately in order to ‘tame’ them and prevent their escape during the hunt.

Importantly, taming was not only achieved through acting ‘nicely’, material charms were used to influence game. Plant medicines aided hunters in stalking and shooting

by either making springbok ‘foolish’ and unwary, or by making them ‘run gently’ (Hollman 2004; de Prada-Samper 2007). In the Karoo exceptional communal game drives involving even women and children were used to hunt springbok. Hunters used special non-poison arrows with long feathers, which if they were especially handsome made tearing noises as they flew, badly made arrows whistled or hissed (McGranaghan 2012:245-246, 270). The bowstring was also tightly bound to reverberate loudly and induce the herd to flee (McGranaghan & Challis 2016:586). To channel the game ostrich feather brushes treated with fragrant buchu and red pigment were stuck into the ground while woman and children also waved them. These feather brushes were said to make the game foolish (*ibid.*).

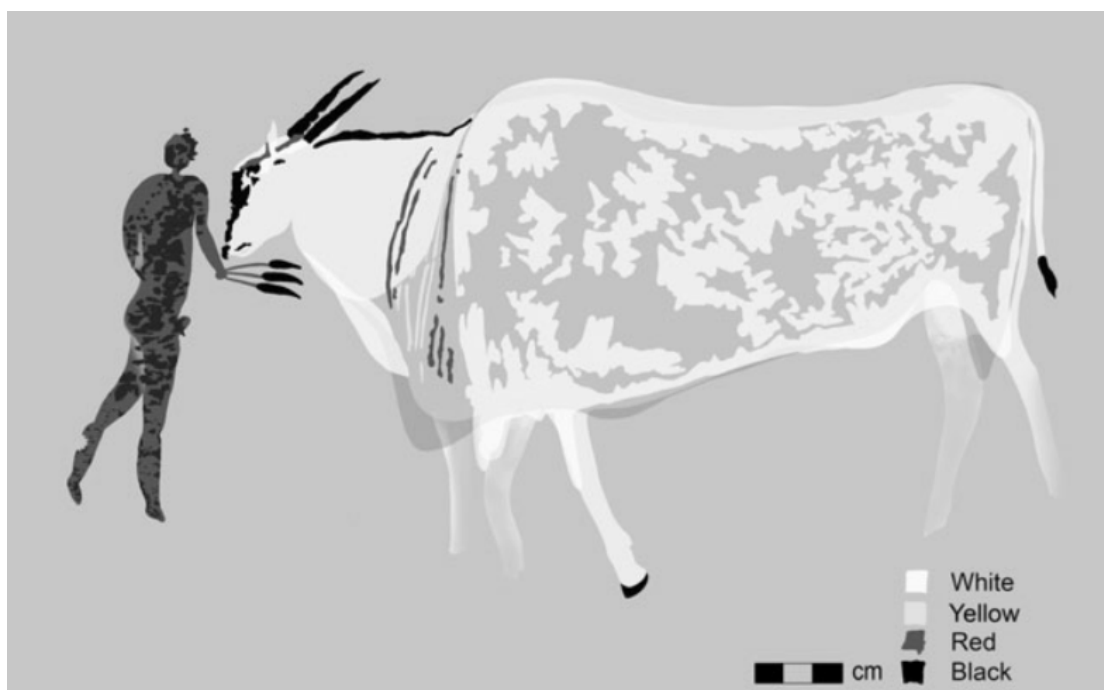


Fig. 4.2. A human figure taming an eland bull with ‘plant’ charms, Eastern Cape Province, after McGranaghan and Challis (2016). Digital redrawing courtesy of Sam Challis.

We find depictions of plant charms being used in rock art, often being held out by humans toward animals (Fig. 4.2). These charms seem to have formed part of a hunter’s taming-magic toolkit. These charms are effective because of their material properties. For example, we have already seen that smell was an important quality for the /Xam. Strongly fragrant plants like buchu would have been readily incorporated into an animal’s wind, especially given their keen sense of smell, in this case making

them foolish. We will see shortly how maidens calm the rain with buchu and powdered pigment. Pigment, with its associated properties of handsomeness and sociality is also deployed with the plant charms.

I would also posit that poison arrows, as components of enchanted technology, were similarly instrumental. The fact that they are seen as more literally performing work means their use as taming technology has been overlooked. The poison itself is a strong substance with clear efficacy that allows hunters to control game; poison slows the animal, makes it docile, approachable and easier to track, and eventually submit to the hunters. In fact, there are instances where we may have mistakenly identified poison paraphernalia as plant charms, or overlooked unidentifiable ‘sticks’ or simple lines, which could well be arrows or depictions of arrows with their tips inverted for handling and taming rather than shooting. Deacon (1992) and Wadley *et al.* (2015) show how poison is stored on the end of a stick (Fig. 4.3. & Fig. 4.4), as perhaps was once the case with the controversial Border Cave find. With these objects in mind, if we look again at Fig. 4.2. we may see it in a new light.

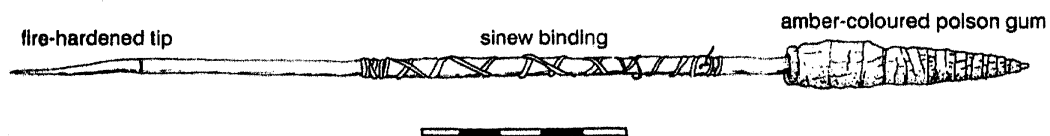


Fig. 4.3. Poison mixture stored on the end of a stick, after Deacon (1992). Image courtesy of Janette Deacon.



Fig. 4.4. Poison mixture stored on the end of a stick, after Wadley (2015)

The enchanted materiality of poison-arrows is vividly apparent in their painted depictions. A small group of figures from site RSA MEL7 seems to confirm poison arrows were objects used to tame game (Fig. 4.5). One human figure, overlaying a hartebeest, is reaching for arrows in a quiver slung over his back. A second human is facing the hartebeest; in one hand his bow ‘sympathetically’ mirrors the angle of the hartebeest’s head, while the other presents two arrows under the hartebeest’s nose. I say sympathetically in this case because the symmetry between human and antelope visually recalls the ontological connectedness Guenther talks about.



Fig. 4.5. Human figures holding arrows interacting with a hartebeest at RSA MEL7, Eastern Cape Province. Traced by myself, digital redrawing by Stephen van den Heever.

This painting strongly suggests that inter-subjective relationships between humans and animals were mediated by techno-magical means during the Later Stone Age. The arrows appear to be ‘taming’ the hartebeest, facilitating their close and quiet interaction. The bow and arrows is eminently appropriate taming technology because, unlike firearms for example, it is silent. The disturbance is even less than a lion or leopard kill, and after the initial flight caused by the reaction of the wounded animal, the herd settles more quickly instead of being driven into new territory (Silberbauer

1965:28). In order to get close enough to attempt a shot, it also demands the hunter has intimate knowledge of animal tracking and behavior. Even before shooting the herd is observed: do they seem nervous and wary or are they relaxed and likely to linger (*ibid.*). The animal to be shot is selected not only for its size but also for its tame temperament.



Fig. 4.6. Large human figure from RSA MEL8, Eastern Cape Province, showing Dowson's original tracing on the left and Blundell's reinterpretation on the right.

Another site that points to the efficacy of poison arrows in taming game is RSA MEL8 (Fig. 4.6.) Originally traced by Thomas Dowson, the surface of the rock shelter is very friable and has flaked quite badly in places. As part of his doctorate thesis, Geoffrey Blundell (2004) reinterpreted the configuration of the largest human figure at the left of painting, placing the silhouette of the face much further down just above the arm. Blundell was concerned with a category of humans he identified as Large-

Headed Significantly Differentiated Figures (LH-SDF): large human and therianthropic figures with elaborately painted heads and faces but lacking in ‘post-cranial’ detail. According to him, these images arose specifically in the area of the Drakensburg known as Nomansland, as people tried to forge a new identity for themselves and navigate the increasingly hybridised and fraught period of mid-Eighteenth Century colonial contact. LH-SDFs are a modified, extended version of Dowson’s (1994) ‘pre-eminent Shaman’ who, in performing potency-invoking tasks such as healing and rainmaking for Bantu-speaking neighbors, was able to amass political clout and individual status. However, recent advancements in dating have shown that SDFs predate European colonial contact, and while Dowson’s and Blundell’s attempts to historicise the San was necessary, their respective approaches to power and identity were not entirely appropriate (cf. Mullen 2018 for a better ontologically situated understanding of SDFs).

It is my view that Dowson’s original tracing is correct. Blundell’s version places the head in an anatomically questionable position, leaving no space for the upper body or shoulders as suggested by the position of the hunting bag and proportions of the figure. More importantly, neither researcher contextualises the figure amongst the surrounding paintings; this is the first time it has been redrawn and presented as such (Fig. 4.7.) Though I should note that RSA MEL8 is a large shelter and this panel represents only part of the site as a whole. The question as to what level we can and should contextualize images versus cherry picking them has been explored (cf. Witelson 2018) and currently remains at the discretion of the researcher. While certain panels seem to naturally and thematically form sections amongst a whole, and some sites seem to be painted at once by a single individual, these remain interpretive assumptions. Equally, different types of research questions require different levels of resolution, meaning ultimately it is difficult to extract the gaze of the researcher from the intentions of the original artists; signaling the creative and imaginative process that any kind of research entails (Willerslev 2011).

By contextualising the large human figure at RSA MEL8 it becomes more informative, enhancing our ability to interpret the painting, and importantly where this thesis is concerned, situates the figure in a hunting context. The figure is exceptional because in the bag slung over his back (his because all the figures have penises) there

Fig. 4.7. Panel from RSA MEL 8, Eastern Cape Province. Strings or thongs emanating from his hand link the largest bow and arrow-laden human figure to the head of the eland. Another of the smaller figures also appears to be holding these thongs. Hunting bags and paraphernalia trail along the strings, which give shape to the ontological bond between hunter and prey. Digital redrawing by Stephen van den Heever.



are over fifty arrows and sixteen bows. The red stripe on the top of his head is also evocative of elands' characteristic red forelocks. On the right of the panel there is an eland with its head down and flicking its tail, indications that it may be dying from the effects of poison. It also has an emanation from its nose, which may indicate that it is bleeding. These two figures are physically linked by two strings that travel from the central figure's outstretched hand to the horns of the eland. Unfortunately, due to the friable rock surface, the entire length of these strings has not been preserved but the connection remains clear. These strings visually demonstrate both the ontological bond between human and eland as well how the hunter, with his abundance of hunting equipment, tames and harnesses the game.

Male by bow? Gender and the hunt

There is one important aspect of San bow hunting that I have not yet addressed, which is that, ethnographically, it is a strictly male activity. Polly Wiessner (1983: 262) describes how, during her research into arrow style and variability, her informants eagerly awaited the slightest drop in hunting success so they could claim other foods in compensation for the animals they failed to kill. Women are expected not to touch hunting equipment, especially arrows, because their femaleness is said to bring a 'poisonous death' to hunting; they weaken the poison which is said to go 'cold' and 'spoil' the endeavor (Marshall 1999: 146). The language used to describe the effects of femaleness suggests a potentially complicated relationship between gender and potency. The Ju/'hoan word *kxwia* is used to mean both 'spoil' and 'to enter a deep trance' (Lewis-Williams 2002:63), a state understood to involve potentially uncontrollable levels of potency. Similarly femaleness is described as 'strong' potency that overcomes and nullifies the potency of the hunters and their equipment (Marshall 1999:146). Men also prefer 'female' grubs (actually a particular species of larvae) for making poison because it is thought to be more toxic (Marshall 1976:149). And as we will see in the next chapter, women consider themselves to be the stronger dancers when it comes to the trance dance.

It also needs to be noted that not all capture of animals as a food-source qualifies as hunting, which is defined by a narrow set of criteria (Cartmill 1993). Activities like fishing, snaring and trapping are not considered hunting endeavors; even women may

pick up tortoises, lizards or snakes while gathering. For the San, true hunting is limited to the killing of large animals with bow and arrow (Parkington 2003:140). This, together with their 'hunter-gatherer' designation, means people often mistake women's gathering work as the logical counterpart to men's hunting activity. In fact hunting is not symbolically opposed to gathering but to women's exclusive reproductive ability (Biesele 1993:41). This is played out in the central rites for each sex after a boy's first kill and a girl's first menstruation. Despite women's overwhelming contribution to the San diet, large-game meat is met with great excitement in contrast to gathered plant-foods because hunting is as much about social reproduction (appeasing kin, procuring potency, initiating dance) as it is about calorific or gastronomic value. This is also why, in the absence of physical features such as breasts or penises, rock art researchers have designated human figures as 'male by bow' (Vinnecombe 1967). And supported ethnographically; the bow is a bawdy euphemism for the penis (Lee 1979:206).

