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An interpretation of rock art imagery from the Brandberg/Dâures, Namibia.

Claire Turner

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Arts, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts(by dissertation only).

Johannesburg, 2012

Declaration

I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. It is being submitted for examination in the Faculty of Arts, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg for the degree of Master of Arts and has not been submitted before for any examination or degree at any other university.

Claire Turner

_____ day of _____

For my mother and my father

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Notes regarding this dissertation

1. The indigenous name for the Brandberg Massif is Dâures. However, given that it is still widely known as the Brandberg, I have chosen to use that name throughout this dissertation. In doing so I intend no disrespect towards the indigenous peoples of Namibia.

2. The terms San and Bushmen/Bushman are used interchangeably within this dissertation. I am aware that both names carry pejorative connotations. I do not intend any pejorative connotations to be associated with my use of these terms.

3. The word 'shaman' has been argued to be an inappropriate term for San healers. Although I do use a few different words relating to 'healer' in this dissertation, I use the word 'shaman' the most prolifically. I believe that the process of going into trance, having out of body experiences and hallucinations are all justifications for the use of the term 'shaman'. In my use of the term I am aware that there are certain differences between San culture and that of the 'original' shamans. However, for the purposes of trance, I deem the word 'shaman' to be an appropriate term.

Introduction

My choice to study Brandberg rock art for my Masters dissertation was spurred on by two factors – first, my research lead me to the realisation that, compared to South Africa, very little interpretative work had been done on rock art of the area. This appeared to me to be a travesty given the mass of recordings done by Harald Pager and all the hard work that had been put into cataloguing the art – some 400 painting sites have been recorded in the Massif, containing over 43,000 images in total. More work desperately needed to be done on unpacking the meaning of the art.

Second, I felt that the Bushmen of the area had not had enough attention paid towards their own abilities and achievements. I was fortunate enough to read Robert Gordon's *The Bushman Myth: The making of a Namibian Underclass* (1992). This book passionately highlighted how quickly the Bushmen (or San) had gone from having autonomy and actively engaging in trade in the region, to severe degradation and unacceptable living standards. The most dramatic event in this decline was the near genocide they were subjected to as a result of Governor Seitz's *Verordnung* J.nr. 26883/5391 of 1911, an event couched in terms of the *Säuberung* (sanitization) programme (Kinahan 2000:356).This spurred me on because I felt that the San of the area needed a history of their own. A chance to write their own, highly successful history would validate the position that they held in the making of Namibian, and indeed, San history. It was necessary to show the abilities of the San people in the region not only in an historical sense, but in a prehistorical sense, as a people who

added much to our understanding of the development of the general development of the symbolic powers of the human race.

During the South African Defence Force's (SADF) low intensity guerrilla war against the South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO) SADF made an active effort to recruit Bushmen due to their 'natural tracking abilities' and their ability to survive in the tough desert conditions (Gordon 1992: 1–2):

> "…the superhuman qualities of Bushmen were grounded not in humanity but in animality. Their inability to herd cattle was attributed to their lack of self-restraint. As they are "extremely emotional," their women cannot be deprived of the men, and this determines the length of patrol (*Pretoria News,* 26 February 1981") (Gordon 1992:2).

This attitude highlights so many approaches towards the Bushmen in southern Africa. Indeed many ethnographers focusing on the Bushmen have continued to promote these ideas: that Bushmen were close to nature, somehow primal and not far removed from the environment around them, denying them any autonomy or independent abilities.

The most significant author to espouse some of these ideas was Laurens van der Post, particularly in his *The Lost World of the Kalahari* (1961). Although van der Post was not the only writer to suggest that the San were a pristine group of people, he was especially focused on portraying them as a mystical, pristine race which was not affected by the modernisms of the western world or other African groups, chief amongst them being hierarchical structure (Barnard 1979).

The concept of Bushmen being pristine and somewhat 'animalistic' lead to them being placed on the lowest rung of the social Darwinian ladder. This idea was

especially popular in the early 20th century and Europeans were, of course, placed at the top of such racial categorisations. Europeans began classifying people according to 'types' (Gordon 1997) and formulating ideas about how far up the linear evolutionary trajectory these 'types' were. For the Bushmen that meant being considered the lowliest kind of human. Indeed, Fetzer and Fischer used Namibia as a field site in which to develop their theories of European racial superiority (Silvester *et al* 1998:12). They used photographic evidence of decapitated indigenous prisoners as a means of visual evidence in support of the arguments of German racial pre-eminence by illustrating that Bushmen were akin to hunted trophy animals whose head would ordinarily be placed on the wall of someone's home or bar (*ibid.)* Similarly, the Denver Expedition filmed the local Bushmen in Namibia and proclaimed them to be the 'missing link' (Gordon 1997:111) in line with the prevailing ideas that the San were closer to the animal kingdom than the human race.

The absurdity of these characterisations of the Bushmen as part of the natural world, and outside of history, is highlighted with the knowledge that the San were actively trading with pastoralists from about 2000 years ago (Kinahan 1989). They were also involved in the world capitalist system for over 200 years, trading copper, ostrich eggshell beads, and ostrich feathers. Indeed, a Bushman is credited with finding the enormously profitable copper mines at Tsumeb (Lebzelter 1934:42).

Understanding and interpreting the enormous and complex religious and social structure of the San in Namibia, as represented by their art, can perhaps in some small way highlight the independent and autonomous history of the San, particularly since they had their own autonomous history for thousands of years prior to the arrival of

the Europeans. This history is very far from the idea of a people who are non-hierarchical, apolitical and outside of history (Wolf 1997; Fabian 2002). The desire to highlight the independent nature of the San in Namibia underlies many of the aims in this dissertation.

Aims

A number of issues raised by archaeological research conducted in the Brandberg over the last three decades will be addressed by this dissertation. Three aims in particular will be focused upon.

First, I aim to provide in depth interpretations of selected images found repeatedly at the sites within the region. Utilising the work already done on the images in the area, I cv nonetheless a large component of the fauna represented in the art, comprising 29,7% of the images found at 327 sites (Lenssen-Erz 2001:387). In gorges such as the Hungorob Ravine, giraffe are the most frequently painted animal species (Kinahan 1989, 1991)**.** Moreover, giraffe are frequently the largest (by size) painted elements in many sites, overshadowed in size only by some human figures (Pager 1989). They are thus particularly visually dominant images in many panels which will be discussed during the course of this dissertation (Lenssen-Erz 2004).

A significant point I aim to examine with regard to giraffe is their apparent association with snakes in the rock art of the Brandberg. Giraffe back lines are mirrored in the paintings of snakes in a number of sites in the region. Most often, these snakes and giraffe are painted within the same panel, and it is common for the giraffe grid pattern to be replicated in the body of the snakes. Although these associations have been noticed (Lenssen-Erz 2000), few attempts have been made at explaining the reasons

for them. Accordingly, my dissertation will focus on this seemingly significant association.

New approaches to ethnographical sources

My second aim concerns the use of ethnography to interpret the rock art. The fact that there exists a noticeable difference between the art of the Brandberg region and other areas forms part of the motivation for this focus. The Drakensberg rock art and the associated 'shamanistic' interpretations have almost always formed the basis of rock art interpretations in the Drakensberg, the Maloti mountains, the Makgabeng San rock art and the rock art of Zimbabwe, since the idea was first proposed by David Lewis-Williams in 1981. However, there are instances where it has been shown that while all San rock art seems to be associated with religion, the approach developed for the Drakensberg does not necessarily apply in the same way to San rock art in all regions (*e.g.* Mguni 2005 on the rock art of the Matopos; Eastwood 2003, Eastwood & Cnoops 1998 on the rock art of the Limpopo Valley), and thus there are regional differences. These studies have indicated that the idea of a pan-San ideology applicable in the same manner to all types of San rock art is useful but contains certain pitfalls. While it appears to be the case that San rock art is linked to a coherent religious ideology, particular iconographic motifs simply do not have the same meaning for all groups of San in southern Africa. Thus the images in San rock art do not to conform to one idea regarding how the San depicted these religious phenomena. Research in areas such as the Matopos (Mguni 1997, 2002, 2005) has highlighted this fact, and shown that there are significant differences between the rock arts of different areas. Therefore, I examine the visually unique rock art in the Brandberg with the aim of showing the differences it has to Drakensberg rock art, accounting for those

idiosyncrasies in light of the idea of a pan-San religious ideology. I am particularly interested in highlighting the regional disparities that exist in the various San ethnographies which have been used for interpreting the rock art, although I grant that similarities do exist too, although these are not plentiful and are not the focus of this dissertation.

In my use of ethnography for this interpretation I challenge the current uses of the ethnographical record. It is not that the idea of a pan-San religious ideology is necessarily erroneous. It is simply the case that there are subtle differences in ethnography from different areas, and seemingly important differences in rock art from the various parts of southern Africa. All of these need to be taken into account in any hermeneutic interpretation of San rock art.

In Chapter 2 I examine debates over the use of ethnography to interpret both the archaeological and the rock art record. I conclude that a different approach to ethnography is needed (where possible) and elucidate this approach, explaining how it would be of benefit to rock art researchers in southern Africa.

Fusion of hermeneutic and body-centred approaches to rock art and ethnography

The third aim of this dissertation is to emphasise the physical qualities so important to the San, reflected in their dances and to a degree in their ethnography. Although this idea is not new to the understanding of rock art, it has not been emphasised in previous work with the exception of Geoffrey Blundell's (2004) phenomenological approach to the body in his work on the rock art of Nomansland in the Maloti-Drakensberg area. In

this dissertation I interpret giraffe and giraffe-snake conflationary imagery using an approach to bodies drawn from the work of Mary Douglas, particularly her ideas on animal forms representing aspects of ritual in society. I thus conflate the highly physical qualities of San healing rituals with these theories of the body to demonstrate the connection between animal symbolism and human bodies in the rock art of the Brandberg.

In Chapters Three, Four and Five I examine these associations and propose a hermeneutic body-centred interpretation for giraffe and giraffe-snake conflationary images. I asses all previous work done on these images, as well as work conducted on similar images from other parts of southern Africa.

Previous research in the Brandberg

Work has been done on the Later Stone Age in Namibia, although much more remains to be done and would be a rewarding study. Archaeological research has been quite intensive; although I would argue that it has not been as intensive as the recordings and attempts at interpretation applied to the rock art. In 1979 Lyn Wadley researched the archaeology of the Erongo Mountain's Later Stone Age sites. In addition, excavations initiated by the Cologne Institute have suggested that the rock art traditions in Namibia are connected to a six phase Namibian Later Stone Age chronology (see also Vedder 1928; Rudner *et al.* 1959,1983; Sandelowsky 1971;Wendt 1974, 1978; Jacobson 1975, 1980, 1984; Breunig 1989 on more information on the chronology and dating of the region).

The San rock art research has been more intensive. Much commendable work has been done on certain areas of Namibian rock art, but it still has limitations. Chief among these is the emphasis on the recording of the art, more specifically the art of the Brandberg which was so painstakingly carried out by Pager (1989, 1993, 1995, 1998, 2001, 2005) and Tilman Lenssen-Erz (2006). This work produced a large collection of direct tracings of paintings, and site-maps, and comprises an incredibly meticulous and valuable contribution to the recording of the rock art of Namibia. Pager (*ibid.*) recorded over 400 sites comprising approximately 43 000 images (Lenssen-Erz 2006), which is thought to represent about 90% of the rock art in the Brandberg (*ibid.*). However, the immense recording of the rock art of the Brandberg, whilst fundamental to the process of interpreting the rock art, does not add much to the interpretation to the art of the area, or our comprehension of the social dynamics which may be reflected in the art. Nonetheless, the acquisition of the data itself is essential for the interpretation itself. That said, John Kinahan (1989) interpreted some rock art from the Brandberg in his PhD thesis, specifically that at Snake Rock, in line with the ideas espoused by David Lewis–Williams, and concluded that San rock art is essentially concerned with the experiences and visions seen by shamans during trance. In addition, Jeremy Hollmann (2007) has done work on moth imagery in the Brandberg, also linking it to the trance experiences but, more specifically, to those undergone with the intention of capturing game animals and ensuring success during the hunt.

The interpretation of Namibian rock art and particularly the rock art of the Brandberg has well-known roots in the work of various researchers. The first documented accounts of art in the Brandberg appeared in the early part of the 20th century (Obermaier & Kühn 1930, Frobenius 1931). However, it was the work of the Abbé

Henri Breuil (1955, 1959) which most captured the attention of the public, and publicised the rock art of the Brandberg. Breuil (1955) famously interpreted what has become known as the 'White Lady' panel, a cluster of San images found in Maack Shelter in the Tsisab Ravine. Believing the images in Maack Shelter to be proof of Mediterranean influences in the area, Breuil (1955) erroneously dismissed the possibility of a local origin for the artists. Breuil's arguments for a European origin of the painters were criticised due to their serious flaws and lack of evidence with which to substantiate them. It has since been accepted that local hunter-gatherers and herders were responsible for the production of the art (van Riet Low 1956; Rudner *et al* 1957; Mason 1958; Breunig 1985), thus refuting any 'foreign' origins for the painters.

Since Breuil's work, interpretation of the rock art of the Brandberg has become markedly more aware of the San and herder origins of the art. As a result, a few authors have adopted more emically-informed approaches to the art (e.g.Kinahan 1989; Pager 2001). Yet, the interpretation of the rock art in the Brandberg/Dâures remains fairly uninformed by the San ethnography which needs to underlie any studies relating to the San peoples (Lewis-Williams 1982, 1990a, 1996).