Given that hunting and its associated material culture seem to be highly gendered there are some curious details with regards to ownership of such things. Women may actually own arrows, trade them with men, and become owners of meat themselves (Lee 1979:247). Lee also describes how, despite being ideologically barred from hunting, this was not a point of conflict or resentment women held against men. And while hunting is implicitly male, one does not get the sense it is a jealousy-guarded activity. For example Lee was told of girls who took part in play hunting and of one unique example of a woman who used to hunt small game (Lee 1979:235). Though on the surface it seems San hunting is an undeniably and exclusively male domain, Judith Stevenson (2000:45) reminds us that the notion of gender-specific divisions of labour has roots, 'not in the prehistory of men and women', but in more recent industrialised Western social institutions. Such rigidity is ethnographically challenged. Likewise we cannot presumptively gender certain kinds of archaeological artefacts and activities.

Dowson (2007:58) argues that performativity, not biologically given sex, is the more important determining factor: "If southern African rock art 'tells' us anything about gender, it is that specific notions of male and female based on primary sex features are at best misleading, but more probably entirely irrelevant. What is immediately

discernible is not Western constructs of gender but activity.’ Individuals are defined by their engagement with the world, creating space to negotiate ostensibly fixed roles and attributes. This is further aided by the egalitarian nature of San society, which hesitates to discredit individual experience. Shamans in particular express markedly idiosyncratic accounts of their trance experiences (Dowson 1988:117). Consequently we find numerous idiosyncratic depictions in rock art, suggesting some aspects of San society were not as codified as we might imagine, gender included (*ibid.*). One such painting (Fig. 4.8.), found at RSA UVL1 depicts a human figure with ambiguous sex characteristics; they appear to have both breasts and a penis, and a resplendent set of bow and arrows. The arrows are intricately painted in red and white so that you can clearly see the different sections: point, link-shaft, main shaft andnock. Intersex figures are extremely rare in San rock art, compelling us to contemplate what may have influenced this particular experience and expression. A closer examination of women’s relationships with non-human beings, material substances, and potency may offer an explanation.



Fig. 4.8. Possible intersex figure at RSA UVL1, Eastern Cape Province. Traced by myself, digital redrawing by Stephen van den Heever.

The informant M, whose testimony was discussed in the previous chapter, also describes how eland blood for paint was obtained through a ritualised hunt (see Lewis-Williams 1995:147). The central figure of this ritual was a young girl, who accompanied by a group of hunters, ‘hypnotised’ the eland by pointing an arrow at it. This arrow was anointed with medicine that had been prepared by shamans. The movements of the ‘dazed’ or tamed eland could then be controlled, and it was shepherded to a suitably close place for slaughtering and painting, and presumably feasting and dancing. In rock art it is not uncommon to see human figures pointing arrows or ‘sticks’ at game, presumably to tame them. Lewis-Williams (*ibid.*) notes that M did not specify how old the girl was, but from /Xam accounts of the supernatural power of young maidens, we can imagine she was at the age of menarche. Tellingly, a girl who has just experienced her first menstruation is said to have ‘shot an eland’ (Parkington 2003:144). In many societies the world over, women and menstruation are ambiguously associated with danger and pollution but also power and enchantment, and the San also expressed an iteration of this belief. For example, according to /Xam custom (Bleek 1933:300), young maidens approaching a pond must strew powdered buchu and red haematite over the water to appease it. Failing to do so, or worse, throwing stones at the pond, would anger the water causing the rain-being *!khwa* to transform her and the entire camp into frogs. Clearly, though potentially dangerous and offensive, when controlled by appropriate behaviour and material substances, women’s potency could be powerful indeed, allowing them to tame game and calm rain.

Women also have a unique ontological connection with certain non-human beings, eland in particular. This is made explicit during the female initiation rite known as the Eland Bull Dance, performed during a girl’s first menstruation. The initiate is isolated in the menstrual hut while the older women dance around it, imitating the tail flicking of eland cows in oestrus by flicking up their rear aprons or a mock tail made of ostrich eggshell beads (Lewis-Williams 1990:77; Guenther 2015:291). The men wear imitation eland horns made from branches and mimic the courting behaviour of eland bulls. According to Guenther (1999:176), “so absorbed are the dancers by this symbolically dense and emotionally intense ritual-ludic dance that their performance may actually come close to a transformation experience from human to antelope”. So moving is this ‘near-eland experience’ that it apparently compels the initiate to weep

(Lewis-Williams 1990:78). Once married, men wrap their wives in eland skins obtained from their successful hunting trips (Parkington 2003:164). The skins of large game animals retain their animal essence meaning things made from skins, such as bags and cloaks, have the propensity to transform themselves and their users back into the animals from whence they came. As Parkington (2003:142) says, “the boundary between people and animals is permanently up for negotiation” and a woman enfolded in an eland skin blurred this transformative boundary.

Generally, hunter-gatherer groups are inclined to conflate hunting with sexual intercourse and marriage (Dowson 2007:56), and the San are no exception. As Megan Biesele explains in *Woman like Meat* (1993:2), “a metaphorical equation of women with prey animals and men with their hunters, sometimes delicate and sometimes overt, pervades Ju/’hoan expressive life”. In conversation, it is sometimes difficult to tell to which meat, wife or prey, a man is referring. After the hunt, he would ‘praise the meat’, a double entendre, and enjoy intercourse with his wife (Biesele 1978:935). This association between women and prey is also expressed in Naro early race narrative; a man married to a Quagga woman slowly and begrudgingly realises that what he has married is not a woman but meat, a game animal he subsequently kills, roasts on the fire and eats (Guenther 2015:283). There is also the story of the heroine *G!kon//’amdima* who is pursued by men as prey, killed, cut up, eaten and finally reconstituted as a woman. By her own volition she then transforms into a steenbok so that all people henceforth should have meat (Biesele 1993:2). Likewise in /Xam myth it is not entirely clear why /kaggen created the eland and hartebeest, but they were most beloved by him, and when they were killed and butchered without his permission he was left grieving, thereby establishing the conflict of interests between hunters and /kaggen (Parkington 2003:138). Both hunting and sex are regenerative oppositional acts, consumption follows killing as birth follows intercourse (Ingold 2000:67), in which both sexes must collaborate.

While bow hunting seems to be a paradigmatically male activity, its success entails a collaborative and negotiated effort between men and women. Quite classically, intercourse before hunting is barred across San groups; a good hunter would not eat or sleep with his wife before or during a hunt as this would make the poison on his arrows go cold (Marshall 1976:147; Biesele 1978:943). Men should not even touch

women's aprons lest they become lazy (Marshall 1976:150). /Xam women were not allowed to touch or eat certain parts of animals, such as springbok shoulder blades, as this would cause men to miss their aim (LL.VIII.14.7263'). A man who had shot game did not look at the moon, associated with femaleness, or the 'moon's water' would cool the arrow poison and cure the animal (Bleek & Lloyd 1911:67). Yet, while women's influence can be detrimental to hunting if prescriptions are not followed, their direct knowledge of the environment contributes to hunting success. Women report on spoor and movements of animals they observe while gathering and men collate this with their own observations and knowledge of game movements in their territory (Silberbauer 1965:47). Married couples also exchange gifts including mineral pigments and springbok hides in exchange for poisoned arrows (LL.VIII.14.7272-7273). Hunting success therefore depends on "intimate negotiations within and between households because it demanded particular forms of sexual comportment from marksmen and the women closest to them" (DeLuna 2015:55).

The poisoned arrow is a particularly important artifact because it mediates social relationships and affords behavior, requiring cooperation between men and women, and negotiated decision-making between spouses. As Kathryn de Luna (2015:56) points out, "many scholars argue that cosmologies linking women's sexual lives to technologies usually practiced by men were mechanisms by which men sought to control women's sexuality." However this forgets that women's conduct also held power over the success of technicians who were husbands and lovers (*ibid.*). Dr. Louis Fourie, who as Medical Officer of South West Africa between 1916 and 1928 amassed one of the largest ethnographic collections of Bushman material culture in the world, noted the wife's part in the interrelationship between the hunter and the animal. Only the hunter's wife could wear the bangles he made out of the animal's frontlet skin, and after each menstruation she reintroduced her husband to the game by washing him, cutting him and rubbing his cuts with the skin of an animal from an earlier successful hunt (Viestad 2018:126).

With this in mind, let us return again to the painting at RSA UVL1. It is possible the artist was channeling unique female potency, which when properly controlled was 'strong', highly potent and capable of great, though double-edged, efficacy. There are also a number of elements that allude to the other, less-tangible though very real,

plane of San reality: the world of trance. The way the intersex figure is one-handily shooting the arrow defies the mechanics of the technology. Also their posture, bent forward at the waist with arm back and leg poised, is suggestive of dance. The main figure is shooting at another smaller human figure, also with bow and arrow, who appears to be caught off guard. However this is not to say this painting depicts an instance of conflict. As we will explore in chapter five, bows and arrows are paradigmatically not weapons. To turn them against another human represents the most improper, antisocial behaviour and misuse of the technology. Moreover, although the arrows are painted in hyper-real detail we cannot automatically assume they depict physical arrows. Evoked during trance, material arrows have immaterial counterparts, and it is to these we now turn.

Chapter 5

Traversing domains of reality

The life of the spirit is an inextricable aspect of everyday life among the Kung. To say that what in the West are called 'profane' and 'sacred' or the 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary' are merged in Kung life would obscure the fact that the Kung do not even categorise their experience in such a dualistic fashion in the first place. Such things are constantly and playfully mingled. 'Religion' as a separate enterprise does not exist; it is simply their way of living.

(Katz 1982:28)

Dancing with arrows

I began the previous chapter with hunting, what we would typically classify as mundane activity, because recent hermeneutic approaches tend to interpret such paintings by looking at how they relate to the world of dance and trance; how game bleeds from the nose like a shaman, who controlled the movement of game. While these are important observations they can give the impression of 'shoehorning' the shamanistic model onto paintings that imprecisely relate to trance and dance. They also overlook the fact that hunting practice, a day-to-day task whose participation was expected of every man, was itself infused with magic and held the same transformative potential as trance. Likewise, the world of trance and dance though ostensibly esoteric was oriented towards tangible and corporeal results, and in many respects was modelled off of 'mundane' activity and technology. Poison arrows, as we have seen, were outward-facing material extensions of San personhood, but this is only one side of the coin. Their enchanted materiality also influenced how people conceived of what ontological theory calls 'interiority' or internal essence; sometimes equated to spirit or soul.

As already discussed, a person's life force is thought of in terms of 'wind'. Intentional beings across the spectrum, from animals to spirits to rain, were animated by wind, which could traverse between persons, wafting, floating and penetrating beings, carrying information about a person's whereabouts, identity and designs, and even causing afflictions. This vaporous force is given form in the shape of arrows, salient material culture that are conspicuously 'windy' things themselves. Hunting of course involves intimate knowledge of the wind's changing direction and being vigilant of one's own wind. The airborne nature of arrows mean they travel along and like the wind. Ultimately aiming to penetrate another body, the effects of poison go to work internally, circulating through the afflicted until they are overcome. The manifestation of internal wind in objectified arrow form demonstrates the influence technology has in rendering ontology. The material world of things provides a template for articulating the inner immaterial world of beings.

Just as physical arrows are vehicles for poison, immaterial arrows are vehicles, or 'substantiated expressions' of, potency (Low 2014:170). Potency, *n/om* for the Ju/'hoansi, has been translated as medicine because of its association with sickness and healing, but as Richard Katz (1982:93-4) notes, this translation is far too narrow. Potency is better understood as energy or electricity that flows through and between humans, and more widely between things in the environment. All persons have access to potency; no one can possess it exclusively nor control it completely (*ibid.*). In rock art literature, potency is typically described as 'supernatural', however with shifting theoretical perspectives this is increasingly problematic. Chris Low (2007, 2017) reminds us that potency is less of a spiritual substance than an efficacious phenomenon people work with in pragmatic ways. In essence, potency was an ever-present invisible energy that in certain contexts was substantiated, harnessed and used to produce real, corporeally experienced, consequences. Crucially, as we will discuss below, internal arrows gave form to potency and allow people to work with it towards efficacious ends in their everyday lives (Low 2014:170).

Though vital and productive, potency is also ambiguous; its effects can be both benevolent and malignant (Katz 1982:93). It is implicated in particularly 'strong' things such as medicine, sorcery, power and menstruation, with the latter accounting for the ambiguous and potentially dangerous ilk of women. Menstruating women

exert an especially weakening influence on hunting (Marshall 1976:97) and menstrual blood has a wasting effect on men (Heinz 1978:157). Just as women can ‘bring death’ to hunting endeavours, the Ju/’hoansi also call potency a ‘death thing’ or a ‘fight’, expressions for anything strong or dangerous (Marshall 1969). Similarly, the /Xam used the word /a to describe a fight or an extreme, potentially dangerous concentration of potency (Lewis-Williams 2002:126). Potency is also associated with boiling, energy transfer and activation made manifest, and other things that are said to boil like meat, water, ripe plants and again menstruating women (Katz 1982:95). Interestingly, all these boiling things are also linked to femaleness. This suggests the reproductive though potentially hazardous power of women was aligned with the productive though potentially dangerous power of potency.

The natural connection between women and potency is instrumental to the trance dance. Usually the women sit on the ground beside a fire and clap and sing while the men dance, though no one is excluded from dancing and in some groups there may be as many women as men (Bieseke 1978:165). According to an informant of Bradford Keeney (2003:121), anthropologist cum spiritual healer *à la* Carlos Castaneda, “women like to dance longer than men. The men say, ‘We’re tired’, but we say, ‘No, we have more energy to continue’. Our secret is that we are stronger than the men. We like to dance all night.” In some places special women’s dances have even developed (Katz *et al.* 1993), and the main dance performed over a vast area of the Kalahari, known as the giraffe dance, was created by a woman called Old Beh in the mid-twentieth century. (Bieseke 1978:162). Inspired by the beat of giraffe hooves against a thundering rainstorm, this medicine song is particularly powerful and effective, and largely replaced the earlier gemsbok dance. This individual instance aside, it is women’s role to provide the music for dance. This music is a fundamental means of transcendence, enabling those who dance to achieve an altered state of consciousness (Bieseke 1978:166-7). According to the blind shaman Kua Dwa, “when the women sing, I can see everything” (Katz 1982:216). Importantly, this music also provides protection for those in trance as they experience out-of-body travel or encounter malevolent spirits of the dead. Curers readily acknowledge their ‘absolute dependence upon the singers’ (Bieseke 1978:168-9) who facilitate trance and offer much needed magical protection to the dancers.

From the dancers' perspective, the practice of trance entails accessing and activating potency. They do this by rhythmically dancing around the women, focusing on the complex clapping rhythms, to which they add the swishing of dance rattles worn around their calves. Intense concentration on the medicine songs and the relentless dancing heats potency in the dancers stomach, which boils up their spine and eventually explodes from a spot at the top of their head or behind their neck, resulting in an altered state of consciousness (Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2004:89-90).

Outwardly unconscious, people in this condition are in danger because their spirit has left their body and unless the cataleptic dancer is carefully attended to it may not return (*ibid.*). They are moved away from the fire and rubbed vigorously with sweat, which is another medium for potency (Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2004:89-90).

Although not directly observed in the Kalahari, shamans in trance are said to bleed from the nose. The /Xam also thought the smell of this nasal blood had curative and protective properties and would rub it on patients (*ibid.*). Nasal haemorrhages are commonly depicted in rock art across a variety of different beings. Lewis-Williams (1981) links bleeding shamans with dying game who, afflicted by poison, also emanate blood.

Trance can be a harrowing and traumatic experience; practitioners face the feeling of being drained of their life force, described as akin to dying (Keeney 2003:32).

According to Kua Dwa (Katz 1982:215), "it is this very death that makes you fear *n/om*. Because if this *n/om* goes into you, you can die. An enormous projectile is in your body." It follows logically that, just as physical arrows convey poison, potency is circulated around, in and out of the body by invisible arrows. Objectified wind-essence suffused with potency, these arrows enter the body through the belly and when activated by medicine songs they heat up, a bodily sensation experienced as 'a pointed something' in your backbone, tingling, and tightness in the belly (Katz 1982:42; Keeney 2003:33). In *Art and Agency* Gell (1998:253) makes the observation that many traditional societies locate mind and intention in the viscera. We have already seen how rumen was the site of /Xam identity, scent or essence. This is illustrated in an early race narrative where a wildebeest attempts to thwart the hunting endeavours of a striped mouse by replacing the mouse's bowstring with his own intestines (Lewis-Williams 2013:245-246). Likewise, Kalahari San say arrows reside in the spleen or intestines (Keeney 2003). As the potency-laden arrows become hotter

and hotter they boil and climb upwards, exiting from the top of the head as steam. The arrows then cool, condense and fall to the ground, upon which they reenter through the feet and the process begins again. Boiling arrows enable shamans to ‘return to the time and place where humans and animals belonged together’ (Keeney 2003: 53), traversing planes of reality through trance.

Becoming a skilled shaman is no easy task; the journey to trance is fraught with fear, difficulty and danger. A story of a trance journey was related to Megan Bieseke by K"xau, a !Kung man. He was the protector of a young man and gave him *n/om*. They travelled together, in trance, to the great God who shot arrows into the young man: "Arrows about this long (K"xau makes the motion of removing arrows from an invisible quiver on his back. They are about five inches long). They smell... They enter his diaphragm and pierce right through to his backbone. When god has shot him the arrow lodges there near his backbone... and moves along it... inside his body. My friend, that's what it does" (Bieseke 1979:62). To aid students of the dance, more experienced healers fire arrows of potency into their stomachs and sides “until your abdomen is like a pincushion with arrows sticking out in all directions” (*Kau Dua* in Katz 1982:214-215). They then rub their hands on the students’ abdomen to work the arrows, condensed as sweat, into the body. Healers may also point or snap their fingers to shoot arrows at other dancers, transmitting potency from person to person (Katz 1982: 46-49; Keeney 2003: 32). Leanne George (2013) has studied these gestures in rock paintings and argues that finger pointing and pointing with bows and arrows form part of the same conceptual phenomenon of potency transfer. Bearing all this in mind, the intersex painting at RSA UVL1 could be interpreted as a shaman shooting potency at a supplicant in need of assistance. Such paintings of figures dancing with arrows provide evidence that people in the past may have similarly conceived of internal life force and substantiated potency in this form.

A return to the notion of enchanted materiality provides another level at which arrows are readily associated with potency and trance. The *Boophane disticha* plant, distributed across southern and east Africa, is a well known ingredient in arrow poison. *B. disticha* also happens to have medicinal uses; in ethnobotany the dry bulb scales are commonly applied topically to abscesses, burns, septic wounds and circumcisions in the belief that the plant is antiseptic (van Wyk & Gericke 2000:156 in Pearce

2008). Even more significantly, ingested decoctions of the bulb scales induce visual hallucinations, which are sometimes used for divination (van Wyk *et al.* 1997:60 in Pearce 2008). The Ju/'hoansi did, until recently (Winkelman & Dobkin de Rios 1989), use a plant called /gaise !noru !noru (*Ferraria glutinosa*) as an hallucinogen in trance dances, particularly to help initiates achieve altered states of consciousness (Katz 1982:281-294; Marshall 1999:52). Although there is no ethnographic evidence for *B. disticha* use in San trance or healing, we cannot discount the possibility people exploited these properties in the past. Supposing this is the case, poison arrows would have a very salient, substantive link to trance and potency. The preparation of the decoction would also account for the association between boiling and altered states of consciousness we still find today. Archeologically *B. disticha* leaves were used to line some LSA burials (Binneman 1999; Pearce 2008:150-1) and it is tempting to suppose people may have made a material comparison between death in trance and death ultimately.



Fig. 5.1. Flowering *Boophane disticha* plant

Fig. 5.2. RSA MEL6, Eastern
Cape Province, suggests a past
link between poison arrows,
plant flora and trance.
Redrawing courtesy of RARI.



One panel at a rock art site RSA MEL6 (Fig. 5.2.) suggests a past link between poison arrows, plant flora and trance. In this painting a central male figure is surrounded by clapping women along with a diverse array of material culture including tasselled and beaded bags, weighted digging sticks, and elaborate arrows. There is also an arrow in the bag slung over the central figure's back. Others have suggested that this is a divining switch (Blundell 2004:107) or a flywhisk (Mullen 2018:87), however I think an argument can be made for an arrow. Below and in front of the central figure there are several matching objects comprised of a tapered point, a small middle 'collar', a main section and an unusually distinctive end. Though unusual, their well-defined sharp termination and multi-section configuration is certainly reminiscent of segmented arrow construction. Interestingly, their unique tufted ends also strongly resemble the firework burst of *B. disticha* flowers in full bloom (Fig. 5.1.)

These arrows could be transformative, hybrid objects, part-artefact and part-flora from which their efficacy is derived. The idea that objects retain the essence of their base materials and have the potential to transform back to their original form is of course not radical in San thought or in rock art where hunting bags are sometimes painted with antelope heads. Most curiously, among the bottom grouping of arrows and digging sticks there appears to be a leafed plant of some kind. Paintings of any type of vegetation are rare in the Drakensberg, so although it may be a reach, the plant, surrounded by arrows, suggests a meaningful correlation could be at play.

Just as the hunting ground is rife with ontological flux and transformation, so too is the world of trance. As Guenther (2015:300) says, "the trance dance is the most dramatic occasion for myth-world intersection." Transcending self, space and time, the strongest experience takes place when dancers turn into one of these animals or ancestors (Keeney 2003:53). Some of the most captivating paintings depict instances of transformation, such as the other panel at RSA MEL6 (Fig. 5.3.) Though slightly separated from the aforementioned panel, both appear to have been painted at the same time and with the same pigment which includes a distinctive luminous orange. In this grouping there are a number of therianthropic, transhuman-beings. Wrapped in animal skins striped and spotted with pigment, it is difficult to discern where their cloaks stop and their bodies begin; the left-most quadrupedal figure has a tail, while the right-most figure has cloven front hooves, though both retain human legs. Indeed,



Fig. 5.3. Therianthropes at RSA MEL6, Eastern Cape Province. Redrawing courtesy of RARI.

the legs of all the beings are the strongest indication of latent humanness in amongst the milieu of tails, snouts, horns, tusks, serpent bodies and antelope ears. One of the transhumans, who seems to have a snake-like tail, is split between a step in the rock surface, suggesting they are traveling below ground into another level of the cosmos. There is also one definitely human figure in possession of one of the distinctive tufted arrows. Taken together, both panels at RSA MEL6 relate to trance in terms of the transformative materials and processes depicted.

Arrows of affliction

Ultimately, the trance dance is oriented toward ensuring the collective health and wellbeing of the community. It is a cooperative effort to banish misfortune and the united contribution of every group member contributes to its 'psychic and emotional efficacy' (Bieseke 1978:169). Translations such as 'curing dance', 'medicine songs', 'healers' and 'doctors', convey the impression that the dance is used to treat specific ailments. While they sometimes are performed to combat pressing illness or shared anxiety, most often they are spontaneous and begin as fun (*ibid.*). The San know that prevention is better than cure, and the dance is best understood as a democratic activity that maintains the happiness and welfare of the group, rather than an exceptional occult rite. This is achieved by attending to the state of peoples' spirit; their life force rendered as invisible internal arrows. Every person needs to have their arrows heated up and circulated; if they sit still too long in the body they stagnate and cause sickness (Keeney 2003:34). Enlivenment and energy, or activated potency, is a tonic.