The lack of ethnographically informed research continues to severely impact on the viability of recent interpretative work on the Brandberg rock art. In some cases the approach to interpreting the art is to break it down into categories, and analyse it accordingly (Lenssen-Erz 1992, 1997, 2000, 2006). This approach is ultimately based on a western conception of the different components in the rock art, with little to no ethnographic reference. As a result, most interpretative work is based on the categories into which the art has been divided by researchers (Pager 1989, 1993, Lenssen-Erz & Erz 2000. But see Hollmann 2007 for an ethnographic approach to moth images in the

Brandberg). Many of the human figures have been categorised according to gender and action (Lenssen-Erz 1992, 1997). The meaning of the figures in the panels is then interpreted in accordance with the perceived difference in actions between men and women (Lenssen-Erz 1992) and men and women are assigned functions in the art, and on a greater level, San society without any supporting reference to ethnography. Other etic approaches to the art include fairly westernised concepts of 'landscape' and its effect on the meaning of the art (Lenssen-Erz 2004) which lack any support from San ethnography to justify this interpretation (see Smith & Blundell 2004 for a critique of landscape studies in southern Africa and their relation to rock art interpretation).

Of particular importance in much of the ethnography and art of the Brandberg, is the role played by various species of animals, found within the region. Again, very little research has been done on the animals depicted in the art, and certainly no extensive literature exists on giraffe, or snake motifs. As far as faunal representations in the art are concerned, springbok have largely been the focus (Lenssen-Erz 1994), possibly due to the high numbers in which they are depicted in the rock art. In a similar fashion to the research carried out on other depictions, springbok images have been interpreted with a significant lack of reference to ethnography. Much more interpretation has been based on natural modelling or 'animal behaviour' (see Hollmann 2007). Thus, as a researcher I am faced with a lack of information on the application of ethnography to the study of the art in the area. Therefore, in this dissertation I aim to develop a more ethnographically informed understanding of the art of the Brandberg than has previously been the case.

Method

This research has relied on recording, distributional data, and subject matter of the rock art in the Brandberg/Dâures Massif. In addition, cultural and ethnographic data has formed the basis of much of my research.

Most of the art in the Brandberg has already been recorded and traced (Pager 1989), and thus there is little need to re-trace the art. Therefore, much of my research will utilise tracings already made by Pager, (1989, 1993) as well as photographs taken by various researchers. These recordings and tracings will be used to interpret the images in the panels, and to assess their context in relation to the surrounding images.

In addition to recorded data, various models will be used to interpret the art. The neuropsychological model was developed for rock art research in the 1980's (Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1989) and has continued to significantly impact on our understanding of San images since that time. The model is based on the premise that all human beings experience altered states of consciousness in similar ways, and therefore experience similar visual and somatic hallucinations during those altered states. The use of the neuropsychological model has become an indispensable tool for San rock art research. Given that there are limitations to the applicability of this model (see Blundell 2004:59-61) including the idea as to whether the results of neuropsychological testing result in the construction of individual identity (Barr *et al* 1972) which I discuss. The problems or limitations involved with this model include the stages which individuals may go through during an altered state of consciousness. Not all people in all cultures always have to experience the same three levels of altered state of being, that being first entoptic phenomena alone, second, the subjects may try

to make sense of these phenomena by elaborating them into forms that they can recognise based on their own cultural background, or state of mind such as being hungry or sexually aroused (Lewis-Williams 1988a:203). Third, subjects experience what has been described as a vortex or "…rotating tunnel that seems to surround them, and there is a progressive exclusion of perceptual information." (Lewis-Williams 1988a:204). It is also recorded that the sides of this tunnel are seen as a lattice of shapes or screens (*ibid.)* a point which becomes important in the context of this dissertation. The first state is most often dependant on the cultural background and mental state of the individual.

However, despite these various cultural differences, San ethnography, and indeed its rock art seems to indicate that the San went through all three two stages of the neurophsycological model and that it has been applied with great effect to our understanding of the rock art of the San in southern Africa. As such, I will use the neuropsychological model in congruence with other hermeneutic approaches, as part of my interpretative framework for the San art of the Brandberg. In my use of the term hermeneutic I do not simply mean 'meaning'. I explain the use of the term presently in this dissertation at a point at which it is most suitable.

Limitations with models, such as the neuropsychological one, always need to be tempered with reference to ethnographic data in order to add a little more emic insight to what is essentially a western, outsiders' view of brain function. In fact, the ethnographic references have already been widely and successfully used in the understanding of San rock art in southern Africa (e.g. Lewis-Williams 1986a, 1986b, 1992, 1999; Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2004). Therefore, the images will be considered in relation to the ethnography and oral histories of the San peoples already

collected, from a wide region, including Namibia, Botswana and South Africa. I have already mentioned that Chapter 2 deals with the applicability of ethnography and its short comings, highlighting my use of ethnography to interpret the rock art.

Situating my study

Geography

At an average height of about 2000m above the desert around it, the Brandberg (also known as the Dâures in local Damara language) represents one of the highest points in Namibia, and certainly is an incredibly visually dominant image in the Central Namib Desert (See Fig.1 and 2).

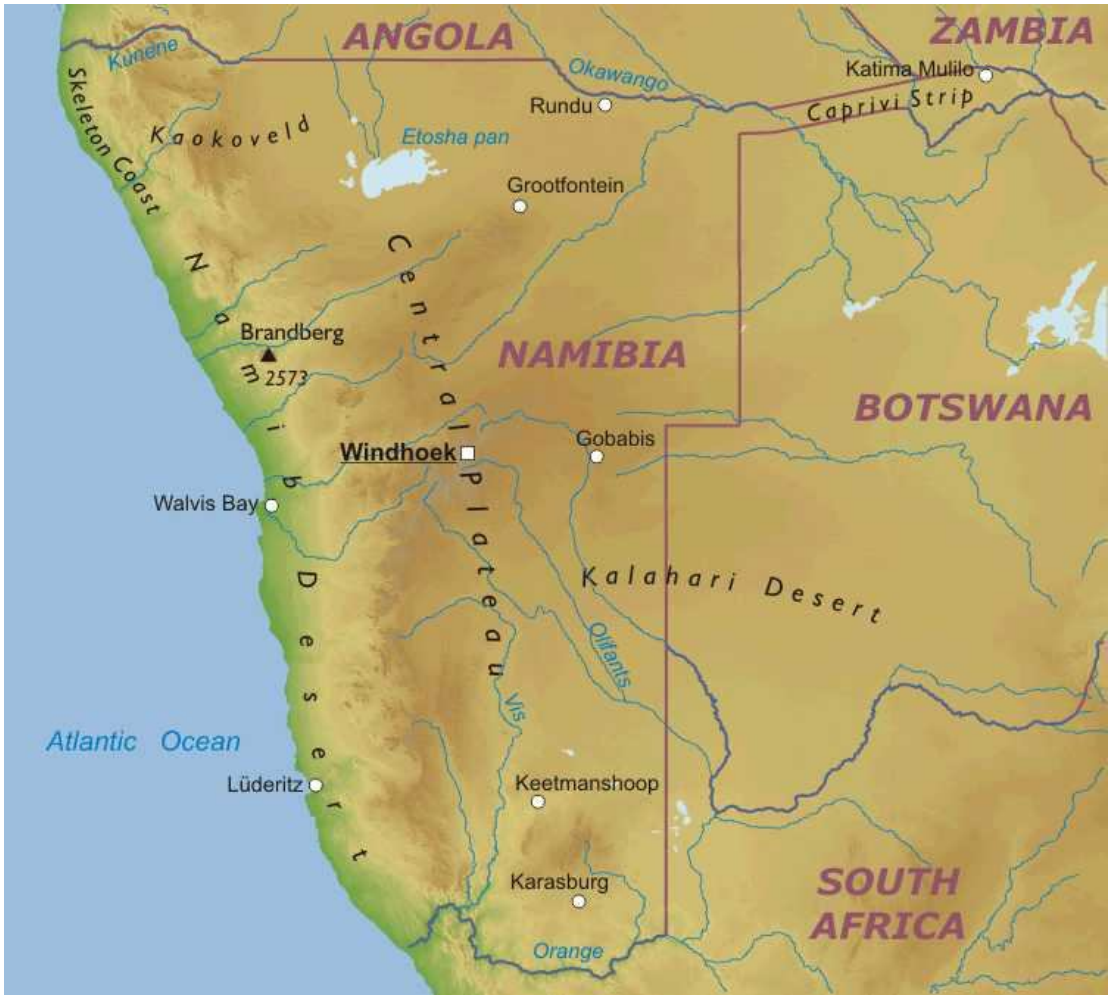

Fig. 1 Location of the Brandberg in Namibia (map courtesy of Geomaps.com)



Fig. 2 Hungorob Gorge, Rifkin 2007

Moreover, the Massif's deep water holes ensure that the Brandberg often carries water for months after the end of the rainy season. It is the only area in the Central Namib where reliable water sources can be found almost all year round. (See Fig. 3). It is therefore perhaps not surprising that San peoples inhabited the Brandberg for approximately 4000 – 5000 years (Kinahan 1989, 1990, 1991), leaving traces of this in the archaeology and impressive amounts of rock art found in the Massif.

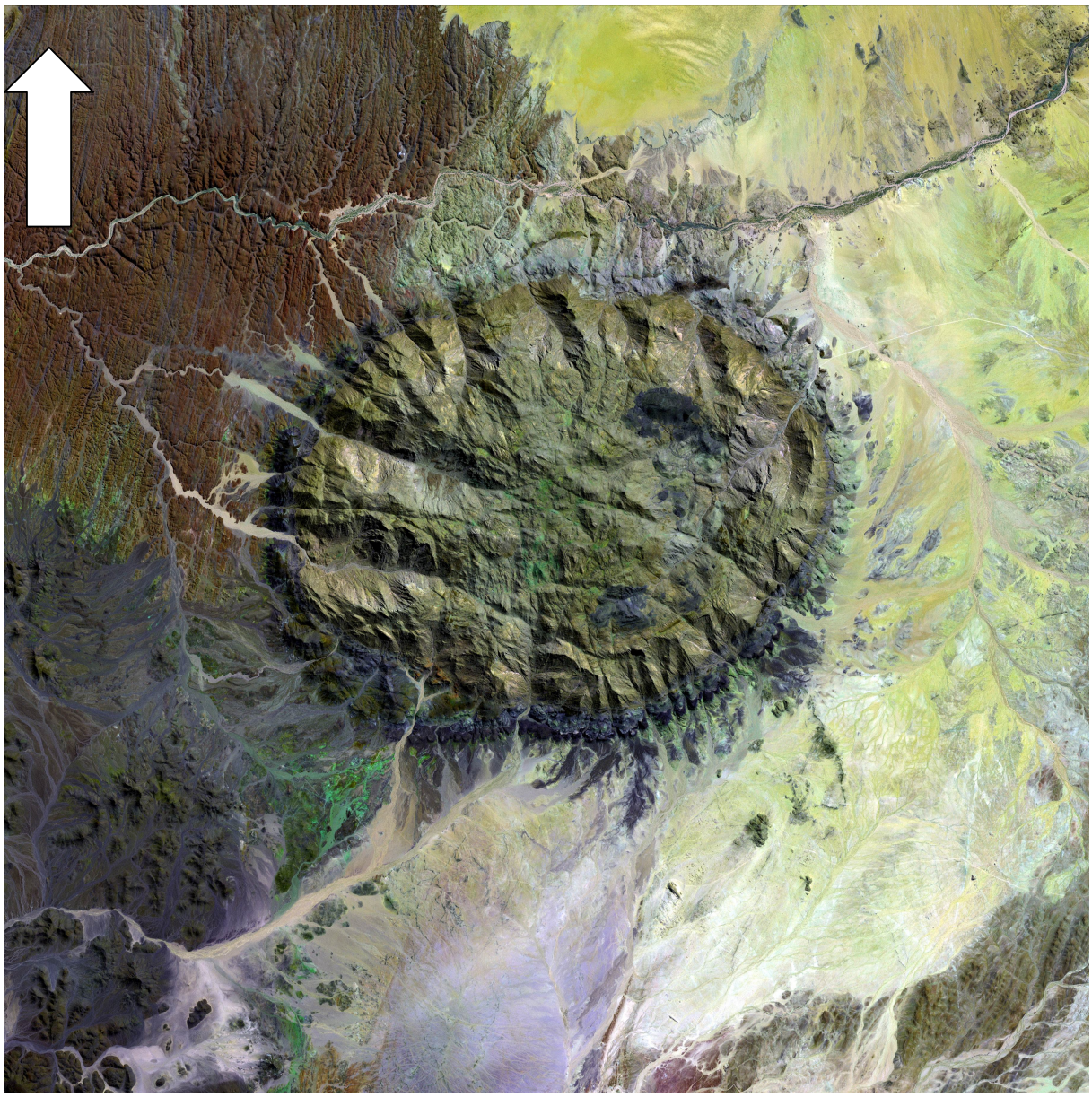

Fig. 3 Satellite image of the Brandberg, Newportgeographic.com

The Brandberg itself is comprised of 20 ravine gorges (see Fig. 4). These are Sesaub, Orabes, Quagga, Eros,Ga'aseb, Farrow, Hungorob, Amis and Dom to the south, Tsisab to the west. In the north one finds the gorges Porters, Märchen, Karoab,Umuab, Nuwuarb, and Sonusib. In the east are the gorges Numas, Circus, Naib and Raiders. The names of the sites found in the Cologne collections of Pager's redrawing are taken from the names of these ravines. I follow this method when referring to sites. The

images will be referred to in terms of the ravine name and site number as recorded by Pager. It appears, from the wide distribution of rock art all over the Massif that the San inhabited almost all of the Brandberg at particular times of the year.

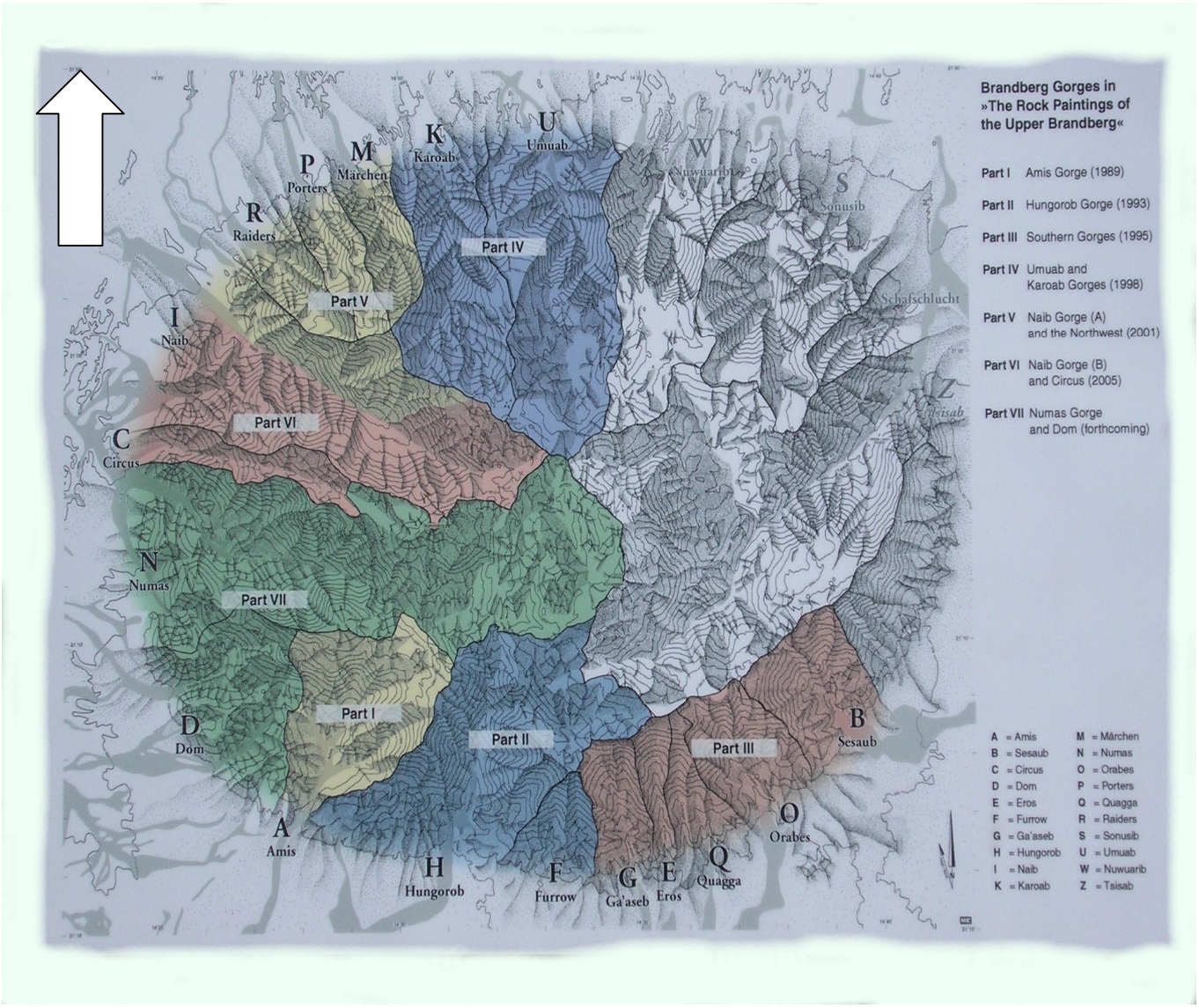

Fig. 4 Gorges found in the Brandberg, Lenssen-Erz 2001

Despite the aridity of the Namib, the Desert receives sufficient rainfall to support large areas of grassland. The rains average about 150 mm per year, recharging the subterranean supplies to the riverbeds, including those of the Brandberg (Kinahan

1993). It seems plausible to argue that the significant numbers of Holocene sites on and around the Massif are due to the presence of dry season water (Kinahan 2000:5).

Sites and archaeology

Many of the archaeological sites are found in the upper regions of the Massif. Most of these are found in painted shelters clustered around waterholes in the upper ravine almost 2000m above the surrounding desert (Pager 1989; Kinahan 1994:4). Research has suggested that the occupation of the Brandberg began at about 5000 years BP, coinciding with the onset of increasingly arid conditions in the Desert (Kinahan 2000:6), although the conditions were still wetter than those seen in the area today. It is arguable that the settlement on the Massif was trigged by the onset of this increasing aridity (*ibid*.). It has been argued that the sites in the upper Brandberg which boasted convenient shelter and access to water, would have served as aggregation sites during summer for San bands that dispersed during the dry winter periods (Kinahan 2000:7). However, there is not enough evidence to claim this was certainly the case (Pager 1989; Kinahan 2000:8).

Excavations in the upper Hungorob Ravine indicate that the faunal diet of the inhabitants of the Massif was largely comprised of local fauna, with no big game animals present. Thus, osteological material indicates that hunting of relatively abundant species in the Massif occurred. These remains include Rock Dassie (*Procavia capensis*), Klipspringer (*Oreotragus oreotragus*), and Jamesons's Red Rock Rabbit *(Pronolagus randensis*) for at least the period prior to the arrival of pastoralists in the area at about 2000 years ago (Kinahan 1995:88, 2000:6 – 7).

At approximately 1000 years BP the mode of production in the Brandberg changed from that of hunter-gathering to a pastoralist way of life (Kinahan 1989,1991) with an almost certain introduction of stock (possibly sheep and goats by pastoralists) at about 700 years BP (Kinahan 1986,1993). Given that the rain on the top of the Brandberg is consistently better than that on the surrounding plains, a good standing of available grasses would have existed to support livestock grazing (Kinahan 2000b:9). The estimated stocking rates for the upper Hungorob Ravine are about twelve small stock units comprising sheep or goats, per hectare per six months (*ibid.*), a value approximately sixty times higher than the pastures at the foot of the Massif (*ibid.*). Kinahan (*ibid.*) has proposed that this represents a model of pastoral transhumance indicating a short period of aggregation at the foot of the Massif after summer rains, and then a rapid movement to dispersed homestead sites in the upper reaches of the Brandberg. Grinding equipment and remains of seed caches found at the summer rainfall sites indicate that inhabitants were gathering grass seeds from the underground caches of harvester ants (*Messor tropicorum*) to ensure grazing, as these seeds can germinate with as little as 20mm of precipitation (Kinahan 2000:10). Although there exists no evidence of this the existence of grinding stones suggests that seeds may also have been ground.

The presence of pastoralism in the Brandberg is somewhat evidenced by the rock art. Although much of this art can be ascribed to the San peoples, some of the sites exhibit finger paintings generally thought to be attributable to pastoralist peoples who inhabited the Massif until approximately the last 150 years (Kinahan 1989). The archaeology of the Brandberg suggests, however, that San peoples utilising the Massif would have had contact with other groups of people for the last 2000 years, which is

reflected in the archaeological data found during excavation of the shelters which includes the presence of sheep and goat bones and pottery ascribed to pastoralists (Kinahan 1989, 1991). The fact that this may represent one of the longest periods of interaction between San and pastoralist peoples in southern Africa makes the insights that can be gained from the prehistory of the Brandberg Massif incredibly valuable in terms of better understanding models of interaction between groups of people. Moreover, the rock art of the Massif does not conform to what is normally seen in areas where interaction played a significant role in the lives of the San groups. Thus, the Brandberg not only represents an area bearing evidence for long periods of interaction, but also one where the usually seen elements of interaction in San rock art are missing. This makes it a unique area in southern Africa where the expected kinds of interaction between San and Khoekhoen peoples may not apply.

Culture contact is of course an extremely important and complex issue in the interpretation and understanding of San societies and their beliefs. In general, the issue of culture contact refers not only to the interaction between San and Khoe peoples, but also to that of the contact between Bantu-speaker groups and the San. This dissertation will argue for certain highly delineated continuities in San cosmology which appear to stem from pre-contact periods in San society. However, it should be emphasised that this does not mean that contact with Bantu speakers left San society unchanged in a more general sense – indeed scholarship has shown that in a more general sense contact caused seismic shifts in San culture and world views. However, at 2000 years or so ago, the San of the Brandberg had had no contact with Bantu-speakers at all, thus making this contact issue a moot point in this dissertation.

However, what the nature of contact between San and Khoe peoples in the Brandberg

was, and still remains to be demonstrated in detail, including the influences each may have had on the other's belief systems. The Khoe do share many similar cosmological ideologies to the San, but there are also undeniably many differences which the researcher must be sensitive to. In this regard, I occasionally refer throughout to his dissertation in the matter. This said it is still surprising that there is seemingly no evidence in the San rock art which portrays the arrival of Khoe peoples into the area.

It is this unique San-centric aspect of the rock art which makes the interpretation of Brandberg rock art and archaeology vital. This dissertation seeks to answer some of the questions posed by the rock art with regard to the thoughts and ways of life of the San archaeological evidence from the Massif. It fills some of the gaps in the interpretative record and answers some of the central questions pertaining to the San inhabiting the Massif. Linking back to the colonialist perception of the San as an animalistic group of people, this dissertation shows that hunter-gatherers in Namibia showed not only incredible and complex symbolic processes, but were capable of dynamic manipulation of power relations within their society, and possibly with other societies.

Chapter 1

The body as a paradigm: concepts of the body in social theory and rock art research

In beginning my investigation of the rock art of the Brandberg I believe that a theoretical approach can help us better understand the use of metaphors in the art, and thus help us better comprehend its meaning. In this chapter I look at a particular theoretical paradigm— body studies— employed successfully in rock art research to explain images. Surprisingly, this paradigm has only explicitly been used once before to explain gradual change in the social relations of the San as well as in the rock art itself. I elucidate this approach and the theory behind it, before moving on to explaining anthropological and sociological approaches within this framework which have been useful in assisting the interpretation of the images. I also examine instances, where this approach has been used to interpret bodies in the archaeological record.

The body in social theory

The body has long been a paradigm of consideration for sociologists, anthropologists and social theorists (Shilling 1993, 2001, 2007). However, there has been an explosion of literature from the early 1980s onwards regarding the body (e.g., Featherstone 1982; Hirst & Woolley 1982; Turner 1984; O'Neill 1985; Suleiman 1986; Bynum 1987; Lakoff 1987; Eisenstein 1988). The considerations in this period moved away from viewing the body as a given object and began interrogating some of the long-standing dualisms such as nature/culture, action/structure and subject/object that had previously existed within these disciplines (Shilling 2007:2). The body also became increasingly addressed in

works centring on feminism, pragmatism and realism (e.g., Butler 1990, 1993; Young 1990; Joas 1996; Archer 2000). Moreover, whilst the body had not been explicitly theorized within sociology and anthropology there are a number of attempts (e.g., Turner 1991; Shilling 1993) to uncover the role of the body or its 'hidden heritage' within these disciplines (Shilling 2007:2).

Thus, despite the apparent rise of the body as a so-called 'new' framework in anthropological and sociological thought, much non-explicit attention has been given to the body over an extensive period of time (*ibid*.). This is particularly true in texts relating to medical sociology and religious anthropology (e.g., Gurvitch & Moore 1945; Durkheim 1951, 1961; Douglas 1970, 1982). As Chris Shilling argues (1993:17) the body has been an 'absent presence' in previous studies, in that much of the work on gender, medicine and race is concerned with the body in terms of its sex, colour or state of being. The body has not however, been expressly employed as the primary paradigm with which to study these issues.

However, as Geoffrey Blundell (2004:76) states, whilst the growing interest in the body as a framework for understanding sociality may be driven by western academic disciplines, it is not necessarily the case that theoretical approaches to the body are modelled on western societies, unlike some of the structural theoretical approaches used previously by rock art researchers (e.g. Lewis-Williams 1982; Campbell 1987; Kinahan 1989, 1991). Indeed, the potential of the body as a tool of social examination lies in the fact that the body is:

> …not a model in the sense of a functionalist, structural Marxist or even structurational models of how societies or cultures operate. Instead, the body offers a much looser, but theoretically informed framework from which to approach the various strands of data that can be drawn upon to write San history. While data does not speak for itself, the benefit of writing about the body is that it does not impose abstract concepts of how society functions on data, but instead allows one to select an aspect of the data and to talk about it theoretically; data are thus given primacy but in a way that is not simple empiricism (Blundell 2004:76).

As Blundell (*ibid*.) notes, the plethora of studies that have emerged on the body in recent years have not led to a chaotic mix of ideas and ways of approaching the body. Instead, as Bryan Turner (1996:24) notes there are three major analytical issues that have materialized in the study of the body:

1. The body can be analysed as a set of social practices. Since the body has to be constantly presented, produced and sustained in human society, the body can be regarded as having a potential that is realized and acted out via the channels of social life and everyday practice.
2. The body can be studied as a system of signs. Thus, the body can be viewed as a signifier of social meaning, status and symbolism (Turner 1996:26).
3. The body may be a system of signs which stand for and regulate power relations (Turner 1996:27). Thus, in the industrialized world, the valued body would be that which signifies itself as highly fit and productive, thus a machine of productivity. Less value and power is afforded to those individuals who do not symbolize fitness and this tendency towards productivity. Thus today's ideal image of the body is that of a fit and industrial body, indicated by copious adverts and television programmes which favour incredibly fit individuals and portray

them as pinnacles of success. Although this is not a new concept since societies such as the ancient Greeks valued physical prowess over all else, the industrial society began placing emphasis on fitness ideals in both males and females which did not exist in most westernised societies before.

Blundell (2004:76) notes that a fourth analytical issue has arisen concerning the body This is the idea of embodiment, which considers the body as lived experience, an idea discussed by many researchers (see for e.g. Shilling 1993). This requires more discussion which I will come to presently.

It is important to note that in these analytical categories there exists a separation between what can be termed foundationalist and anti-foundationalist approaches (Nettleton 1992). The latter views the body as an object which is subject to forces, processes and politics (the anti- foundationalist approach). The former approach is that of the foundationalists who regard the body as lived (Nettleton & Watson 1998; Williams & Bendelow 1998). In this conceptual framework we not only have bodies subject to external forces and processes, but we *are* bodies, and the sense of who we are is inseparable from our own body (Howson 2004:12). These ideas have grown from a plethora of academic research and would be difficult to ascribe to a single academic.

Anti- foundationalist approaches

This body of theory stems largely from classical sociology and tends to regard the body as an object which is under construction from outside forces and processes which shape, constrain and, to some degree, invent the body. This approach is also referred to as the social constructionist view of the body (Shilling 1993).