The movement of dance in combination with music is therapeutic; it provides the impetus for boiling arrows. Through trance, shamans are able to circulate and refresh their own arrows. Those who are unable to achieve transcendence rely on shamans to remove old 'dirty' arrows from their body and replace them with new 'clean' arrows (*ibid.*). The curer lays their hands on the person to pull the dirty arrows into their own body. Then 'the curer works himself to an apex of excitement, at which point his entire body gives a violent shrug directed towards expelling the arrows through his upper back. At the same moment he utters a characteristic curing shriek' (Bieseke 1978:168). The /Xam also practiced an iteration of this 'soul cleansing': "Then he

takes out harm's things from another person. They call them bits of wood for the things are like sticks" (Bleek 1935:3). Curers all have unique ways of giving arrows. Some lightly flutter their hands over the receiver's stomach and others grasp onto their back and shoulders and move them up and down. Much like the individualism inherent in material arrows, there are as many ways of giving arrows as there are shamans (Keeney 2003:52). Mirroring *hxaro* exchange, shamans also trade internal arrows between distant villages (*ibid.*), dispersing potency around the larger San community.

While healers are busy firing arrows into dance initiates and renewing other's internal store of arrows they must also defend the group from malevolent arrow attacks. Spirits of the dead are primarily bearers of sickness and misfortune (Katz 1982:29). In rock art they are depicted with gnarled wasted bodies and clawed nails, like those at RSA MEL6. They lurk in the darkness at the edge of the dance and shoot arrows of sickness at the living. They can also steal peoples' arrows, a cause of weakness and waning life force (Keeney 2003:33). Shamans in altered states have a heightened sense of perception; with 'new eyes' they can visualise the beings of the spirit world (*ibid.*). "It's people like myself who can see these creatures and tell them, 'Get out! Get out of here! Beat it!' Those who can't see these creatures just get stuck by their arrows" (*Kua Dua* in Katz 1982:215). Luckily shamans also have enhanced olfactory abilities and can sniff out sickness caused by unwelcome foreign identities lodged in infected bodies (McGranaghan 2015:277). /Xam healers would rub their 'cold' smelling nasal blood onto patients (*ibid.*). Powdered fragrant plant medicines, stored in a tortoise shell, are also curative. Healers would place a smouldering coal into the mixture and waft the smoke towards the patient (Marshall 1969). Presumably internalising the strong scent exorcised the malignant contagion.

However, San shamans are not always benevolent individuals and some have the ability to shoot dirty arrows of sickness into people (Bleek 1935:29; Keeney 2003:34). These arrows also have material counterparts. A number of museum collections include sets of miniature bows and arrows, some with thorns as arrows and others with scaled-down reed arrows (Deacon 1993:15). These have been referred to as 'love bows' presumably because their diminutive size would suit Cupid. Late nineteenth and early twentieth century colonial settlers to the Kalahari called them

‘Bushmen revolvers’ (Guenther 2005:103) which better describes their use in magically transmitting disease and ‘poisoning’ their intended victim. A medicine man who wanted to destroy another would shoot the opponent’s kaross with one of the miniature arrows. Although the arrow would fall harmlessly to the ground the victim would die of magic (Bleek 1928: 28). In paintings people are often in possession of flywhisks. These are used to flick away arrows of sickness and malice from spirits of the dead and evil shamans.

Humans, living or dead, are not the only agents that owned arrows of sickness. According to the /Xam, springbok also possess invisible magic arrows, therefore demanding ‘nice’, respectful behaviour from humans. According to //Han=kass'o: “For the springbok is wont to get into our flesh, and we become ill... Therefore, we do not play tricks on the springbok’s bones... the springbok also posses things which are magic sticks; if they stand in us, we, being pierced, fall dead” (Bleek & Lloyd 1911:177-179). A painting at RSA KOF2 (Fig. 5.4.) depicts a prone male figure with projectile-like lines radiating from his body, evocative of the arrows of sickness described as those pulled from peoples’ bodies by shamans. He has a hunting bag and bow with him and is wearing the antelope-eared cap typical of owners of game (Challis 2005), which facilitated ontological connection and control over game. Sven Ouzman (1998:7) describes this figure as a ‘wounded’ game shaman.



Fig. 5.4. The ‘wounded’ game shaman at RSA KOF2, Free State.
Redrawing at the National Museum.

The trance dance was undoubtedly the epicentre of San social life, where time and space was collapsed, and productive forces renewed people from the inside out. The emphasis hermeneutic theory puts on the dance is certainly well founded. However, as this discussion hopefully by now made clear, the intangible world of trance was iterated in terms of the material and technological world, not the other way around. The association between hunting and ‘spiritual’ action was made explicit (McGranaghan 2012:203). ‘Shooting’ and its material culture provided referents used extensively in connection with the work of shamans and the agentive substances with which they engaged. As McGranaghan (2012:204) points out, in mediating theories of disease and theories about other forms of violent death, hunters and shamans were broadly equivalent. From the standpoint of their prey, hunters represented a species of anti-social shaman who shot deadly poisoned arrows, mirroring the relationship between humans and anti-social agents (*ibid.*).

Rainmaking: where taming and trance collide

Antagonistic spirits of the dead are also said to be ‘men who are with the rain’ (Bleek 1933:304-305) and can withhold this vital resource from the living. As is the case with hunting, when pressed by researchers /Xam and Kalahari San informants say they know rain is a natural phenomenon (Lewis-Williams 1981:104). But just because something is a pragmatic matter of survival does not mean it will not be embellished upon with what we might consider the stuff of myth and magic. If anything, essential elements of the ‘natural’ world that resist human control are readily conferred agency and ontological identity. This gives people an opportunity to negotiate terms of a relationship, and accounts for capriciousness when things defy expectations, as they are wont to do. A host of details explored below indicate rain is conceived of as such. Moreover, any residual doubt that hunting provided a template for shamanic practice is assuaged by an analysis of rainmaking.

Rain is rendered corporeally in San thought; wispy clouds are the rain’s hairs, blown together by wind they form its hardened body. Mist is its breath and it moves across the landscape on legs formed by rolling columns of rain (Bleek 1993:310-311). The rain itself is thought to be the blood and milk of a rain animal. People also distinguish

between male and female rain. Male rain is characterised by thunderous, unproductive storms while female rain is gentle and soaking (*ibid.*). Like all corporeal beings, rain leaves behind spoor. Much like a game warden might teach students how to identify the tracks of animals, the Ju/'hoansi made imitation rain prints in the sand for the Marshalls: “with all five fingers held stiffly and plunged deeply into the sand to make big holes” for male rain, and “by smoothing out a place in the sand and covering it closely with tiny dots” for female rain (Marshall 1957:232).

We have already seen how ontological identity and personhood is defined by odour and wind. Importantly, rain has its own distinctive scent that wafts from afar. In comparison to other animals, humans generally have weak olfactory abilities.

However one scent humans are particularly adept at sensing is that of the rain. When rain hits the ground it disturbs decomposing bacteria and microbes in the soil, creating an aerosol (Joung *et al.* 2015). These microbes produce the chemical geosmin, which humans can smell at a level of five parts per trillion. For comparison's sake, sharks smell blood in water at one part per million, meaning humans are highly attuned to the scent of rain. In Western science this smell is called petrichor (Bear & Thomas 1964). Oils released by vegetation during dry periods contribute to its earthy profile (*ibid.*). Lightning strikes can also produce the sharp smell of ozone, which some people sense before a storm arrives. Thus the smell of rain is dependent on a number of factors: the season, the environment where the storm is located, the extent of the proceeding drought, and the type of storm. The implication of this is that, just as differently blowing winds herald different kinds of rain, rain could be speciated. As we will see, depictions of rain animals in rock art adhere to a level of conformity, frequently taking the shape of hippopotamus-like creatures, but also have unique features.

The odorous nature of rain also sets it in an unfamiliar relationship to humans. Just as animals are endowed with the ‘supra-human’ ability to smell approaching hunters (McGranaghan 2012:134), so too can humans smell impending rain. Its strong smell corresponds to strong, potentially dangerous potency that must either be mitigated by ‘civilians’ or harnessed by a rain shaman. ‘Fumigating’ odours disseminated in wafting smoke were one way to combat dangerous weather. The /Xam used the pungent smell of burning springbok horns to disperse dark threatening rain clouds

(LL.VIII.23.8031). People fortunate enough to have good *n!ao* could also affect the weather by burning their hair in the fire: A Ju/'hoan woman told Megan Bieseke (1993:108) that if she were to burn her hair the sun would become so hot it kills people while her husband's hair brought rain. The odour of new maidens attracted *!khwa*'s attention and ire, both in Early-Race narratives (LL.V.2.3869) and contemporary practice (McGranaghan 2012:137). Aromatic buchu was used to counter the negative effects of her scent and placate *!khwa*.

The ontological link between young women and the rain is salient; both are harbingers of fertility and fecundity. A new maiden was said to 'have the rain's magic power' because of her fresh procreative ability (Dia!kwain in Lewis-Williams 1981:52). Ironically menstrual blood was a 'death thing', indicating the absolute strength of a new maiden's potency, and her behavior had to be appropriately calming lest her connection with the rain cause havoc. For example she should not eat the meat of things 'the rain owns', such as tortoises, or the rain would become wrathful and thundering (*ibid.*: 303). She could also 'curse' people by snapping her fingers, causing *!khwa* to 'shoot' lightning at them (Bleek 1933:287). Stripes of red pigment painted over the body could assuage *!khwa*'s anger and convert his attention into a more benign (and possibly beneficial) interest (McGranaghan 2012:424). Again we find the productivity of men's endeavors was tied to the correct performance and cooperation of fertile women in encouraging gentle rain. The deeply saturating, female summer rain corresponds with the greening of the land and aggregation of game. In the southern Drakensberg sourveld gives way to sweet grass and large herds of eland would move up to the new grazing seasonally. (Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2004:138). In the Kalahari, people also coalesce during these more plentiful times. Extended social networks come together around water pans to renew exchange relationships, cement kinship ties and participate in large trance dances (*ibid.*). Abundant fresh rain energises the environment and productive potency flows readily around communities.

It comes as no surprise that the rain exerts its influence over hunting activities. The vaporising effects of the sun after several days of rain mean environmental odours become particularly poignant. "The sun 'pulls up' the 'wet' and the smell 'goes between the wet' and is carried on the wind" so that on such days even a man can

smell game if the wind is right (Heinz 1978:156). However before this time, during the first blazing hot months of summer in the Kalahari, hunting drops sharply (Silberbauer 1956:29). Fresh poison is no longer available and old stock has been exhausted or lost its virulence. Conveniently, large buck give birth in these months and the pause in hunting affords them relative peace (*ibid.*). Crucially, the strength of arrow poison is dependent on a suitably rainy wet-season; in bad years it is less potent. (Guenther 2005:131). Fig. 5.5. depicts a large rain cow at RSA FRH1 whose body encompasses several buck and two human figures surrounded by numerous flying arrows, which also emanate from the rain cow itself. The arrangement of the arrows is reminiscent of other similarly painted emanations, possibly blood or milk or potency, which fall from cut rain animals as rain. This panel is suggestive of the fecundity of the rain and its leverage over game availability, hunting and arrow potency.

Controlling rain was not left entirely up to new maidens or people with positive *n!ow*. Indeed their influence can be interpreted more as mitigating against *!khwa*'s negative potential. Because laypeople feared angry rain bulls they would continually burn fires that likewise dispersed beneficial rain and was a source of dispute between laypeople and rainmakers (Bleek 1993:309-310). By contrast, rain shamans, *!khwa-ka !gi:ten* or owners of rain were responsible for actively pursuing and taming their quarry. When rain was desired or needed they would go by night, accompanied by a group of willing assistants or apprentices, to a waterhole where a water cow was known to live. Much like hippopotamuses, they are thought to be nocturnal, leaving their pools to graze at night, and some paintings of rain animals closely resemble hippos. According to */Han#kass'o* (Bleek 1874:141) they then 'charm' the animal, and attach a rope to its nose. The rain shaman then leads it "over as large a tract of country as they can, in order that the rain should extend as far as possible... wherever this animal goes, rain will fall" (*ibid.*). *//Kabbo* describes how the party led it up to a mountain top and at the summit "cut a she-rain which has milk. I will milk her, then she will rain softly on the ground... I will cut her, by cutting her I will let the rain's blood flow out, so that it runs along the ground" (Bleek 1933:309).

The success of the mission hinged on the efficacious taming of the rain animal through the usual material means. The leather thong used to harness the beast was

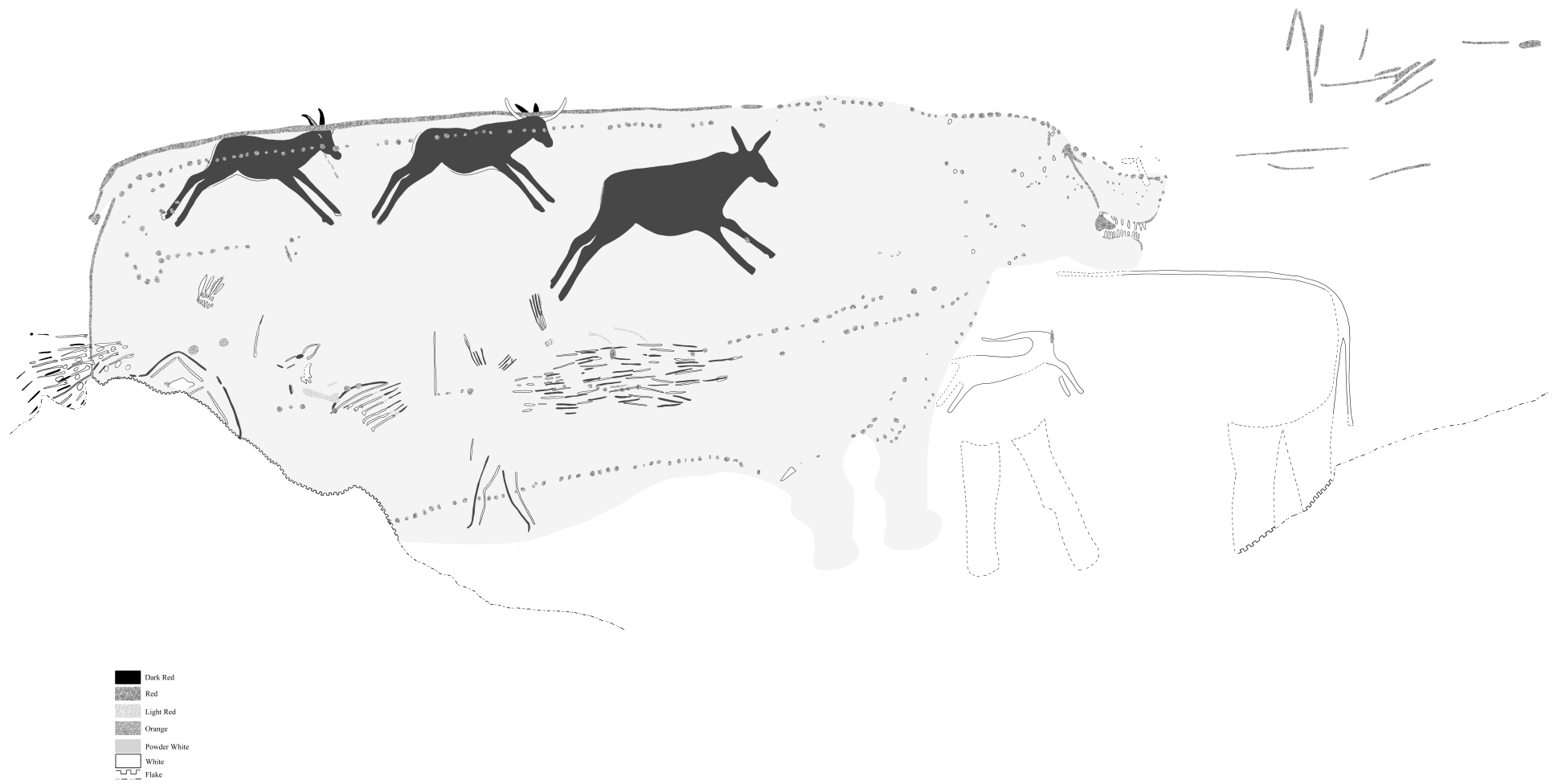


Fig. 5.5. A large rain cow at RSA FRH1, Eastern Cape Province, encompasses buck and two human figures whose arrows resemble emanations often found in association with rain animals thought to be potency, milk or blood. Traced by myself, digital redrawing by Stephen van den Heever.

rubbed with fragrant buchu. Dia!kwain recounted an instance when the thong broke and the man responsible, presumably a novice rain shaman, was advised that if the bull had smelt buchu “it would have been calm and gone quietly without struggling” (Bleek 1933: 303). Fig. 5.6. from RSA FRH2 shows a painting of a rain animal being tamed by reins held by a male figure. The strokes emanating from the animal indicate rain, though they are just as likely to also indicate potency and in this context the two substances are quite interchangeable. Qing alluded to the role of trance in rainmaking when he explained a similar painting at Mangolong near Sehonghong in Lesotho, and the human figures in it as “people spoilt by the dance, because their noses bleed” (Orpen 1874:10).



Fig. 5.6. Harnessing a rain animal at RSA FRH2, Eastern Cape Province. Traced by Kiah Johnson, digital redrawing by Stephen van den Heever.

Rock art also suggests arrows were used as powerful taming instruments. The painting at site RSA LTS1 (Fig. 5.7.) depicts a spectacularly fearsome rain bull being wrangled by an ensemble of over thirty human figures. The bull, harnessed by a thong, is being led by a small ‘bobble-headed’ figure who holds forth a taming charm that resembles the poison applicators from the previous chapter. What is distinctive and exceptional about the painting at this site is the arrows; each figure grasps a



bundle of up to eight in one hand and the arrows themselves are painted in up to four colours and seven individual segments. While maintaining the segmented conformity of physical arrows, this configuration is elaborated on to a significant degree. This suggests they may not have had direct material counterparts and represent a magical extension of hunting technology which is already geared towards taming. This is supported by the fact that none of the figures are actually shooting; there are no arrows in flight directed towards or penetrating the rain bull. The men point and brandish their arrows but they do not fire.

This is an important detail that taken together with /Xam early race narrative suggests rain animals were not in the prey category for humans. /Han=kasso's mother told him a tale where a man once hunted the rain (Lewis-Williams 2000:222-223). The rain was in the form of an eland, which the man shot and tracked accordingly. The people that had come with him to butcher the stricken rain "cut up the rain. They kept cutting off meat. They kept putting it to roast, but the meat kept vanishing, being burnt up in the fire." When all the meat had evaporated the people determined "it is an eland whose meat we do not eat." Unfortunately the line of transgression had already been crossed and as they were preparing to leave the rain raged around them and turned them into frogs. The San recognise the ultimate potency of rain and its essential contribution to life; 'for the San, rain is everything (Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2004:38). To eat a rain animal or the things it owns (cobras, puffadders and tortoises according to the /Xam) was an affront to its power and place in the universe and consequently evoked its wrath. Therefore, rain animals must be nicely tamed and never shot, for this would amount to grossly antisocial behavior.

This narrative also draws attention to the highly transformative, ontologically unstable nature of rain as an entity. In myth rain appears in the guise of elands or as *!kwa*, who, in the form of violent storms, punishes people for contravening social protocol. Near waterholes at night it takes the form of quadrupedal rain animals. Transported to the sky these exist as corporeal meteorological phenomenon, which are again sometimes associated with *!kwa*, who, like */kaggen*, traverses space-time and molests contemporary humans. It also falls from the sky as 'liquid rain', its elemental form (Bleek 1933:304). From Qing's (Orpen 1874:10) statement, one of the only in situ explanations of rock art from a San perspective (Challis *et al.* 2013), we can ascertain

that snakes are also rain animals. This accords with the status of cobras and puffadders as the 'rain's meat', potent transformations of body that the San 'fear greatly' (Bleek 1933:303). Snakes are saliently associated with the rain. Because they bask on the ground after rain their prominence coincides with the coming of the rainy season and their iridescent scales are reminiscent of rainbows (Mallen 2004:6). The transformative potential of rain correlates to its unrivaled potency. In the process of taming rain animals, shamans must also undergo a degree of transformation. This creates an ontological bond with rain, affording the shaman a degree of control and echoing the connection that takes place between game and hunters.

Returning back to the paintings at RSA LTS1, there are three principal shamans that all share characteristics with the antagonistic rain bull. /Han=kass'o indicated that two of the six human figures in the Mangolong paintings are 'sorcerers' suggesting, much like the trance dance, it was a collective undertaking between shamans and supporters. Dowson (1994) has identified some processional groups of men as being 'consortia of shamans', where the shamans are distinguished from laypeople by certain characteristics such as elaborate decoration or dress. But much like hunting, rainmaking activities took place away from camp, possibly in high rock shelters close to the sky, and some argue this guarded knowledge allowed rainmakers to assume a degree of prominence in San society (Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2004a, 2004b). However if the painting at RSA LTS1 is anything to go by, taming angry rain bulls required a lot of material- and man-power in comparison to more placid rain cows. Corresponding to the 'speciation' of winds, its possible that different rain animals were associated with different locations on the landscape. And much like hunters shared their *n!ow* sense with certain animals, rainmakers had special relationships with either destructive or gentle rain.

At RSA LTS1 the connection between the rain shamans and the rain bull is manifested in the bodily transformation, similar to the presentiments hunters share with game. The large centre human figure most strongly resembles the rain bull; the single tusk on his forehead mimics the rain's tusk and the two pointed streamers at the back of his head resemble the rain's two horns. His feet, clawed like a feline predator, and bleeding nose are a result of deep trance. He appears to be collecting nasal blood in his hand; perhaps a 'cooling' offering to the rain bull. The large figure in closest

contact with the rain is doubled over. Their connection is made explicit by two strings running between him and the beast. Painted as flecks and lines, this shaman is discharging potency from his head that mirrors the potency or rain falling from the bull's cuts. These bodily transformations and physical connections are indications of the ritually induced ontological relatedness between rain shamans and the rain. As with hunting practice, these experiential connections are beneficial to the outcome of the endeavour. At the left of the panel there are seated figures looking from afar. Dia!kwain described how people in the camp would watch the sky and eventually saw the rain clouds roll in signaling "the medicine men really seem to have their hands upon the rain bull" (Bleek 133:337).

With regards to paintings of arrows of potency Garlake (1995:144) claims, "The arrow with the completely unrealistic head in a stereotyped form becomes the arrow of potency and its appearance in paint becomes a widespread, striking, immediately legible means of denoting potency. However, the evidence at RSA LTS1 suggests quite the opposite. Eastwood (1999:21) describes how depictions of rows of men holding arrows are a recurrent theme in the rock paintings of the Northern Province. He argues that the placement and arrangement of these arrows is telling; they are often held in bunches at the waist of bent-forward figures. Dancers double over during the trance dance from abdominal pain caused by boiling potency, and these arrows seem to be visually referencing this experience. At RSA LTS1 the figures also hold bundles of arrows so that they splay out from behind the neck or head, resembling exploding potency. Even though these arrows are hyper-real renderings, not 'stereotyped forms', they still denote potency. If anything, their detail and the attention paid to rendering their complex multi-segmented construction situates rainmaking as a technical procedure, more akin to 'practical' activities like hunting than ritual or occult practice.

Technique and ritual, profane and sacred, do not denote types of action but aspects of almost any kind of action (Gibson 1998:165). Just as hunters used arrows to procure potency for the community, healers and rainmakers used them to accomplish their work, which was also oriented towards tangible results and resources acquisition. Arrows, material or immaterial, were instrumental across all arenas of San practice,

and they mediated relationships with all manners of beings, acting as powerful indexes of San personhood.

Chapter 6

Identity, Contact, and Conflict

Emblemic Arrows

As components of enchanted technology, arrows acted as agentive extensions and expressions of San personhood. Ubiquitous ephemeral tools, poisoned arrows were instrumental in procuring socially important meat, a vital source of potency. By virtue of their potent material qualities and ‘windy’ operative technique, arrows saliently gave form to people’s inner life force. They substantiated immaterial potency and allowed people to work with it towards advantageous ends, such as in trance undertakings, healing and rainmaking. “Socially, politically and economically, San arrows have greater import than any other single San artifact” (Wiessner 1983:261). Given the prominence of arrows in San practice and thought it seems likely they would become formalised markers of identity. From an ontological perspective, physical arrows situated humans in a network of relations with non-human entities. They were beacons of humanness that radiated outward from the source and helped maintain perspective during instances of ontological blurring; they indexed San personhood. But of course the San were not the only humans in the world; arrows also operated at different levels of identification.