Turner (1992) has noted that many of the ideas relating to social constructionisim grew out of a Cartesian view of the body in which the mind is the seat of social behaviour, and the body is simply a means of expression of such behaviour. Thus, there is a division between the body as a lived experience, and the body as an object (Howson 2004:15). The body as an object is more central to the ideas found within a Cartesian framework.

As Chris Shilling (1993:62) notes social constructionist views are united by their opposition to the idea that the body can be analysed as a purely biological occurrence. Thus, instead of being the foundation of society, the body is analysed as a social product which includes the character, meanings attributed to the body and the boundaries which exist between the bodies of different groups (*ibid*.). However, there are a number of different approaches to the body within the social constructionist viewpoint. These approaches focus on various aspects and degrees of constructionism, concentrating on to which degree the body is a product of society and whether it is possible to speak of the body as a biological phenomenon (Vance 1989; Shilling 1993).

Three major theorists who have influenced social constructionist views of the body are Mary Douglas, Michel Foucault, and Erving Goffman. In addition much influence has come out of the recent histories of the human body (Shilling 1993:62). I focus in this dissertation chiefly on the work of Douglas, since it has come to inform some aspects of my approach to interpreting the rock art.

Douglas' work has been instrumental in developing views of the body as socially constructed. Thus, Douglas (1966, 1970, 1972) focuses on the idea that the body is a symbol of society. In *Natural Symbols* Douglas (1970) has argued that the body is the

most readily available image of a social system. Thus, ideas about the body correspond, in Douglas' view to ideas about the society in which the body is produced. As Douglas has argued:

> …systems of symbols, though based on bodily processes, get their meaning from social experience. They are coded by a community with a shared history. Because of their hidden origins and community background, many such symbols seem to be more natural than language, but they are culturally learned and culturally transmitted. So the preliminary starting-point for this argument is that there are no natural symbols; they are all social (Douglas 1982: xviiii – xx).

What is crucial to understand about Douglas' work is that the body is not merely regarded as an instrument that passively has meaning imposed upon it. The meaning of the body as a symbol of society comes from society, but also interacts with the body to reproduce that meaning (Douglas 1978:296). Thus the body mediates the social system in three possible ways (*ibid*.):

1. It is itself the field in which feedback interaction takes place.
2. It is itself available to be given as a medium of exchange within the wider network of exchanges which constitute the social situation.
3. Finally, it mediates the social structure by itself becoming its image.

Thus, human beings will be wont to adopt approaches to the body that correspond to their social location. Therefore, an artist wishing to shun the rules of society may portray himself with a "…carefully modulated shagginess according to the responsibilities they carry" (Douglas 1970:72). Or the hunter-gatherer who lives in a free and non-restrictive social structure is likely to be more prone to express bodily abandonment in the form of

laughter then the Haitian living in a strictly modulated social environment (Douglas 1978:298).

Therefore, the body is a metaphor for society as a whole. Crucially, in times of social crisis, when identities are threatened, there is likely to be a corresponding rise in concern with the maintenance of existing bodily boundaries and the control of the purity of bodies (Shilling 1993:64). The purity of bodies deals with the idea that the boundaries of bodies become a concern for society, for example in the instance of menstruation many societies have ritual which confine the menstruating female to a place whereby she cannot contaminate any other facets of daily lives. This is essentially a control of the purity of a body and thus the society in general. This is not necessarily the key point in this dissertation but it does highlight how bodies are seen to be symbols for society and its wellbeing.

What is key to note in Douglas' view of the social state is that in society is reproduced in the body of the individual and such individual bodies are associated with animal bodies. This can be seen in her celebrated example of the pangolin (*Manis tricuspis)*:

> It is not caught but rather it comes to the village. It is a kingly victim:
> the village treats its corpse as a living chief and requires the behaviour
> of respect for a chief on pain of future disaster
> (Douglas 1963:170).

However, there is a further level of complexity to my argument. Certain cultural norms are associated with a particular form of physical comportment. In some societies these states of comportment and even physical behaviour are in turn associated with natural phenomena which symbolize these socially stipulated physical states. For example Wyatt

MacGaffey (2000), writing of the identification of BaKongo 'chiefs' associated with the leopard writes "the chief had a special relationship to leopards whose flesh he might not eat because he too "was a leopard" (*ibid.*). Significantly he also resembled the leopard in his physical comportment, the chief is one who 'licks blood' from the sword used in execution (MacGaffey 2000:136). This form of social constructionism is important when analysing the social role of animals in San rock art. For while it is the case that many animals in rock art portray transformed shamans, certain animals also stand for the physical traits associated with certain members of San society. In this dissertation I use this anti-foundationalist approach to bodies, as well as the idea that animal bodies can be representative of various human states, in order to demonstrate that certain social values are represented in a distinct animal form.

Shilling (1993) has been highly critical of this social constructionist approach. He argues that the social constructionist approaches have to date provided unsatisfactory views of the body (Shilling 1993:9). He feels that we need to understand exactly what it is that is being constructed. Thus, he feels that social constructionisim has separated the body from social theory:

> Instead of addressing this question, and allowing us to understand how social forces mould and shape our physical selves, constructionism has tended to evacuate the embodied agent from social theory (Shilling 1993:9).

In some instances, Shilling (1993:172) admits that the body has been taken into account in the analysis of social structure. However, he calls this (*ibid.*) the dual approach. Essentially, the traditional approach to the body (i.e., that taken in social constructionism)

has ignored the 'lived experience' of the body. Thus, the body has still had an 'absent presence' in the sense that "…the discipline (sociology) has rarely focused on the body as an area of investigation in its own right" (Shilling 1993:172).

Shilling takes issue with the studies of Douglas and other social constructionists in that they ignored an understanding of what the body was, and how individuals used and experienced their bodies in daily life. He does concede that the works of individuals such as Bourdieu (1977, 1990), Giddens (1979, 1984, 1991) and Norbert Elias (1983, 1985, 1987, 1991) have developed theories of the self and the body as a reflexively constructed phenomenon (Shilling 1993:174). However, he still denounces these theories as making the body infinitely reconstructable (Shilling 1993:176) and subject to ever changing social environments.

Shilling would rather that we seek to understand what the body *is*, that is, what the body is to the individual in daily life. We need therefore to adopt an approach that is more in line with understanding the fleshy experience of being a body (Shilling 1993:181) rather than an approach that looks at how the body is shaped by societal pressures. This 'fleshy approach' concerns the relationship between body and self-identity as it exists as a 'lived experience' somewhat independent of social constructionism.

This leads me to consider the opposition to the anti-foundationialists, which is the foundationalist movement in body studies. In addition to Douglas' approach as outlined above.

Foundationalist approaches

Shilling (1993) argues that the lack of theory regarding embodiment present in the anti-foundationalist approaches was corrected by a focus on the lived experience which exploded in the 1990's. However, the concept of embodiment emerges before the 1990's in academic literature. This concept is in direct opposition to the anti-foundationalist approaches which privileged society's influence on the body over the impact of the lived experience and the human body's own experiences of the world around it.

This idea goes back to the fourth analytical category I outlined above, which is that category which defines the concept of the body as embedded in the 'lived experience', often referred to as embodiment. Blundell (2004:77) suggests that the interest in embodiment is the result of an increasing recognition of the different philosophical influences on modern social theories. Many of these influences centre on the idea of phenomenology. Phenomenology can be defined as the importance of personal experience over social structure (Ferguson 2001) and focuses on the:

> …social processes people depend on to categorise sense data as phenomena and examines the extent to which these phenomena are shared (Howson 2004:35).

Thus, phenomenonlogists are more interested in personal experience and consciousness than social structure.

The ideas related to phenomenology are said to be most influenced by the philosophy of Edmund Husserl (1859–1938). For Husserl (1991) consciousness was tied to objects. Therefore phenomenologists have the idea that all consciousness is tied to objects and meaning for these objects comes from the manner in which the individual experiences

them in the life-world (Koclemans 1995:579; Blundell 2004:77). Most phenomenologists have the idea that all consciousness is tied to experience which falls into mutually exclusive worlds of subject or object (Blundell 2004:77). This focus on subjective or objective phenomena leads to different emphases in terms of the subjective and objective views of the world (*ibid*.). As Blundell (2004:77) states, these differences are particularly apparent when one compares the works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Martin Heidegger, who are the two most influential phenomenologists in current theory.

Merleau-Ponty shaped the call for what can be termed a 'carnal society' (Shilling 2003:204). The founding assumptions of this society were that the 'self', 'society' and 'symbolic order' are constituted through the work of the body (Crossley 1995:43). Thus, for Merleau-Ponty (1962:136) embodied subjects develop direction and purpose on the basis of the *practical* engagements they have with their surroundings and through the *intentionality* they develop as a result of this situatedness of the embodied experience (Shilling 2003:204), an approach otherwise known as intercorporeality (Howson 2004:168). Therefore, Merleau-Ponty was looking to emphasise not only the existential (worldly) nature of the human body, but above all sought to understand the bodily nature of the body (Blundell 2004:77).

Merleau-Ponty questioned the presumption of a correspondence between external stimuli and sensory apparatus within the processes of perception (Csordas 1990; cf. Howson 2004:35). Rather then viewing ourselves and our perception as being that of an outsider looking in on the world around us, Merleau-Ponty thought that perception began with the subject perceiving the world, that is the human body (Howson 2004:35). He does not

view the body as a separate physical object that stands alone from the mind and which can be comprehended through rational thought (*ibid*.). Rather, the body was the basis of being-in-the-world in the sense that our embodiment precedes and grounds reflective thought (*ibid*.:36). The body is not an object separate from its experiences and its interaction with the world around it. Rather, the body perceives the world and other objects as a result of its action with the world around it and no concept of the world can really exist independently of the body's perception of the world in which it lives.

Merleau-Ponty's arguments are very much centred on perceiving the body subjectively and from the view point of the actor living in the body, rather than from an objective point of view which would see the experience as separate from the actor's own comprehension of the world through his or her body.

Heidegger, by contrast, does not focus on the pre-given human essence which is so essential to Merleau-Ponty's work. Rather, Heidegger attempted to "develop a highly original account of humans as embedded in concrete situations of action" (Guignon 1995:317; cf. Blundell 2004:77). Thus, for Heidegger:

> there is no pre-given human essence but, instead, humans are defined through their actions. Human actions, moreover, are embedded in particular contexts so that one is not free to do simply as one sees fit but one's cultural context, for example, places limits on what one can do (Blundell 2004:77).

Therefore, for Heidegger, unlike Merleau-Ponty, the world is a pre-given essence in which the human acts and experiences his life. The experience of the body is constrained by the environment in which the body lives, and not cultivated by the body's interaction with the world as it would be for Merleau-Ponty. The world thus exists as a separate object to the human experience of it and human actions are constrained by their

environment, therefore enhancing the idea that an objective experience exists separate from the human experience in the world.

Both Heidegger's and Merleau-Ponty's approaches have received their own criticisms. Heidegger has been disparaged as anti-humanist. This is due to his emphasis on the environment shaping human perception of the world (Blundell 2004:77). Merleau-Ponty has received criticisms because his approach to embodiment does not make it clear how "…symbols inform a phenomenological perspective on embodiment" (Burkitt 1999). Second, it is arguable that phenomenological perspectives on embodiment have little to say about power and power-relations (Howson 2004:37). Third, 'the 'opening out' onto the world described by Merleau-Ponty appears to be undifferentiated (*ibid*.). Both Howson (*ibid*.) and Iris Young (1990) point out that in cases of gender (and I would argue race and age) the female body is "not necessarily experienced as in direct communication with self, as an active expression of self, but as an *object, a thing*" (Young 1990; cf. Howson 2004:58). Thus females have a distinctively feminine style of deportment and movement that is programmed into them as part of what society views as female behaviour (similar points could be made about males). This style of movement does not develop purely out of experience and perception of the self and others, but is actively regulated by social structures and constraints which view the body as an object and symbol of society. This understanding of gender relations suggests that in many cases the anti-foundationalist approach creeps into many analyses of how the body interacts with the world, rather than being able to create the world around it through its interaction with objects and other 'body-selves'.

The duality between objective and subjective approaches, both within the phenomenological approaches, and the anti-foundationalist views has been well documented and critcised (see Shilling 1993, 2001). However, it still remains that the body offers a valuable way in which to analyse both the society in which it lives, as well as the individual's experience and position of, and in, that society.

Given the large proportion of images of bodies available to us in archaeology it seems surprising that very little study has been done from the perspective of the body (Blundell 2004:80, but see Meskell 1996, 1998, 1999; Knapp & Meskell 1997; Meskell & Joyce 2003 for examples of the application of embodiment to archaeology focusing on how the body may have perceived the world around it, resulting in archaeological evidence, not necessarily focusing on dead bodies themselves). Even less study has been done on the role of the body in rock art (but see Blundell 2004, and Yates 1993 for an example of the application of body studies to Scandanavian rock art) particularly San rock art. This seems surprising given the high volumes of anthropomorphic figures in the art and the variability and detail with which these figures are depicted (Blundell 2004). There is, however, one explicit exception to this rule and one non-explicit exception. I turn my attention now to looking at the researchers who have used the body explicitly or inexplicitly as a framework from which to analyse San rock art.

The body in rock art

The case with much rock art is that we do not have individual or even group references to San people's own particular understanding of the body and its boundaries (but see Katz 1982 for San shamans' depictions of how they perceive their bodies.) Therefore we are dependent on the rock art images of the body in order to understand how the body was

conceptualized, socialized in the same way that we today use our bodies to make statements and to interact with the world around us. Moreover, the body as a framework of reference allows us to move beyond structural social approaches. Both Lewis-Williams and Dowson (e.g. 1989) understood that the body was an important tool with which to understand the San belief systems to understand social approaches to the rock art. They made clear associations between the animal bodies in rock art and the physical experiences of shamans in trance as they turned into these animal bodies. However, ultimately, as pointed out above, they used these corporeal associations to look at the body not from a phenomenological approach as Blundell did, but rather used them to support a social structural approach which is where their use of the body as a framework with which to gain an 'emic' understanding of the art fell somewhat short, although not entirely since they did gain insight into the feelings and visions of the shaman in trance, and thus allowed us to understand the basic meaning of the rock art even if they did not explicitly use an approach based on body theory.