We have already seen how individuals would etch designs into their arrows to distinguish them from others. This practice involved the classic anthropological interplay between individual expression and group ascription. Marks were distinctive enough to be identifiable but similar enough to signify important relations and relatives. Accordingly, in her systematic survey of Kalahari San arrows, Wiessner (1983:257-258) found them to contain both ‘assertive’ and ‘emblemic’ aspects of style; assertive relating to personal statements of identity and emblemic, after Wobst (1977), indicating ‘formal variation in material culture that has a distinct referent and transmits a clear message to a defined target’. In essence emblems are able to crystallise a group of people into an explicit material or visual expression.

Marshall describes how when making metal arrow heads “each man adopts a style in proportioning the little triangles and shaping the barbs which the !Kung call ‘ears’” (Marshall 1976:146). Upon closer inspection, Wiessner found that the variation in head shape is actually emblematic; it marked differences between language groups (!Kung, G/wi and !Xõ) and in some cases differentiated between dialect groups and band clusters. It was important for arrows to mark group identity because of the centrality of meat sharing in solidifying socioeconomic ties, especially where hunting grounds may have overlapped or stricken game wandered into different territory. John Marshall’s (1974) film *The Meat Fight* documents a dispute over the ownership of a hartebeest that was shot by one band and found by another; the resolution hinged on to whom the arrow belonged.

/Xam arrowheads also seem to have been emblematic of group identity. Using the Bleek and Lloyd archive, Janette Deacon (1996) was able to locate and excavate the Northern Cape settlements of their informants who belonged to two neighbouring dialectical groups. //Kabo and /Han≠kass’o, were ‘Flat Bushmen’ who lived at ‘Bitterpits’ and other water sources between Kenhardt and Vanwyksvlei, while Dia!kwain was a ‘Grass Bushman’ and lived around the Katkop hills between Kenhardt and Brandvlei. According to /Han≠kass’o (Bleek & Lloyd 1911:227), Flat Bushmen used metal to make their arrowheads while the Grass Bushmen used a white stone. Deacon’s excavations corroborate this testimony. She found a general absence of stone tools at the Flat Bushmen camp while the area of the Grass Bushmen was characterised by a distinctive white chalcedony. Deacon concludes the /Xam used different materials to underscore group ascription; emblematic style was not confined to morphology of artefacts alone. It is tempting to see the single flintlock found at the Bitterpits as evidence that the Flat Bushmen had greater access to non-traditional materials, but Dia!kwain was also in possession of a gun when he was arrested, and metal was readily available in the form of fencing wire. Indeed this was the preferred source of metal for beating and sharpening into arrowheads. It seems the continued use of local stone for arrow points was a conscious decision on the part of the Grass Bushmen.

There is also evidence for emblematic arrowheads deeper in time. Though rare, spectacular Later Stone Age tanged arrowheads have been excavated across a wide extent of South Africa and Lesotho. A method of statistical shape analysis suggests the conformation of these finely knapped lithics corresponds significantly to geographic territories (Smeyatsky 2017). Arrowheads from Lesotho and the Upper Orange River Basin form one geographic and stylistic group while arrowheads from the Western Cape and Karoo form another (*ibid.*). As in the aforementioned cases, these stylistic spatial variations could very well indicate large-scale linguistic boundaries between prehistoric San populations. At the very least they suggest areas of social and economic organisation. As Wiessner (1983:232) says, the projectile point, an artifact that is present in many lithic assemblages, was found to be well suited for carrying information about groups and boundaries because of its widespread social, economic, political, and symbolic import.

Rock art may also corroborate the notion of ‘emblematic’ arrowheads. A small painting from the site RSA INX4 (Fig. 6.1.) depicts two groups of humans that appear to be shooting at each other. One side of this ‘fight’ is painted red and the opposition is painted in dark red. The arrows of the red people come to tapered distal points, like many bone arrowheads, while the arrows of the dark red figures end in triangle points, like stone- or metal-tipped arrows. It is possible the different morphology, which corresponds to pigment colour and positioning, represents different materials. Taken as a whole this painting strongly suggests the involvement of two distinct groups of people. Of course, due to the significant nature of the medium, we cannot automatically assume it depicts an actual shootout (Campbell 1986). The arrows are more likely to be arrows of potency, but as we have seen, arrows of potency can be hyper-realistic renderings that conform closely to their physical counterparts. This painting suggests that, like material arrowheads, immaterial arrows of potency also signified a level of discrete group identity.

Ouzman (2005) points out that biological, economic, political and ritual hybridity is a sound survival strategy. And it was a strategy that people readily adopted along the Maloti-Drakensberg Mountain frontier. Silayi was a Tembu man who absconded from one multi-ethnic band of stock raiders to unite with a group of Bushmen, headed by chief Nqabayo (Stanford 1910). Apart from wishing to avoid further gruff treatment at

the hands of his cohort, who tied him up after they were nearly caught by Dutch farmers, joining with the Bushmen would ‘ensure success’ in stock-stealing exploits (*ibid.*: 435).

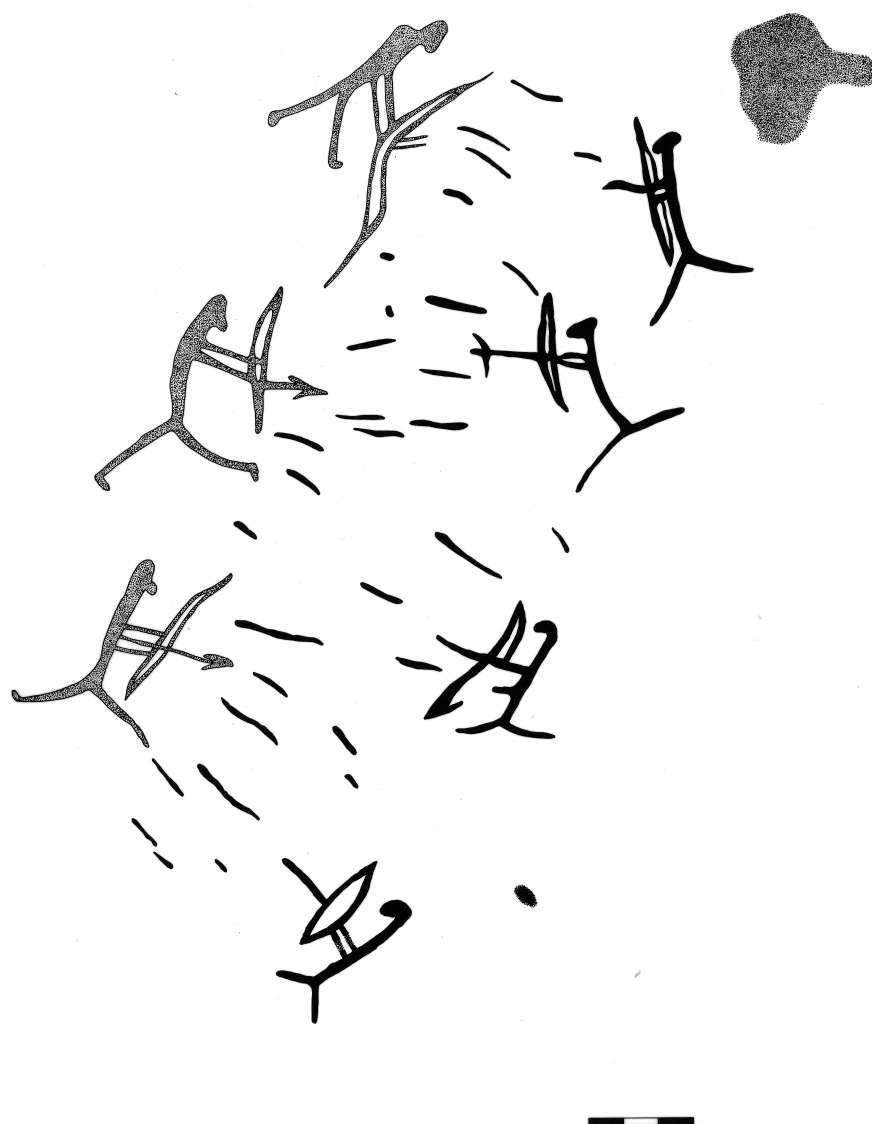


Fig. 6.1. At RSA INX4, Eastern Cape Province, two opposing groups of figures are rendered in different pigment colours and have differently shaped arrow points. Traced by myself, redrawing courtesy of RARI.

Silayi’s experience exemplifies the emblematic nature of the San’s poison arrows during these times of unprecedented contact and conflict. Upon joining Nqabayoy he recalls ‘we received bows and arrows and became members of the tribe’ (Stanford 1910:436), before embarking on many fruitful raiding parties around the

Drakensberg. In this instance, group membership was conferred by the bestowal of archetypal San technology. Presumably Silayi had no prior training and would have used the kit quite ineffectually. And only Nqabayo himself made poison: “He used the root of a shrub mixed with the bark of a tree... The root and bark were boiled together in a clay pot until they became a black-looking jelly. It took days to prepare the poison; when ready. Ngqabayi served it out. The poison was deadly” (Stanford 1910:438). Silayi knew the kind of root that was used but not the kind of tree from which Nqabayo got the bark, suggesting the full recipe was guarded knowledge in the event that Silayi returned to his people, which he eventually did when they called after him. Nevertheless, the possession of arrows was clearly deemed important for their assimilation into the group and marked an initiation of sorts. Nqabayo’s band continued to hunt game while stealing livestock and, barring evasion, these arrows were their primary method of defense against angry farmers and their guns.

The right tool for the job

During his travels through southern Africa in the first few years of the nineteenth century, Hinrich Lichtenstein was told by a Bushman that iron-tipped arrows were never used for game but were ‘reserved to be employed against mankind’ (Lichtenstein 1928:248). When he next encountered a Bushmen whom he thought might threaten him, he checked the arrows in his quiver and when he found none with iron tips, he returned his weapons to him (*ibid.*: 273). The fact that he lived to tell the tale was presumably convincing enough for Lichtenstein, though metal tipped arrows were readily adopted, especially once fencing wire became common on the landscape (Deacon 1992:7). Despite the widespread use of metal arrows tips as vectors for poison amongst /Xam hunters they were not always positively evaluated. /Han=kass’o deemed some iron-tipped arrows ‘ugly’ (LL.VIII.1.6086) despite them being functionally identical to those tipped with stone or bone. In early race narratives ugliness is linked to inappropriate or antisocial action and compared to the behavior of predators such as the hyena (McGranaghan 2012:162). It seems metal-tipped arrows may have come to be associated with increasing violence and anti-social behavior.

For the San, poisoned arrows are not classified as weapons, and it was only the increasingly violent interactions with colonial agents that forced them into this category. Spirits of the dead (dis)embodied the height of antisocial behavior because of their propensity to shoot at the living. The closest /Xam object that might be considered a weapon were referred to as ‘spears’ and often also translated as ‘assegai.’ Assegais are items of material culture more emblematic of Bantu-speaking agro-pastoralist populations, but nevertheless the term conveys the appropriate notion of attack and defense. Spears were used to drive off or kill anti-social lions (McGranaghan 2012:268), interpersonal conflict of the ontological variety. But mostly spears were employed to finish off an animal weakened by arrow poison, not as weapons (Lee 1979:139). The paucity of weapons in San material culture put them at a serious disadvantage in the face of colonial firepower. It was difficult to defend against hostile encroaching forces or wield any influence in affairs of the state, as still remains the case (Bieseke and Hitchcock 2011).

The San’s lack of formal weaponry corresponds to their ideology of peace and social prohibitions against violence more generally. According to Marshall (1976:288) ‘the !Kung fear fighting with a conscious and active fear’ and do everything possible to avoid it. Elizabeth Marshall Thomas (1959) even entitled her popular book *The Harmless People*. Children rarely received corporal punishment, and domestic violence was rare before alcohol became widely available in the 1970s (Wiessner 2016:156). Violence drew moral outrage from the community; the Ju/’hoansi knew that peaceful relations were key to maintaining the freedom of movement in times of resource failure or social strife (Wiessner 2016:S156). Despite this non-violent ethic and they experienced a relatively high homicide rate (*ibid.*). Their ideology of nonviolence is conspicuously unsupported by any formal institution to manage the situation once violence breaks out. To illustrate the point, homicide rates noticeably reduced in the 1940s and 1950s when Hereros settled in the southern Nyae Nyae area and provide courts for mediation, and dropped even further with the presence of state policing in the 1970s and 1980s (*ibid.*).

The Ju/’hoansi did not sanction violence as a legitimate means to any ends except against murderous psychopaths (Lee 1979). Murder by poisoned arrow was so far outside the realm of acceptable social protocol it was almost always explained away

as the act of a madman. People who kill are called ‘strange things’ with emphasis placed on their irregular, almost non-human nature: “he was not a normal human being” (Wiessner 2016:S158-S159). Subsequently the only socially approved killing was directed toward close kin who were mentally disturbed and posed a real threat to the group: “There was one who was mad from the beginning. He was Tsamkxao who was senseless. He used to beat and kill people. After he killed another man, his uncle Kxao said, “I am going to shoot Tsamkxao, hit him with an arrow today” (*ibid.*). When homicidal violence did erupt, perhaps between love rivals, it was accepted that people would retaliate immediately. However there was no cultural impetus to exact revenge, and if it was not performed on the spot the incident was generally dropped. “People convinced one another that blood would not erase blood but just render more tragedy” (*ibid.*). To smooth tensions between aggrieved parties the incident was portrayed as an unfortunate twist of fate; the passions of young men or the fault of the beer.

Whether or not the San of the prehistory shared a similar ideology of peace is difficult to say, especially because this ethic does not preclude violence. Also murder by arrow poison leaves no physical trace, save perhaps in treatment of the dead. Antemortem and perimortem fractures in skeletons recovered from Later Stone Age burials demonstrate that people were, on occasion, the victims of severe trauma attributable to interpersonal violence (Morris 2012). However there is only one unambiguous case of post-cranial injury resulting in death; two arrow points were found imbedded in the lower back vertebrae of a young adult female from Quoin Point on the southern Cape coast (Morris 2011). Reconstruction of the event indicated that the victim was likely to have been lying on the ground in a prone position when the arrows were shot (*ibid.*). Most clear instances of homicide resulted from blows to the head with an instrument much like a digging stick, as opposed to a sharp-edged implement such as an arrow or a stone knife (Pfeiffer & van der Merwe 2004). A single grave in Melkbosstrand contained the remains of an adult woman and a juvenile both with gashes to their cranium while three children all bearing cranial injuries were discovered in a shared grave at Modder River. It has been suggested that these homicides are indications of inter- rather than intra-group violence and the result of competition between rival foraging groups (Humphreys 2007) meaning past populations were not entirely aggression-adverse.

Early twentieth century ethno-historical accounts made by colonial settlers in the remote regions of the Kalahari also paint a picture of the San as more dangerous and bellicose than modern ethnographies suggest (Guenther 2005:18). They reported a high incidence and intensity of conflict, blood violence, raiding, and endemic warfare. Hunting weapons doubled as weapons of war. They are also portrayed as more centralised and less egalitarian than in contemporary writings, with ‘captains’ ruling over aggregations of bands and tribes. After 1910 there was increasing hostility between the San and settlers. Social and political pressures encroaching from the outside world triggered intense inter- and intra-San conflict, fighting, and sorcery accusations (*ibid.*: 30). Guenther reminds us that this violent characterisation was due in part to inadequate observations and preconceptions about Bushmen as either noble-savages fighting their last stand or as vicious barbarians. Nevertheless it was a time of unprecedented change; traditional modes of living came under increasing stress, which was undoubtedly a source of great anxiety and cause of tension.

Colonial civil servants and settlers viewed bows and arrows as the economic mainstay of the San and the most dangerous weapons in their otherwise meager armory against the settlers (Wanless 2010:30). So much so that, in 1928 South West Africa, the Arms and Ammunition Proclamation was amended to make it illegal to be in possession of bows and arrows without a license issued by the local magistrate (*ibid.*), effectively dispossessing the San of their most significant objects. Stock theft and poaching was a primary cause of strife between the San and colonists. The former were increasingly divorced from their traditional means of production; land was demarcated and game numbers dwindled due to livestock grazing and farmers’ more intensive hunting activities (Deacon 1996:249). Orpen tells a story illustrating the attitude of some colonists to the San in the north-eastern Orange Free State. Told to him by a *bywoner*, or tenant farmer, while Orpen was a guest at his table:

This man had been told by his farm employer that there was an old Bushman thereabouts who was always saying that the farm really belonged to him. Hunting on the same farm, the *bywoner* shot a wildebeest, whereupon the Bushman suddenly turned up to claim his share of the meat due to him by the custom of his people. Having helped to cut up the beast and load the best of it on to the hunter’s

horse, he was told he could take the offal. “Then,” said Orpen’s host, “when the Bushman turned and stooped over the offal, I took aim between the shoulders and shot him.” Orpen dropped his knife and fork, said goodbye to the wife, and left the house. (Willcox 1978b:80)

As harrowing as it is, this story encapsulates attitudes and hostilities faced by the San from what amounted to invading forces. The /Xam were essentially without land and livelihood by the early 1870s (Deacon 1996). Dia!kwain was apparently imprisoned for culpable homicide after he shot, with a gun, a farmer who had threatened to kill his family. Kalahari San living near Ghanzi were alienated from the land in the 1890s when large tracts were offered to prospective white settlers to ‘develop’. As Guenther (1976:123) laments, they “suddenly found themselves ‘squatters’ on their own traditional subsistence areas” and to this day are largely disenfranchised and unskilled farm labourers. Silberbauer (1965:12) observes, “Living off the proceeds of the hunt requires unrestricted and undisturbed use of large tracts of country, which is incompatible with the needs of the pastoralist and cultivator.”

The mother of invention

Of course the San were not passive observers to their plight. At least two thousand years of contact with incoming farmer and herder groups meant they had negotiated a niche for themselves as ritual specialists. Rainmaking, healing and sorcery were all services that could be rendered for patronage, protection and livestock. The commodification of traditional practice offered a route to survival and even prosperity. Though whether this afforded San individuals a new level of political power and influence, or altered the supposed egalitarian structure of society, is a matter of debate (cf. Dowson 1994; Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2004b; Blundell 2008; Smith 2010; Mullen 2018).

Internally, traditional practice and technology were also modified to suit the changing needs of the frontier. For example ‘war medicine’, which became increasingly in demand in the face of novel threats and weapons, was actually a corruption of materials used in hunting magic. The /Xam used an unspecified plant root, possibly *Galium tomentosum* (Hollmann 2004), known as *fo-/oa* to make springboks ‘foolishly

afraid', running in among the people rather than fleeing in a 'sensible' fashion (McGranaghan 2012:243). Men sewed a band into which they could put *fo-oa* when hunting (LL.II.36.3276-3278). This strongly smelling plant could also be rubbed on the bodies of the hunters. And //Kabbo describes how, like arrows and other plant charms, a burnt (bitter smelling) *fo-oa* stick could be pointed at a springbok to tame it (Bleek 1936). The San used this root medicine in skirmishes to sap the energy of their opponents and cause confusion and dizziness, while ensuring the accuracy of their own blows or arrows (Sinclair-Thomson & Challis 2017:199).

Not only did the San have to repurpose old magic for new problems, they also had to contend with conceptualizing new and impactful forms of material cultural. In the face of looming genocide, the gun was a potent object that readily infiltrated San thought and rock art. Even though both guns and arrows are projectile technologies, they did not automatically become analogues, as one might assume. They occupied different categories; arrows were hunting tools associated with potency and its procurement, and guns were most saliently murderous things, associated with violence and destruction. This, in tandem with their materiality meant guns were indigenised not in terms of arrows and hunting practice, but in terms of furious lightning storms and rain control (Sinclair-Thomson 2019). The flash and crack of ignited gunpowder was likened to a lightning strike and both produce a strong acrid smell: visual, auditory, and olfactory linkages. *!kwa* and rain bulls, beings and bringers of lightning, were 'death things'. And lightning is sometimes given material form as 'black pointed shining stones' (Bleek 1956:464), a tantalizing resemblance to musket balls (Sinclair-Thomson 2019:130) perhaps signaling an instance of syncretism between object and thought. Guns may have become powerful objects of rain control, superseding traditional methods of taming rain bulls.

These kind of approaches have added great nuance to our understanding of battle scenes in rock art. Early simplistic studies assumed that during the colonial period the San were painting what they encountered on the landscape, including the new European arrivals and their trappings. However, such interpretations overlook the abundant ethnographic and ethno-historic source material indicating the significant, action-oriented context of art making. By contrast, Colin Campbell (1986) was the first to situate scenes of conflict within San conceptions of the world. He argues

Europeans were reimagined as malevolent spirits of the dead and their inclusion in rock art reflected their capacity as antisocial bringers of sickness and death (Campbell 1986:265). Recent innovative interpretations suggest paintings of guns, horses, and Western clothing are not necessarily representations of Europeans at all, and in fact they are more likely to be depictions of the artists themselves (Loubser and Laurens 1994; Mallen 2008; Challis 2012, 2014). These interpretations mostly focus on the male raiding exploits and ‘war magic’ of creolised groups; hats become the accouterment of outlaws and bandits.

I would like to point out that women were also a part of the new shifting world order. Paintings of figures wearing dresses with bustle pads are ostensibly women. Lara Mallen (2008:56) has pinpointed their introduction to the Eastern Cape to the years between 1860 and 1900. These sartorial objects were designed to keep the heavy cloth of voluminous skirts from dragging on the ground and to maintain the fullness of the drapery, which otherwise would flatten due to the weight of the fabric. An effect of their function, they exaggerate the wearer’s hips and buttock to a caricature-like degree, suggesting corporeal opulence. Based on the significant materiality of fat and the value placed on its abundance these dresses could saliently become indications of great potency. As we have seen, new maidens already possessed strong *n/om*. Paintings of bustles would have been compelling visual reminders of female potency and an indication of their visibility and agency on the frontier. It is also possible bustle wearing was incorporated into San women’s practice, or at the very least thought, in order, not to keep skirts off the ground, but as a reserve of potency, a protective force in troubled times. Wiessner (2016:S160) reminds us of the nature of passive agency in egalitarian societies; adopting colonial material culture may have helped them negotiate dangerous interactions with new and unpredictable agents. Outward appearance belied inward facing repurposing of bustles’ significance thus subverting the colonial experience. Perhaps most importantly and as we have seen, the San recognised the power of transformation and the link between corporeal mimesis and control. In order to know and manipulate your adversary it helps to get inside their body.

The syncretism and stress produced by the Maloti-Drakensberg colonial frontier also brought a kind of renaissance to the rock art of the area. This time period is associated

with a flurry of artistic innovation and production. In addition to fine-line paintings that incorporated new imagery, entirely new styles of painting emerged. These have been classified as Type 2 and Type 3, and are distinguished by different qualities and colours of pigment, methods of paint application and subject matter. They are particularly interesting because their authorship is up for debate. They may have been painted by individuals belonging to mixed bands inclusive of both foragers and agro-pastoralists, like Nqabayo's, that were eking out survival on the landscape together in the face of colonial oppression. It appears these groups were drawing on the efficacy of San rock art to advance their position in the new world order. As Gell (1998:6) reminds us, "art is a system of action intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it." Social tension was at an all-time high and we can imagine practices like dance and painting proliferated in order to ameliorate stress and improve circumstance; pressure leads to innovation.

The endurance of San thought and practice is evident in these non-classical paintings. Executed shakily by brush in a thin powdery-pink pigment, images at RSA FRE1 (Fig. 6.2.) still contain references to San ontology. The top left figure with out-held charm is redolent of the 'bobble-headed' man leading the harnessed rain bull at RSA LTS1. Many of the figures have hunting kits on their backs and are deliberately holding their bows and arrows forward. In the middle of the second row a tailed figure is caught in a moment of transformation. In the bottom row a winged figure lays 'dead' in a classic trance posture; traversing domains of reality through trance he appears to take on a mantis-like form, the ontological apex-figure of the San universe.