As Blundell (2004:81) notes, when researchers use a structural analytical framework, they are forced to pursue the following analytical route:

1. The social theory they are using has to be applied to diverse ethnographies so that a general model of San society can be created. Since these theories are largely western in origin, their applicability to hunter-gatherers remains open to question.
2. Rock art is placed in a particular box, or part, of the social structure illustrating how society operates. In some cases, such as Marxism, this box is found at the ideological level, whereas in structurationist models, the box will be at the level of rules and regulations. Therefore, the analysis of rock art comes from a much westernised and

externally conceptualised point of view which does not allow us to understand how the image-makers themselves may have perceived their world.

3. Finally, all the models are based on the idea that the society in question underwent some sort of social change, be it radical, as in the case of the Marxists, or slow and consistent as is the case with structuration theory. I am not opposed to the idea of change in San society. However, the change needs to be demonstrated in each case, and not theoretically imposed from a theory that automatically assumes it.

For these reasons, studies that focus on the body rather than an assumed social structure are possibly less problematic (*ibid.*). This is because, in Douglas' (1970) theory, societies express their concerns and constraints through the metaphor of the body and the body itself serves as a means of signifying social issues, even if it does so within the framework of a social structure. The fact is that the social structure can be read from the depictions of the bodies in the art, rather than having the social structure imposed on society without an emic perspective. From a phenomenological point of view, the manner in which the individuals are perceiving and interacting with the world around them will also be demonstrated in their bodies and bodily functions. Bryan Turner (1996:6) notes that the somatic society is one in which the significant moral, political and personal concerns are problematised and expressed through the body itself (Blundell 2004:81).

Understanding the body as a conduit for social concerns and problems means that it is possible to understand any society, including San society, through an analysis of the bodies in this society (*ibid.*). Although some theories of the body still have a markedly structural quality to them, they still privilege the individual in the society under question over the structure out of which they function. It may be the case that we can never truly

remove ourselves and our western view-points from our analyses of bodies. However, we are much closer to understanding San world-views and social processes if we begin our rock art research by looking at how the San viewed themselves and their society through the conduit of the body as expressed in the rock art, and referred to in ethnography. This is why body studies (even those that read the body as being a result of social structures) offer an improved rubric for interpreting the sociality of San society.

A researcher who has done studies of the body in San rock art is Blundell (2004) whose text, *Nqabayo's Nomansland* is arguably the first such work to explicitly look at San concerns with the body as it is represented in the rock art. Attempting to use an embodied approach to the San rock art of Nomansland, located in the south-eastern mountains of South Africa, Blundell predominantly focuses on two categories of bodily imagery.

His first category to be subjected to an embodied analysis is a group of images he calls Eldritch Figures. These figures are defined as images with five important characteristics (Blundell 2004:98). First, they are painted in a thin white paint. Second the figures are often painted clustered together. Third the images are frequently painted over other images in the panels found in the Nomansland area (Pearce 2002). Fourth, the figures are frequently anthropomorphic, and commonly therianthropic in depiction. Fifth, the figures are most often painted with grotesque, deformed corporeal aspects such as claws, very elongated penises, skeletal bodies and ferocious teeth (see Fig. 5).

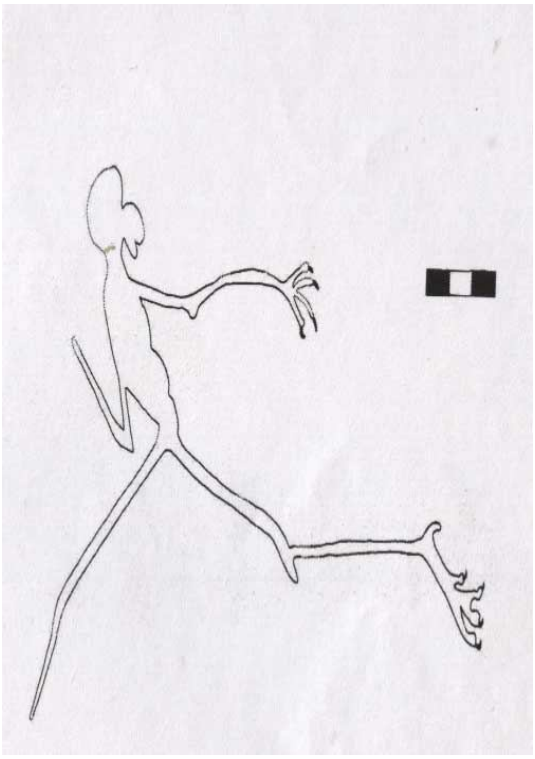

Fig. 5 Eldritch image, Blundell 2004

Following Turner's (1996) argument that all disease is disorder, and that such disorder can be expressed through the corporeal being, Blundell (2004:111–112) argues that these images represent spirits-of-the-dead in the rock art. Since spirits-of-the-dead are the harbingers of death, disease and both physical and social disorder in San society they have been painted with bodily deformations and socially maladjusted bodies which reflects their role in San society as bringing social and physical distress to the band. Thus, in this argument, the images of spirits-of-the-dead have been interpreted as images which San painters specifically painted to reflect the social role spirits-of-the-dead have in the San group. This fits in with the anti-foundationalist ideas of the body as it describes how the San groups experienced their lifeworlds in line with a preconceived notion of what how the body is perceived and understood in a particular society. Illness will be something you expect to be unpleasant, ill formed, and in a society where cures where

not easily available, particularly terrifying. Therefore your interaction with other bodies in the sense of those inflicting illness will be formed by an expectation of that of a deformed individual and an experience of extreme bodily deformation as experienced and explained by other shamans in the group.

The other figures in the art that Blundell examines are images he calls significantly differentiated figures or SDFs (Blundell 2004:131). These figures are defined as anthropomorphic, which correspond to Thomas Dowson's (1994) pre-eminent category. Sites containing these SDFs are found in a geographically limited area of Nomansland (Blundell 2004:132). These figures are characterized by anthropomorphic images with overly-large heads, and in some cases, exaggerated bodily parts such as large penises (*ibid.:*133). They are also frequently depicted with a number of objects and the bodies themselves may be highly embellished with headdresses and braided hair. These SDFs are importantly often portrayed with distinctive facial features (*ibid.*: 139).The importance and increasing emphasis on the upper parts of the bodies in these images Blundell ascribes to the 'death of the postcranial body' (*ibid.*:145) which is that paintings of the body below the head became less and less important (Fig. 6). The head was thus emphasised in detail as well as size.

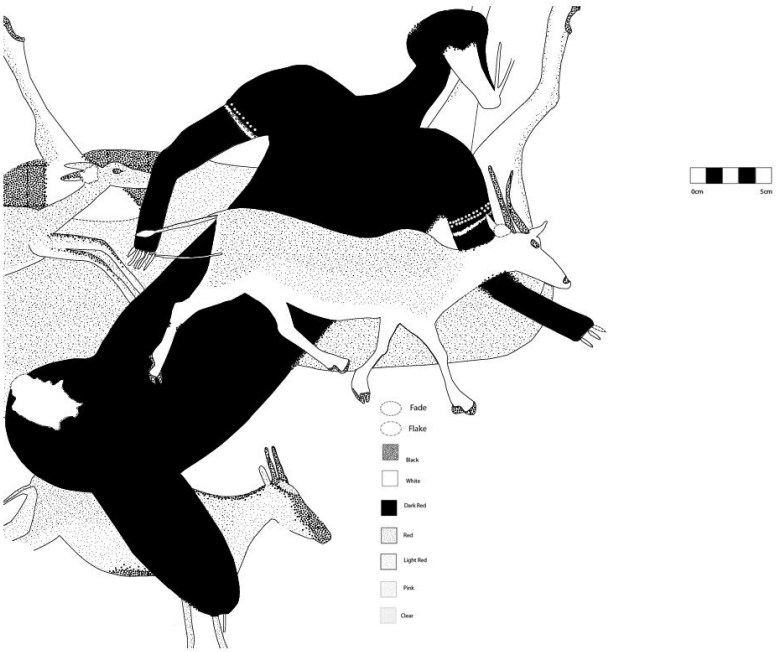

Fig. 6 SDF, Turner 2006

This change in the portrayal of anthropomorphs in the rock art and the death of the post cranial body is attributed to changing social relations in the area of Nomansland (*ibid.*). Believing that these images represent powerful shamans (as did Dowson) Blundell (2004) argues that the death of the post-cranial body was due to the importance of individual identity in the shamans as their landscape became increasingly filled with people of different cultures, thus enhancing the need for shamans to amplify their personal identity through their faces. In this use of body studies a cross-over between foundationalist and anti-foundationalist approaches has been used. On one hand, the shamans were enhancing their individuality through their faces and upper parts of their bodies because of a changing social structure in which individual shamans were noted for their power. However, the way in which shamans were experiencing other bodies around them also led to a need to emphasise their individuality since their personal experience of

the world around them was one in which a number of people from different cultures were affecting the shamans' experiences of the world.

Importantly, Blundell (*ibid.*:157) believes that the San would have shifted to rain-making from healing due to assimilatory practices with their Bantu-speaking neighbours. Thus the body, which would have been highly important in their healing rites, became less important in rain-making practices and their personal identities as powerful rainmakers would have taken precedence over their bodies.

Crucially, Blundell has used body and embodiment to explain the rise of SDF's as an image category. Through the vehicle of the body, the San were thus expressing their changing social situations and the differing personal interests of the shaman. He is therefore not denying that social structures were impacting on the way the body was reified, but he has looked at the images of how the San perceived themselves to understand these social structures, rather than trying to slot the art into a pre-conceived social framework.

Blundell (2004:168–169) also makes an embodied argument for the consumption of the rock art. He bases this view on the synesthesiastic experiences many people report during trance. Synesthesiasts frequently report a mixing of the senses and thus will 'hear colour', 'taste shapes' and 'feel sounds' (Cytowic 2000). Many shamans report having synesthesiastic experiences during their trance experiences in which they feel as if their limbs are turning into the entoptic images they may be seeing, thus confusing sight with physical sensations. According to Blundell (2004:169) certain rock art images in Nomansland can be related to synesthesiastic sensations. An example of this is a site

(situated in the Free State) containing red finger dots in a line which progressively turn into a portrayal of human limbs. It has been argued (Lewis-Williams & Blundell 1997) that these dots portray the synesthesiastic experience in which vision and touch have been combined. Based on this argument, and the information from San descendants stating that the rock art was touched to draw potency from it during trances in shelters (Lewis-Williams 1986b) it appears that the touching of the rock art was an important part of the consumption of the art.

Not only was touching of the surface integral to the consumption of the imagery, but was a significant act in its own right since the surface of the rock has been argued to represent a veil between the real world and the spirit world (Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1990). Through this veil, creatures from the spirit world would move between the real world and the spirit world and, indeed, imagery is frequently painted as if moving in and out of the rock surface or disappearing into cracks and crevices in the rock face (*ibid.*). Thus, by touching the rock surface the San could come into physical contact with the spirit world and its inhabitants (Blundell 2004:169).

In accordance with the location of the rock art sites, the physical touching of the rock art and the rock surface itself is an act of physical interaction with the rock art (*ibid.*). Therefore the art was not just something to just be passively looked at, but could be used to actively gain access to the spirit world. Indeed, shamans and dancers attempting to go into trance could dance in certain shelters and see the imagery, eventually becoming one with the imagery itself (*ibid.*). The focus of this argument is that the experience of the rock art was corporeal itself. Instead of just looking at the images the viewer could

physically interact with them thus making the consumption of the rock art a corporeal experience.

There are some limitations to Blundell's interpretation of the images in Nomansland. Chief amongst these is a partial lack of chronology in the production of the art. Dowson (1993) was faced with the same problem and argues that this concern with chronology was chronocentric. Dowson (1993) felt that chronology and a focus on history from this chronology was a westernized view point and that other evidence needed to be relied on to construct history, not only chronology. This was in a response to Aron Mazel's work (1992) which considered archaeological deposit and not only rock art in order to obtain dates with regards to the rock art itself (Blundell 2004: 67). Mazel (1992, 1993) felt that a secure chronological framework was needed in order to use the images in the art to write a more secure history for the San (Blundell 2004:67).

Whilst Dowson makes a strong argument, it is true that chronology supports arguments for rock art that are focused on interpreting change in the art. If possible, it is important to gain dates for the art. Blundell has done this in part, but he still fails to conclusively show that certain images, such as SDFs, were changing at particular times in history. This lack of chronology is also an issue in the Brandberg.

Blundell also assumes that facial features in the art are indicative of different races and people being painted in the art. In some of the images it is difficult to tell whether these facial features are representative of any kind of 'real' person, and may be more illustrative of non-real creatures in the spirit world than actual shamans.

Blundell's use of phenomenology to explain the presence of SDFs in the art is commendable; however it may not be the case that the 'death of the postcranial body' was due to the emphasis shifting from healing to rainmaking. Both healing and rainmaking still require the shaman to enter a trance state. Thus, the power of a shaman as a rainmaker would still be evidenced in their physical expression in terms of their body. Although individuals may have been known as powerful rainmakers, this still required them to show their prowess through their body in trance. Thus it does not necessarily follow that the body would have become less important with the rise in the importance of rainmaking, and thus this argument does not adequately explain why bodies of SDFs were painted with very little attention to detail, or in an incomplete way.

Despite these limitations to Blundell's arguments, the use of the body as a paradigm has resulted in some interesting insights into the rock art. It also allows for a move away from 'top down' theoretical approaches, where theory was applied to society and then rock art. Rather, Blundell looked at the rock art as a means of reading the history of the area which arguably brought us closer to understanding how the San in Nomansland were reacting to their social environment.

The explicit body in San rock art in the Brandberg

My approach to the rock art of the Brandberg is theoretically guided by previous approaches to the body. In subsequent chapters I develop not only a hermeneutic understanding of images of the giraffe and giraffe-headed snakes, but I also focus on how these images can be connected to society in terms of an understanding of the body as a vehicle for societal expression..

In developing my approach to the body I have taken note of Blundell's (2004:88) suggestions as to how the body should be studied in San rock art. He proposes that:

1. Painted or engraved anthropomorphic bodies need to be treated as a basic unit of analysis for consideration of social concerns (in his case in the Nomansland rock art).
2. That, where possible, the somatic analysis of the body should take place from the perspective of embodiment. In particular one needs to look at how identities are tied to the individual's physical being.
3. Where embodied approaches are impractical or unachievable, analyses should still consider 'the body'. In this approach bodies will be treated as a microcosm of the social conditions existing in the group which produced the images.
4. In attempting to reach a 'somatic past' we should not only consider the images themselves, but corporeal experience should be considered as a factor in the entire process of production and consumption of the images.

Taking note of his perspectives I approach my analysis with the following considerations in mind:

1. Not only human, but animal bodies can be representative of humans in certain cases. These are considered in this dissertation when attempting to assess the sociality of the rock art in the Brandberg. Given that there are so many diverse animal depictions, future studies of the rock art in this area would benefit from analysing the animal imagery as not only metaphors of potency, but metaphors for society itself. I believe that this is the case when keeping Douglas' theories in mind which state that animals can stand for metaphors for society at large. So far we generally look at animal bodies in rock art from the perspective of how potent

they may have been, but I do believe that they may stand for more than this. They may be social signifiers. I do not propose that we can understand how animals perceive the world and their bodies. What I do propose is that where animals stand as symbols for humans and human experiences we may be able to analyse the reasons for representing humans in animal form from the perspective of the body. Although animals as representative of human trance experiences have been analysed before in rock art research, I believe that more explicit analyses can be done.

2. I refrain from applying an embodied approach to animal images. Giraffe and giraffe-headed snakes are so consistent in their reproduction that it would be difficult to argue for individual presences in their production. Instead, I follow a more anti-foundationalist approach. I suspect elements of this approach will be useful in future studies of animals as metaphors for societal states of being.

In addition to a theoretical framework, this dissertation rests heavily on a hermeneutic approach to the rock art. As has been the case for rock art research in the last 30 years, my hermeneutic approach is largely informed by ethnography. Therefore, in the next chapter I move away from these somatic theoretical concerns, and focus on the ethnographic issues and challenges that have arisen in our consideration of imagery in San rock art. I then go back to the rock art and examine previous explanations presented for the imagery under discussion before offering my own interpretations. This attempts to explain how, within the framework of the body, these animal images can be said to symbolise a particular set of societal norms.

Chapter 2

Method and Ethnography: The need for a new approach to ethnographical interpretation

Whilst my previous chapter looked at the body as a theoretical paradigm for understanding some of the images in the art of the Brandberg, this chapter examines another crucial tool for rock art interpretation — ethnography. As is so frequently the case in rock art interpretation, assessing the meaning of the imagery is largely dependent on our use and interpretation of ethnography from various San groups in southern Africa. Therefore, as a means of interpreting my two major images in the rock art of the Brandberg, I have to resort to the ethnography that exists concerning snakes and giraffe.

It is evident that some 25 years of San rock art research has conclusively demonstrated that ethnography is the key component in the interpretation of the meaning of San rock art imagery in southern Africa. Despite long standing debates as to the kind of ethnography that should be used, and the manner in which that ethnography is interpreted and applied, it is undeniable that ethnography remains the most potent method to understand the symbolism employed in the hunter-gatherer paintings, even in instances where that imagery may be 4000 or more years old as may be the case with some images in the Brandberg rock art (Lenssen –Erz 2001:331). However, recent discussions pertaining to our use of ethnography have raised questions regarding the manner in which the ethnographic sources are applied to the study of the ancestors of San peoples and their archaeology. As I grapple with these issues in my own preliminary readings of

ethnography with which to interpret the rock art of the Brandberg, I use this chapter to examine the renewed discussion and suggest that although the current approach to the use of ethnography to interpret rock art has solved many problems, others remain. I therefore suggest a variant approach to the use of ethnography for rock art interpretation by researchers working within the broad ritualistic framework of interpretation.

Previous debates

Like San rock art studies, hunter-gatherer archaeology has not always been able to use ethnography to assist in site interpretation. There has been an interest in using ethnography to assist archaeological research in southern Africa which has resulted in the application of ethnographical sources to archaeological interpretation. However, in order to situate this debate, it is necessary for me to discuss the issues surrounding the use of ethnography in understanding archaeology of hunter-gatherers in southern Africa, and particularly San rock art.

The Kalahari Revisionist Debate, spearheaded by Edwin Wilmsen (1989) and James Denbow (1986) has had the most intense impact on the relevance of modern day San ethnography to the interpretation of much older San material culture. This debate has been long and extensive with a number of researchers taking part (e.g., Schirire 1980, 1992; Denbow 1986; Gordon 1984; Lee 1984; Wilmsen 1989; Solway & Lee 1990; Wilmsen & Denbow 1990). The Revisionists major point emphasises the contention that the San have been exposed to intensive interaction with Bantu-speaking farmers for nearly 2000 years. This suggests that they, and consequently their culture, have been influenced by other cultures long before the San encountered the Europeans who recorded their ethnographies. Thus, the contention is that most ethnographic

documentation may not be that applicable to pre-2000 year archaeological remains since the way of life of the San thousands of years ago is likely to have been radically different to that recorded ethnographically.

The Revisionists, in turn, have been criticized for reducing the San to an economic underclass lacking the autonomy to play an active part in the creation of their own history (Kent 1992). Researchers dispute that the San were an economic underclass in their relations with their Bantu-speaking neighbours (e.g., Blundell 2004; Pearce 2008). The eminence of the trance-dance in the Kalahari ethnographies, and the fact that we know from ethnographies from disparate areas (eg. Orpen 1874; Stow 1905; Bleek & Lloyd 1911; Schapera 1930; Low 2004) that the San all over southern Africa were and are still practising this rite with largely similar beliefs attached to it, suggests that San ideology was not as deeply affected by relations with their Bantu-speaking neighbours as the Revisionists would like to suggest.

The most significant issue with the Revisionist approach is that they don't challenge the Harvard ethnographers' (eg., Marshall 1962, 1969, 1976, 1999, Marshall-Thomas 1959) notions that the San groups in the Kalahari were pristine when they arrived, that they got there just 'before the deluge' (Marcus *et al* 1986: 165). Instead, the Revisionists simply re-adjust the notion of pristine hunter-gatherers to the time before the arrival of the Bantu-speakers. In some ways this creates the idea that San history began at the point of the arrival of the Bantu speakers (Pearce 2008: 30), that before they were in contact with the Bantu-speakers they had no class distinctions and hierarchy, and no significant social structures of their own (Blundell 2004). Although this has been demonstrated not to be the case (Blundell 2004) the legacy of the Revisionist approach to ethnography and its

use can still be seen in copious rock art interpretations both in South Africa (e.g, Manhire *et al* 1986; Campbell 1987; Loubser & Laurens 1994; Jolly 1986, 1992, 1994, 1995, 1996a, 1996b, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2002, 2005) and in Namibia (Kinahan 1991) all of whom assume that San history can only be read in the rock art from the point at which the San began to have interaction with either their Bantu-speaking or Khoe/pastoralist neighbours.

However, the issues raised by the Revisionists have usefully served to reinforce the understanding that the San ethnographies cannot always be uncritically applied to LSA archaeology or rock art studies. Despite this understanding though, it is accepted that ethnography is not inapplicable to researching earlier San material culture, albeit if some caution needs to be applied to its use. Most importantly, it has to be remembered that there is little archaeological evidence from the last 2000 years to suggest that the San were in fact an economic underclass to their Bantu-speaking neighbours (Sadr 1997) and indeed as I pointed out in my previous chapter, rock art studies have served to reinforce this idea, sometimes through the conduit of the body in rock art rather than from the ethnography alone (Dowson 1998a; Blundell 2004).

Other slightly less pivotal debates have ensued over the use of ethnography for interpreting the meaning of San material culture. Many of these specifically relate to the use of ethnography with regards to San rock art research. The most important point of contention relates to the explanatory power of shamanic-centred readings of the ethnography (eg., Lewis-Williams 1981, 1984a, 1984b, 1987,1988b, 1998, 2001; Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1989,1990; Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2004). Widespread agreement exists over the idea that the art is fundamentally concerned with the religious experiences

of San ritual specialists. Other motivations for the production of the art, as well as differing interpretations of the art have been postulated (e.g., Solomon 1997, 1999, 2000a, 2000b, Lenssen-Erz 1997). However these arguments remain to be conclusively demonstrated. Often they fail to establish what motivated the San to paint in the first place.

Debates over the meaning of the art initially came to the fore with Alex Willcox's (1963, 1978) contention that much of the art could be explained as "art for art's sake". This view has also been expressed by other researchers (e.g., Lee & Woodhouse 1964; Rudner & Rudner 1959). The idea proposes that all people have a natural propensity for making art and no more complex explanations are needed than that which proposes that art was simply a pleasurable past time and a way of receiving praise for skilful artistic talents, a point found nowhere in the ethnography. However, the significant point in this idea is that no credence is given to the possibility that the art may be symbolic.

The proposal that art was painted for its own sake spurred extensive quantification of San rock art carried out by various researchers (e.g., Willcox 1963; Maggs 1967; Pager 1971, 1975; Vinnicombe 1967a, 1967b, 1972a, 1972b, 1976, Lewis-Williams 1972, 1974, 1981) in an attempt to get beyond the art for arts sake approach. Drawing on apparently scientific techniques which emerged from the New Archaeology movement, researchers intensively quantified the rock art in the hope that some sort of pattern would emerge which would aid in the symbolic understanding of the art. For Willcox (eg.,1978, 1984) the quantification of the rock art appeared to demonstrate that many images were empirically concerned with the day-to-day activities of the San people, rather than their ritual or mythical beliefs (e.g. Willcox 1978). For Lewis-Williams (1972, 1974) the

quantitative data showed a recurrent theme with regards to the painting of such images as the eland and that the art followed a distinct syntax. As a result of this, debates ensued largely between Willcox and Lewis-Williams (e.g.1984b) over whether the meaning of the art could be elucidated through such quantification and numerical analysis.

This quantification carried out by researchers such as Willcox (e.g., 1963, 1978) and others did not ultimately prove that the art could be understood through purely empirical means. Extensive analysis of empirical and analogical reasoning in rock art research (e.g. Lewis-Williams 1972, 1984b, 1999; Lewis-Williams & Loubser 1986) and more generally (Wylie 1982, 1985, 1989) has indicated that not only is the use of ethnography in San rock art research analogous, but that it is a strong, cogent analogy, informed by a reasonable and applicable method. Through these debates, the question as to whether ethnography is one of the approaches which can be used to interpret San rock art appears to have been answered in the affirmative and is now generally the accepted approach.

Although the use of ethnography had become the norm when interpreting San rock art, a notable disagreement arose over the manner in which ethnography has been interpreted and how this affects the meaning of the rock art. I refer here to the long-standing disagreement between Lewis-Williams (e.g. 1998, 1999) and Anne Solomon (1997, 1999, 2000a, 2000b) as to whether the art does or does not largely relate to the so-called "shaman-centric" aspects of San ethnography (Solomon 1997). This issue is not fundamentally concerned with whether or not ethnography can be applied to the rock art, and indeed both parties make extensive use of ethnography in their interpretations. Rather, it deals with the manner in which researchers choose to look at the ethnography and correlate it to images in the rock art. Fundamentally it still concerns issues around

how ethnography is applied in rock art research, and moreover how the ethnography itself is interpreted.

Although the issues raised by Solomon and Lewis-Williams over the years are well-known to most rock art researchers, there are a few points of the debate I would like to reiterate. This is because these points emphasise the fact that many of these debates in rock art research have achieved little more than a failure to provide a way in which researchers can take the discipline to new levels of interpretation, or fine-tune our current interpretative frameworks.

Solomon (1997, 1999) constantly raises the issue of whether or not myth, rather than ritual, is the primary focus of the rock art, especially concerning antelope-headed therianthropes. She believes (e.g., Solomon 1997) that certain of theses characters from San myth which represent 'primal time' or mythical beings are depicted in the rock art where Lewis-Williams (e.g., 1987, 1994, 1995, 1998) interprets them as medicine men (or women) experiencing an altered state of consciousness. Whilst myth may be important in some contexts, there are some well-established issues with Solomon's mythological interpretation of the rock art.

First, while most of the detail in San rock art can be explained as a result of the experiences of San medicine men/women during trance, San myth does not explain these details with the same range or depth of meaning. Second, it simply does not supply researchers with a way of identifying whether such mythical beings were depicted in the rock art rather than experiences from altered states of consciousness. It does not suggest criteria for seeing mythical creatures in the rock art. It suggests that non-real imagery can

be mythical, but then again so does the trance hypothesis. Whilst there may be many unreal images, there are so-called real images such as antelope, felines and birds. There are also many human images. Some are in non-descript postures, but many are in postures more easily related to trance than myth. Last, it does not adequately deal with the issue of motivation in that it fails to suggest what the relation of myth to rock art may have been, that is, *why* the San would have painted what they related in their myths, rather than what they saw during trance.

We know that the imagery in the rock art may reflect the trance dance since the trance dance is concerned with the spirit world. As the rock surface seems to have been a veil between the real world and the spirit world, it seems that the rock art was being painted to portray the images as being 'in' the spirit world. As Blundell (2004, and see Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1990) showed, this influences not only the production, but also the consumption of the rock art.

Myth, on the other hand, does not explain why the San would have chosen to paint what they were already narrating in their myths and, more importantly, what the relationship between the viewer and the art was. If the point of painting was simply to portray what was suggested in their myths, then we appear to be back at the art for art's sake interpretation in that the San were therefore painting what they communicated in their myths for illustrative purposes.

The mythical approach to rock art interpretation therefore leaves us with very little understanding of how to identify or interpret the mythical creatures that are supposed to be present in the art. It would appear that religious experience, rather than myth, as an

explanation best explains the images. This is due to the fact that religious experiences have been frequently demonstrated in the rock art (e.g., Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1990, Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1994; Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2004). Moreover, religious experiences provide not only an explanation for the rock art, but a motivation for the painting of the art, and a way in which to understand its consumption.