Poison arrows, as distinctly San objects, were distilled into emblems in situations of contact. They not only communicated outwardly but also signalled intra- San group ascription through their different styles and materials, reminding us the San were not a homogenous group. We can see from Silyai's circumstance, they were not 'genealogically' conferred, and stood more as markers of a lifeway that involved hunting and 'poaching'. These ephemeral, stealthy objects managed to infiltrate the colonial psyche to such a degree that they became controlled substances. This is despite the fact that, in theory, they were expressly not weaponry. The introduction of fencing wire marked a drastic change to the environment for the San, alienating them from their traditional hunting grounds. Yet they were not passive in the face of

dispossession, this same wire was repurposed to meet their own ends; “cut fences came to be a chronic problem for the ranchers as the San would saw off sections of wire with stones in order to make arrowheads” (Lee 1979:133). To prevent this, fence builders eventually learned to leave an extra length of wire on the ground. There is a certain irony in the fact that the colonists banned arrows but had to continue to provide materials for the their making.



Fig. 6.2. Paintings at RSA FRH1, Eastern Cape Province, rendered in a powdery pink pigment atypical of classic rock art but still executed by brush may represent a more recent contribution. Tracing by Alice Mullen, digital redrawing by Stephen van den Heever.

Chapter 7

Drawing Conclusions

Technology, ontology and environment

Hermeneutic approaches to rock art interpretation rely heavily on notions of symbolism and meaning, which as we have seen are problematic starting points when trying to understand material culture oriented not towards communication but towards action. Nor do symbols get us very far when trying to understand ontology, which is concerned with people's direct experience and ordering of reality, not representations of reality. Technology, as something that mediates action and experience, is a far better guide to understating the social objectification of nature than animal symbolism (Rival 1996). Moreover, efficiency and efficacy are not always correlated; criteria other than efficiency may dictate technological choices, which are deeply embedded in social relations.

I'd like to return briefly to the area where ontological theory has long flourished with an illustrative case study that holds some parallels to the material under question in this thesis. In her analysis of Huaorani hunting practice, Laura Rival (1996:149-156) elegantly demonstrates the link between these Amazonian hunter-gatherer's technological choices and ontological relationships. Using blowpipes and poison darts, Huaorani hunters 'blow' arboreal animals like monkeys and birds. They have a fairly intimate knowledge of individuals composing a monkey troop and plan in advance which individual will be hunted down on any given trip. The Huaorani recognise similarities between the social organisation of monkeys and humans, and demonstrate a real concern for animal and human population dynamics. They know arboreal animals will flee the area if human settlements are allowed to become too large or sedentary. Fruiting trees are also never picked clean; fruit is left behind for birds and monkeys. A balance must be struck between human groups and the animals they hunt. In contrast, they show a complete lack of interest in controlling peccary distribution. Unlike individualised monkeys, peccaries roam in anonymous, large

herds. They are all devouring, associated with the rotting fruit they eat and the decay of the forest floor. They are considered repugnant and not hunted so much as indiscriminately exterminated when detected near a settlement.

Monkeys are hunted exclusively using blowpipes while peccaries are killed with spears. Hunting by blowpipe is slow, quiet and calm, death ensues silently and practically painlessly, while hunting by spear involves a frenzy of aggression, noise and bloodshed. Spears are disposable and far easier to manufacture than the elaborately crafted blowpipes. Social qualities are also embedded in these blowpipes; they embody reaching full maturity, control of force, and artistry, and require years of practice to master. The choice to hunt with a blowpipe indicates the Huaorani's choice to have a close, non-adversarial relationship with arboreal species, seen as social beings themselves. Conversely spears were weapons to wound unrelated people and animals. Spearing a monkey would be an affront to its sociality just as 'blowing' a peccary affords it unwarranted relatedness. Rival concludes "one should be wary of substituting an 'instrumental' for a 'substantive' theory of technology." Technology is a product of cultural selection and functions not only physically but also socially. Hunting technique reflects practical knowledge acquired through direct perception and engagement in the world. Experiential relationships form between humans and the environment; some based on trust and respect and others defined as destructive or predatory.

This 'subjectification' of nature affects technological choices; how people deem it appropriate to relate to the beings in their surroundings. There are often very real practical advantages to ontologically influenced technology. For example, although bow hunting virtually stopped at the start of summer in the Kalahari due to the seasonal scarcity and weakness of arrow poison, this provided game a chance to breed. Even though poison arrows may not have been entirely efficient in the short term, in the long term this was an essential feature of their efficacy. Tellingly, no other methods of hunting large-game replaced the bow and arrow while hunters waited for the rains. Apart from restricting hunting seasons, San hunter-gatherers also cull game selectively, carry out controlled burns, use vegetable resources with discretion, replant portions of root, extract only part of honey from wild nests so the hive is not deserted, and many similar techniques of conservation and future-planning

(Woodburn 1980:101). Their close knowledge of the environment allowed the San to immediately exploit and simultaneously protect its resources.

This is not to imply, however, that just because all humans and non-human animals are embedded in a network of intimate relations that everyone will be respectful and act towards one another appropriately (Dowson 2007:59). The rules of etiquette and behaviour exist and are made explicit because they are not always followed. The form taken by the most institutionalised transactions is often key to the dominant political values of a society (Gibson 1998:166). For the San this amounts to the sharing of meat of large game animals. An ethos of sharing and moderation permeated San thought and was associated with positively valued traits. For the /Xam, displays of control and restraint when eating were commendable (McGranaghan 2012:183); the desirability of the Early-Race Caracal was enhanced by her moderate habits of consumption as a handsome *!xau:*, or ‘small-eater’ (LL.V.3.4351). Avoiding monopolising access to fat (LL.II.3.419), the small-eater existed in diametric opposition to the *!gwunni*, greedy person (Bleek, 1956:393), a trait associated with ‘ugly’ beasts-of-prey who would carry away and consume whatever they could find. As a human trait it became particularly unattractive, linked with anger, ugliness, and an absence of generosity (McGranaghan 2012:421).

Sam Challis (2019) has recently interpreted a rock art site in highland Lesotho as relating to ‘superabundance’ of resources and the potential danger of their overexploitation. The location of this site is anomalous for its extreme altitude at 2387m. The shelter is beyond inhospitable in the winter but could have been an especially fecund destination for the San during the summer months when large herds of eland migrated to these rich grazing grounds. Meat and fat are vital sources of potency, but too much meat for one individual or secretive hoarding of meat, like too much potency, was dangerous and threatened transformation into monstrous beings. The exceptionally large painted figure at this site has a bulging stomach, tusks and three legs with clawed toes. He seems to be afflicted by gluttony, an excess of meat and an excess of potency, manifested in the figure’s anti-social corporality. Though rock art was not didactic in a direct sense, this painting offers us an emic insight into San conceptions of proper resource management and wardenship, and how this might have been achieved through rock art as agentic action-oriented technology.

Other monstrous, anti-social beings in the San world were of the human variety. Violent land-grabbing colonists were described as predators and scavengers; “They say we are evil and come in the night like wolves [hyenas], and have hair like lions” (Raper and Boucher 1988:194); a powerful statement of the European’s almost literal ‘inhumanity’ (McGranaghan 2014:13). The /Xam also saw a significant contrast in the large bodies of the white farmers against the small Bushman. European corporality suggested immoderate consumption and linked them to a monstrous figure of the Early Race called ‘All-devourer’, also translated as ‘Fat-stomach’, as well as lions who, with a ‘great’ body swallowed down even bones to fill their stomach (LL.II.18.1670). Their inappropriate social behavior aligned European colonists closer to the ontological category of monsters and predatory beasts than human beings.

By contrast, the naturally handsome behaviour, tameness and tractability, combined with their seasonal patterns of group dispersal and aggregation, made elands social animals ‘*par excellence*’ for the San (Lewis-Williams 1990:78). As /Kaggen’s things, elands display the greatest beauty and refinement in the animal kingdom. Hunting them by bow and arrow was the ‘nicest’ way to perform the deed of dispatching them: the features of their death-by-poison at least mirrored the experience of shamans in trance. Shooting people with arrows of potency aided in transporting them to other realms, and that is effectively what the hunter does when he shoots the eland with a poison arrow. ‘Death by trance’ afforded the eland a socially salient end, equivalent to its potent nature. This is also why murder by poison arrow was such a grievous act; relational instruments associated with the procurement and activation of potency were corrupted through this antisocial behaviour associated with malevolent spirits of the dead; their productive potential became a destructive force.

Despite overturning the persistent idea of hunter-gatherer as ‘noble savage’ in harmony with nature (as we have seen forces of nature can be dangerous antagonists, nor do all hunter-gatherers partake in same the ethos of ‘non-competitive egalitarianism’ (Woodburn 1982) that characterises the San), there persists an idea of the “wisdom of indigenous cosmologies which treat tree, plant, animal and human interactions as a single spiritual, moral and regenerative system” (Croll and Parkin

1991:20). While this is an oversimplification of the ways hunter-gatherers objectify nature, there is no doubt these ontologies are generally oriented towards maintaining relationships with some, though not all, beings of the 'natural world.' Moreover indigenous peoples' deep experiential knowledge of the environment results in an intensive catalogue of short and long term survival strategies, ensuring a level of ecological conservation is maintained. Poignant climate change protests have recently been led indigenous communities, such as the First Nations people protesting against the Keystone Pipeline on the US-Canadian boarder. We are increasingly made aware of the failure of Western ontologies to sustainably manage the environment. A remedy might be to value traditional knowledge at the same level as institutional knowledge (*ibid.*).

Just as the San turned their skill towards making rain and providing medicine for a etic client base, new commodification of traditional practice may hold the key to engendering thoughts of sustainable resource management in the minds of outsiders, as well uplifting the materially impoverished and politically disenfranchised communities of San descent. In her short documentary film, *Voetspore (Footprints)* (2017), Sarah Duff explores the transformation of the Erin Game Ranch, one of six farms awarded to the #Khomani San in 1999 in compensation for land lost during colonisation. Erin is a fenced game-farm of approximately 6000 ha about 60 km south of the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park between South Africa, Botswana and boarding Namibia. Prior to handover it was a commercial game ranch and it still functions as such but is now communally run with #Khomani trackers and guides. Hunting is done on foot, and although customers use rifles, not bows and arrows, the experience is meant to draw on the environmental expertise and hunting skills of the #Khomani. Their intent is to afford people in the community meaningful livelihoods and income generating opportunities whilst encouraging a renaissance of traditional knowledge and values.

Thinking through things

This thesis began by answering a call to theory: how can we move rock art discourse out of a rut and into new productive territory. An ontological approach has many advantages. It removes the Cartesian divide, breaks down dichotomies between types

of action, places direct experience at the forefront of knowledge creation and takes seriously indigenous constructions of reality; all good things, and ontological theory is distinctly decolonising in this regard.

In expanding the category of person, objects must also be reconsidered as potential agents. Indeed by virtue of their significant materiality, and embodiment of meaningful techniques of production and consumption, things readily occupy active roles. In San society two kinds of material culture are particularly salient agents: rock art and poisoned arrows. Both are concerned with the entanglement of identities and as components of enchanted technology, are oriented towards altering the state of the universe. Just as 'the arrow point is a work of art' (Guenther 2005:62), so does rock art accomplish work.

The San world is characterised by ontological-flux and instability. The undifferentiated nature of humans and animals in previous world orders established precedent for present day transformation and connection between humans and non-human beings. Within this relational meshwork arrows were defining pieces of equipment that acted as material manifestations of San personhood. This is made all the more apparent when we find the San also conceived of their interior life force in this objectified form. Internal arrows were instrumental to individual wellbeing as well as the activation and flow of potency in and around communities.

Arrows engendered relationships between all kinds of persons, human and non-. They cemented relationships between trading partners, spouses and affines. They were agentive and appropriate technology for interactions with game and rain animals. Anti-social spirits of the dead shot at the living with infectious arrows. And the San fired back at colonists, whose humanity was up for debate.

Traditional technologies, through their design and the wider concepts they materialise, also are often eminently appropriate means of ensuring sustainable access to the environment. Hunter-gatherers are especially cognisant of long-term conservation strategies and their close, experiential knowledge of the environment means they are talented wardens in this regard. When human relationships are formed through procuring and sharing meat, achieving full personhood is reliant on both

technological skill and the availability of game. Thus human personhood is inseparably bound up with objects and environment and the relational entanglement of these more-than-human assemblages and agents.

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