I primarily employ the "shamanic centred" approach (which privileges the role of trance as an explanation for the images seen in the rock art as opposed to mythical imagery) in this dissertation to understand the hermeneutics of the art. I now move onto a discussion of the hermeneutic approach.

The hermeneutic approach

The 'hermeneutic approach' can be broadly defined in rock art studies as the manner in which meaning of the art is unfolded. More specifically for this dissertation I am not only looking for meaning in the art, but also meaning in the San social landscape. So, this broadly fits in with general understanding of the 'hermeneutic approach' with regards to rock art interpretation. However, I also look for meaning in the ethnographies of the San which often reflect and relate to their perspective of the world and their 'lived experience' in it. This too can be regarded as a search for meaning and thus broadly can be termed a 'hermeneutic approach'.

For researchers working within the "shamanic centred" framework of interpretation, as this dissertation does, there is an array of ethnographical references and previous work

that may be drawn from. Many support the idea that San rock art in southern Africa is primarily concerned with the experiences of religious specialists during an altered state of consciousness. Most agree that the meaning of images in the rock art can be gained primarily from an interpretation of the ethnography, although some (e.g. Eastwood & Eastwood 2006; Hollman 2004, 2002, 2003) have also pioneered the use of new methods in interpreting images such as natural modelling.

Natural modelling is a methodological approach to the interpretation of rock art which is premised on the idea that many symbols in the art (and indeed the ethnography) are based on natural models (Whitley 2001:81). Natural models are those natural phenomena (such as animal behaviour)

> …that served to structure that logic underlying aspects of religious symbolism and ritual, usually by some form of analogical reasoning… . When natural models are based on phenomena that themselves involve invariant principles, uniformitarian laws, or timeless characteristics, the models have the potential to inform our understanding of truly prehistoric religious phenomena, without benefit of informants' exegesis, and sometimes even without ethnohistorical connections. (Whitley 2001:132 –133).

Animals and their behavioural characteristics may be used in the rock art and in ethnography because their natural characteristics assist in emphasizing some aspect of religious belief. Therefore, it has been argued that in the Makgabeng Plateau in South Africa, female kudu in oestrus are frequently painted to emphasize a concern the San have with the potency associated with sexuality in their religious belief, as well as San concerns with seasonal and territorial aggregation (Eastwood *et al.* 1999). Thus, frequently in San rock art research, natural modelling is related to the ethnographic references to the creature being studied. More importantly for this dissertation, natural modelling applies a form of body studies in that it uses the animal bodies as a metaphor for certain experiences in society within the framework set out by Douglas, and explained

in my previous chapter. In the same manner in which Lenssen-Erz (1994) used springbok to understand social concerns in the Brandberg, these researchers are using natural motifs, specifically in the case of animals, and their corporeal traits to understand what they meant to the San. I argue that it is possible to take the use of natural modelling one step further. One can analyse the movements and postures of animals following Douglas (1963) and suggest that they are metaphors for certain corporeal sensations. Viewing animals in this way allows us to comprehend the physical experiences of the society that produced these animal images and allows us to take a step beyond a hermeneutic understanding of the animals to a physical one, an idea which I discuss further later in this dissertation.

However, whether one makes a corporeal statement or a hermeneutic one through the use of natural modelling, the significant factor is that all these studies continue to support the broadly acceptable framework for interpreting rock art which is that rock art reflects the religious experiences of the San. The new advances in our interpretations stem not only from a new way of looking at the ethnography, or approaching interpretation, but also from the use of new and complementary methods such as natural modelling.

Thus, the debates over the use of ethnography, as well as the use of ethnography to interpret rock art have done much to enhance the contention that the rock art is essentially concerned with San religion. In some cases (e.g., Mguni 2002, 2005) the application of a combination of ethnography and natural modelling has allowed for dramatic new insights into the complex manners in which San people chose to represent some aspects of the spirit world, and how these representations may differ from one area to the next. Moreover, it demonstrates that the "shamanic centred" framework explains the broad

context of the rock art but may not always pick up the complexities of representation, or nuances in meaning when used on its own. Thus, when coupled with other methods it appears to be an even stronger interpretive framework than it was when originally developed.

However, the issue in using natural modelling arises when faced with rock art not necessarily amenable to these methods. For instance, when an antelope image, or some other animal, does not display interesting or easily identifiable behavioural traits. In addition, as David Pearce (2009) has argued, although the animals are models, they are symbols for something in the art. Therefore, it may not always be the case that the meaning of the images can be automatically read from the posture of the animal under question (Pearce 2009:338). In these instances we are faced once more with the need to consult the ethnography to attempt interpretation, and if possible, combine our interpretation with a theoretical framework as this dissertation does.

I am not alone in re-assessing our approaches to ethnography. There has been a renewed interest in the manner we apply the ethnography, which differs from the previous debates which dealt largely with the ethnographical framework itself. The researcher who is most vocal on a need for a slightly different methodological approach to ethnography is Peter Mitchell (2005a, 2005b). He has suggested certain key problems with current approaches to the use of ethnography for southern African archaeology in the Later Stone Age. I now consider his points and their relevance to rock art research.

New approaches to using ethnography

In his discussion of the use of ethnography, Mitchell (2005b) focuses specifically on the interaction between ethnography and archaeology. He rightly points out that southern Africa has a rich Later Stone Age archaeological record combined with a comparatively impressive ethnographic data set from which to draw when examining the archaeology (Mitchell 2005b:66). Moreover, our well-developed rock art framework means that southern Africa stands out as one of the best places for pursuing joint studies which can incorporate ethnography, rock art, archaeology, environmental data and historical sources in interpreting the Later Stone Age material record (Mitchell 2005b:67).

However, he points out that previous archaeological studies done using the ethnographic record have run into various problems, as much as they have posed interesting possibilities for the use of ethnography (Mitchell 2005b:67). The two flaws in the use of ethnography according to Mitchell (*ibid.*) are as follows:

1. Researchers tend to focus on a "holy trinity" of ethnography. That is, many researchers favour ethnography from three groups namely the Ju/'hoansi, the G/wi and the /Xam. This means that a very small portion of a large collection of ethnography is being emphasized, which overlooks the possible cultural variability that may exist in other groups (*ibid.*).
2. The Kalahari Revisionist Debate has demonstrated that there may be some problems with the use of these ethnographies due to the extensive interaction that has taken place over the last 2 millennia in the region (*ibid.*).

Mitchell (2005a, 2005b) proposes a three-pronged approach for surmounting these problems:

1. He suggests that we first need to "…develop a closely argued archaeology of ethnographically known Bushman societies" (Mitchell 2005a:67). In essence we need to become as familiar with the archaeology of groups which are the main sources of ethnographic interpretation, as we are with their ethnography.
2. As a second requirement, Mitchell refers to what he calls a "longstanding call" to "de-!Kung" archaeology (Parkington 1984) (!Kung is a previous name for the Ju/'hoansi). In this instance he is arguing for the need to expand the use of Bushman ethnography beyond the "holy trinity". Not only should we be using these three popular San groups, but we should be looking at ethnography from less well known and referenced groups from which ethnographic data has been collected.
3. Finally, he suggests that archaeologists need to look beyond San ethnography for inference. Thus, archaeologists need to look at the archaeology and ethnography from other parts of the world in which 'complex' hunter-gatherer societies can be found. By doing this archaeologists can make comparisons between the impacts of social and economic intensification on these societies, and impacts on San societies undergoing similar processes.

In addition, Mitchell (2005b:68) also suggests that we should make more of an effort to connect rock art to archaeological studies. By this he means we should not only be looking at the parallels between the introduction of livestock into Later Stone Age archaeology, and the inclusion of images of domesticates in the rock art. This is a highly

literal comparison between rock art and archaeology. We should also be using the dual record in a less literal sense. Thus we could look at whether the social interpretations advanced for some of the rock art can be found in some way in the archaeology, thereby more strongly suggesting the social change that was thought to be taking place as indicated from the rock art evidence.

Mitchell's framework in application to rock art research

A number of the approaches to the use of ethnography that Mitchell (*ibid.*, 2005a) mentions are pertinent to rock art research. However, I would argue that aspects of his suggested approaches are at odds with established interpretations of rock art, above all those which give primacy to religious and cosmological motivations for their production.

The contention that archaeology often only deals with a "holy trinity" of ethnography may be applicable to the ethnographically related studies of archaeological sites carried out by researchers such as John Yellen (1977); Lyn Wadley (1996) and Janette Deacon (1996). However, rock art researchers frequently use more than the "holy trinity" of ethnography when interpreting rock art, in particular ethnography from the Maloti bushmen, and the Nharo (e.g. Lewis-Williams 1982, Lewis-Williams 1986a; Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1989) thus we are already in-line with Mitchell's second suggestion for the use of ethnography. However it is true that we do not necessarily consider ethnography drawn from smaller groups of San people. Rock art researchers still do have a tendency to privilege better known groups, even if our pool of sources is larger than that used by archaeologists.

Another point that Mitchell (2005b) raises as a limitation for our use of ethnography relates to the contact issues raised by the Revisionists. I do not deny that it is difficult to assess the extent to which San society has been affected by interaction, although I have argued that it appears that their beliefs have not been heavily influenced. However, a point which I have already mentioned is the indication that there was not necessarily as much economic subordination of the San by their Bantu-speaking neighbours as is suggested by the Revisionists (Sadr 1997). The tacit conclusion from this evidence is that without economic subservience, there could not have been that much ideological domination over San beliefs. Moreover, there is no prerequisite that says that economic subordination equals ideological subordination (Scott 1985). As I have already pointed out, the continued existence of core ideological beliefs in the Kalahari San suggest that despite possible economic subordination to their Bantu-speaking neighbours many beliefs still continued largely unhindered and in all likelihood, quite unaffected if the belief systems of other San groups serve as a reference. For instance, if one looks at the rock art of the Limpopo-Shasi confluence area, an area long affected by Bantu speaker interaction, we are still finding images which indicate that there was a central belief in the trance dance and the supernatural potency which accompanies it (Eastwood 1999, Eastwood & Cnoops 1999). In the south-eastern mountains Qing (1874) in a testimony collected by Joseph Orpen clearly demonstrates a belief in the supernatural powers of rock paintings and of similar belief systems to that collected by Bleek and Lloyd (1911), which all point to a core belief in the trance dance and its potency despite the fact that Qing appears to have had extensive interaction with Bantu speakers, even speaking their language. Therefore, whilst the Revisionists may argue that economic subordination may equal ideological subordination I believe that we have evidence to the contrary. There

may have been some cultural borrowing between groups of San and Bantu speakers, but my rock art is generally accepted to be too old to have been painted at a period in which the San co-existed with other groups. That said, we cannot rule out possible interaction with pastoralists (Kinahan 1989), but it has been argued that this interaction occurs much later in the rock art sequence and is not a factor in the images which I am examining in this dissertation (Kinahan 1989, 1991).

Research conducted into the belief systems of the San, as well as Khoekhoen and Bantu-speaker groups, further indicates that interaction had less impact than was originally thought, illustrating that ideological systems do not necessarily change with economic ones, despite the Marxist contention that they do. Thus, comparisons between San ethnographies (Lewis-Williams & Biesele 1978; Lewis-Williams 1980, 1981, 1985, 1990, 1992) have shown that there are a number of similarities between the beliefs of the San people all over southern Africa, despite the fact that many of these groups had different neighbours with contrasting belief systems.

Some researchers (Jolly 1994, 1995, 1996a, 1996b; Prins 1994) have suggested that in the south-eastern mountains the San would have been taking on practices from their Nguni and Sotho neighbours, and that these are evidenced in the ethnography and the rock art. These works (*ibid.)* deal largely with divinatory practices, particularly of the Nguni. Peter Jolly (1995, 1996a, 1996b) and others ascribe some images in San rock art in the area to the assimilation of Bantu-speaker practices by the San. However, these images are commonly depicted in all San rock art, not just in areas where the San encountered Bantu-speakers. There is no reason to suspect that in the south-eastern mountains the presence of these elements in San rock art was as a result of the influence of Bantu-

speaker ideology, whereas elsewhere it was a product of San ritual. David Hammond-Tooke (e.g. 1962,1997, 1998, 1999, 2002) has shown that many of the similarities between Nguni belief and San religious practices are a result of the Nguni 'borrowing' from the San, and perhaps not the other way around and has indeed gone further and demonstrated the social mechanisms by which this happened (Hammond-Tooke 2002). However, Hammond-Tooke does not rule out the possibility that the San may have also borrowed beliefs from their Nguni neighbours (*ibid)*. Therefore, this is not to say that the San were uninfluenced by their Nguni-speaking neighbours. It is however, impossible to assess how much they may have been influenced due to the fact that there are no longer San in the Drakensberg. We therefore need to accept that the Nguni assimilated beliefs from the San and that the San may have garnered beliefs from the Nguni.

It seems that, despite the contentions of the Revisionists, it has been conclusively demonstrated that San belief and ritual has been heavily impacted upon through contact. Although there are some aspects that appear to have been absorbed from other cultures (such as the use of divining implements by groups of central San), the basis of their religion and trance experiences appears not to have been greatly changed through contact. Thus, it may not be such a prevalent problematic methodological issue to consider in the interpreting of the ethnography as Mitchell (2005b) suggests, particularly in the ethnography relating to ritual.

I now turn to the suggestions made by Mitchell (2005a, 2005b) for improving our use of ethnography for interpreting the archaeological record, and assess its relevance to rock art research. As outlined above, Mitchell suggests three changes to the manner in which we use ethnography.

It is arguable that there is a need to develop an archaeology more closely tied to known ethnography. I think it is acceptable to say that this will add much to our understanding of how and if San groups have changed from their predecessors. However, this will only inform us of the change in areas such as temporary settlement patterns, aggregation and dispersal, territorial behaviour, diet, movement of the band, attainment of livestock, and in some cases, ritual activities such as burial. It will not be capable of indicating how and if the cosmological beliefs of the group have changed, which I have already argued that they haven't despite a change in socio-economic factors. Moreover, if any material culture is discovered which suggests ritual behaviour, in most cases that material will be interpreted as ritualistic based on our understanding of the ethnographies. The material itself will not generally be able to inform our understanding of San cosmology. Thus, an archaeology more closely tied to known ethnographies is likely to benefit archaeology much more than it will benefit cognitive studies such as rock art.

The 'de-!Kunging' process with regards to the use of ethnography has, as I have already argued, been taking place generally in San rock art research. However, as I will demonstrate later, the need for an ethnographically informed approach which considers a wide range of ethnography is still present in San rock art research. Whilst many ethnographic sources are used, it is still often the case that a few groups will be referenced most frequently simply because their ethnography is better documented, and has been used several times previously. It was this issue which led me to consider a wide range of ethnographic sources in the interpretation of the Brandberg rock art examined in this dissertation and I think it is a point which still needs to be stressed in current San rock art research today.

Archaeology may be able to gain from comparing hunter-gatherer ethnography and archaeology from other parts of the world to the southern African record. This is because the impacts of environment, interaction and changing modes of production may be broadly analogous, particularly when the driving factors for these changes (or lack thereof) appear to be similar. Possibly even the social theoretical approach to the archaeology and even the rock art can be compared to other societies experiencing similar social shifts and changes. However, the cosmology of the San, their ritual, and their myth is almost entirely unique to them. Thus, comparisons can be made between the belief systems of the San and other hunter-gatherer groups, but these comparisons will only be useful to a limited degree due to the differing ideological systems, even in cases where the ritual processes may be similar.

Mitchell has made some cogent points about the uses of ethnography in archaeological research. However, his points are not all directly applicable to the way in which we use ethnography for the purposes of rock art interpretation.

In my research into the rock art of the Brandberg, I have made use of various methodological approaches. To some extent I have applied both natural modelling and neuropsychology to the interpretation of two classes of imagery. That said, I have had to rely most extensively on ethnography to inform my interpretations. In my following chapters I justify the relevance of the ethnographies I have chosen to use.

Demonstrably, my conclusions about the two classes of imagery I discuss in this dissertation (giraffe and giraffe-conflationary images) are somewhat different to the

conclusions reached by previous researchers examining the same classes of imagery. I will discuss these in the following chapters. However, it is arguable that my divergent conclusions have added to our understanding of the nuances of the San cosmological spectrum, and demonstrate that although there are definite overarching similarities between the various ethnographies, there are also important differences. These differences can only be illuminated through a slightly variant approach to the use of ethnography for interpretation.

These differences are even more enhanced when one considers that I use a framework for interpreting the ethnography which looks not only at the beliefs of the San with regards to their ritual activities, but actively emphasizes the physical attributes of their ritual activities, which provides a different insight into the rock art than has previously been posited, even in cases where the physical experiences of shamans were taken into account. Therefore, at this point I would like to outline this approach and suggest why it is necessary for the advancement of San rock art research.

Another approach to ethnographical interpretation

There are a few key methodological considerations which have informed my research and which I believe will be valuable for future rock art research. This is particularly applicable to areas outside of the Drakensberg, where our current ethnographical interpretative methods were developed.

In accordance with Mitchell, and other researchers, I think it is imperative to consider as many San ethnographic resources as possible. It is of course almost redundant to suggest

that *all* sources used must be original. To this end, 'obscure' ethnographies can contain key information for the interpretation of rock art in an area which cannot be found in the more widely referenced ethnographies.

Differences in the ethnography need to be considered with as much emphasis as is given to similarities. The similarities are related to what can be termed the 'pan-San' approach to understanding ethnography **(**McCall 1970**).** This approach posits that there are multiple similarities between the various ethnographies; therefore these different kinds of ethnography can be drawn on despite ethnographical variation since there are broad similarities between these ethnographies. These relate to the similarities between the approach to ritual, particularly trance, and similarities between the ideas relating to animals, particularly the eland in San belief and ritual (e.g. Lewis-Williams 1981). However, often the similarities between regions in terms of the overarching cosmology of San society obscure the fact that the meaning of some symbols can differ between groups. When these differences arise, it is necessary for the researcher to question why those differences exist. It may not always be the case that the differences are simply a matter of recording bias or error. As is the case with the rock art of the Brandberg, the less common differences appear to make far more sense in relation to the rock art images, and archaeology of the area. Thus considering these differences impacts upon our interpretation of the art.

When differences between the symbolisms of groups do arise, these differences run the risk of being ignored if the idea does not appear to be emphasized in the ethnographic record. It is also the case that differences may be overlooked due to the symbolism differing from other, more 'popular' groups of San. Thus, to establish whether a

difference is idiosyncratic and particular to one group of San, or has a more general application, this difference in belief must be compared to beliefs about the same ritual or creature in groups which are linguistically related. It is far more likely that linguistically related groups (Barnard 1992) will share similar nuanced beliefs, than non-linguistically related groups since the linguistics of hunter-gatherer groups (and indeed modern society) are related to their belief systems (Barnard 1992). This comparison enables the researcher to assess how important those differences are. For example one divergent reference in !Kun ethnography (possibly !Kung, it is not clear from the source if the !Kun group is in fact the !Kung) to the significance of snakes (Bleek & Lloyd 1911), which differs to the beliefs held by the /Xam (Bleek & Lloyd 1911) or Maloti San (Orpen 1874) is not in itself significant. However, if that same divergent reference is mentioned in three other linguistically related groups (to the !Kun), it suggests that this differing belief is valid, even if that belief is not shared by linguistically separate, but ethnographically popular groups such as the /Xam.

In extending our examination of the importance of regional particularities in the ethnographic record, Khoe ethnography should also be consulted. While this is a hugely contentious and problematic area of study it has been argued convincingly by some researchers (Barnard 1992, Low 2004) that there are similarities between the cosmology of the two groups which were likely to have stemmed from their shared past and long history of interaction. In particular, beliefs which are shared between the Khoe and the San and are not found amongst neighbouring Bantu-speaker populations are likely to be valuable sources of information about areas of common belief (Barnard 1992). For instance, it appears that certain beliefs relating to gods, taboos and the spirit world may have developed in tandem between the two groups. When looking specifically at groups

stemming from the northern regions of southern Africa, such as the Damara and the Hai//om, we see a marked similarity in the ritual roles regarding settlement layout, and taboos around initiation, kinship and marriage, even though the Damara, once hunter gatherers have since taken on a herding way of life (Barnard 1992:218). In almost all languages spoken in the Khoesan group of languages the word for spirit-of –the-dead is *g//ãûa,* despite differences in languages. What is significant to notice though, with regard to this dissertation, and my use of ethnography, is that the rock art of the Brandberg portrays some images of the trance dance thought to be painted prior to the arrival of pastoralists in the area (Kinahan 1989:44), suggesting an ancient root for this phenomenon, and thus an incredibly old origin for almost all ethnography relating to ritual amongst the San. When used with caution, these apparently common cosmological beliefs may be used to generate inferences from which to interpret the cosmology and rock art of the San, even when acknowledging that some beliefs may have been developed in tandem with the San and have come to pervade the ethnographic record today. Therefore, I am not specifically saying that the Khoe had no impact on San ethnography, and therefore would not like to deprive the Khoe of their own ideological agency. However, it is an impossible task to separate which beliefs are Khoe in origin and which are San. One thing I think can be said with confidence is that the rock art imagery portrays an ancient religious and ritual system in which the trance dance has primacy and the beliefs relating to the spirit world are most likely San in origin, even if some have been influenced to a degree by interaction (see Hoff 1997 for an example of this). The major problem is that we simply cannot delineate which beliefs may have been affected and are therefore forced to use the ethnographic data we have and can only use the now well-argued idea that the ideas relating to trance and its ritual components are almost purely San in origin.

The final suggestion I would like to offer rock art researchers considering ethnography is to take into account all ethnographical ideas and concepts relating to the body (both human and animal). Since rock art primarily portrays bodies (human and non-human) its primary mode of communication is through the portal of the body. When assessing ethnography, a rock art researcher cannot only concentrate on ideas surrounding rites of passage, hunting taboos and trance dances without being aware of the corporeal processes involved in the acting out of these actions. This is not to say that the body has been ignored as an analytical tool in interpreting rock art. Indeed Lewis-Williams (e.g., 1987, 1990b, 1995, 1996) has been very much aware of the associations between animal bodies and human bodies in the rock art. Moreover he and other researchers have noted that the trance experience has certain physical prerequisites and results (Lewis-Williams 2001; Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1989, 1994; Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2004). These corporeal experiences are incorporated into our understanding of the rock art and the animal and human images produced. They have seen the body as a means of communication of the experiences of trance, but not necessarily as a vehicle which is in itself expressive of its own experiences, and the constraints and possibilities available in the society in which it is actualizing itself. Blundell (2004) for instance makes a cogent analysis of the trance dance, showing how the physical portrayal of trance is in some ways more important to maintaining and reproducing social laws and social status than the experiences of shamans themselves. Thus, particularly when looking at issues of sociality as expressed in rock art, but also to a degree meaning, one needs to consider the highly corporeal experiences of the San when considering the ethnography. Importantly, this consideration is tied to the manner in which we use and interpret ethnography.

Thus, my contention is that researchers have become too comfortable with applying the same sets of ethnography to the interpretation of rock art from hugely divergent areas. Moreover, it seems that the general trend is to use the ethnographical sources other researchers have used, complete with their interpretation of the source, without going back and re-examining the original context of the source itself. Indeed, given the manner in which some researchers have used ethnography which is to privilege images and experiences in ethnography as 'things' rather than a corporeal experience which the group (as opposed to simply the shaman) will be going through, frequently limits the understanding we have of the embodied or even body-related experiences the San were having. As a result, we have indeed ended up with instances whereby a 'cookie-cutter' approach is used and it seems to be tacitly assumed that symbols southern Africa-wide had the same meanings for all groups of San.

This of course is not the same criticism as has been applied to the 'pan-San' cognitive model used widely in southern African rock art research. It is arguably true that the broader cosmology and ritual of the San southern Africa-wide appears to be based on similar principles. However, it is one thing to argue that San groups all over the area believe/d in the existence of a spirit world, believe/d in spirits-of-the-dead and attained altered states of consciousness during dances. It is a different matter to conclude from this 'pan-San' cognitive system that snakes/stars/rain had exactly the same symbolic connotations for all groups of San. It is at this point that I believe too many interpretations of San rock art have come short.

As a result of the use of the 'pan-San' cognitive model we are left with the sense that the only way in which rock art research can progress is to find new ways of interpreting over-

utilised ethnographies. Alternatively, we need to demonstrate that ethnography is not the only tool by which the rock art can be interpreted.

This progression is necessary because the current ritual-centred model in rock art research has apparently not moved our understanding of the meaning of San rock art much beyond what Lewis-Williams first suggested in "*Believing and Seeing*" in 1981. We are still debating the applicability of the 'pan-San' model, and the viability behind the idea that San ritual and rock art are connected. Although, as Lewis-Williams pointed out in 1994, innovation in San rock art research has taken place within an ethnographic framework. Indeed, it is the ethnography of the San peoples which has provided the most insight and new understandings of the art that researchers have had.

However, despite Lewis-Williams contention that "…an ethnographic approach does not necessarily produce a monolithic view that is incapable of development" (1994:6) it appears that the use of ethnography alone to understand San rock art is no longer producing the 'innovative' insights it was 15 years ago. It is, rather, through the use of other methodologies such as natural modelling, and theoretical developments in approaches to the social implications of rock art that the innovations have been made, although these will always have to be used in conjunction with ethnography.

Unfortunately, in most cases one needs to have a good understanding of the meaning of the rock art before social implications can be attributed to the art. In order to unpack the hermeneutics, researchers inevitably begin with the ethnography. My contention is simply that without a tightly defined regional understanding of ethnography, including

the similarities *and* differences, ethnographic interpretations are likely to remain similar from one area of art to the next.

This similarity is a danger for research, as it can lead to less feasible interpretations of the rock art. My work in the Brandberg is a case in point. Whilst other researchers used a broad and previously argued ethnographic interpretation for certain images in the art (outlined in the following two chapters), I have chosen here to look very closely at the beliefs of various groups of San from the northern to southern areas of southern Africa. This leads to a very different and I would argue far more relevant interpretation of the same images.

Thus, ethnographical information needs to be far more closely scrutinized and dissected than has previously been the case in rock art research. The era for debate over ethnographic applicability is long since over. Rather it has been replaced with a need for active ethnographic study and comparison. It is this that will assist researchers in a methodological advancement in the discipline.

Having considered the ethnographic benefits and limitations for rock art research, and also having briefly assessed the need to include theoretical concepts in our analysis of the ethnography, I move now to the next chapter. In this next chapter I analyse the previous uses of ethnography to interpret the snake and giraffe images in the Brandberg. I also look at interpretations from other areas with similar imagery. My purpose is to show that many of the interpretations from the Brandberg are drawing indiscriminately on interpretations from other areas without assessing the ethnographic validity of these interpretations.

Thus, in this chapter I have focused on the following:

- Ethnography initially did not inform rock art research in order to understand the art.
- Once ethnography had become a tool for interpreting the art, there was much debate on how that ethnography should be used
- There was a contention, now no longer accepted, that the San had been so influenced by their Bantu speaking neighbours that it rendered their ethnography not useful.
- A new way of using ethnography was suggested in order to understand not only rock art, but the archaeological record too.
- This new approach to utilising ethnography could be applied to rock art studies.
- This approach needed to take into account its joint development with Khoe influences.
- This ethnography needs to be read not only from the more prevalent sources, but also from those sources which are less explored and more obscured, but more regionally specific where possible.

Chapter 3

Snakes and Giraffe: Previous interpretations and ethnography

My previous chapter suggested that our current uses of ethnography frequently collapse differences between ethnographies from different areas, and often lead to a 'cookie-cutter' approach. I argued, instead, for a more area-specific use of ethnography where possible, and suggested that one should take into account the bodily actions and perceptions of the shamans and group in response to ritual activities when reading the ethnography

This chapter is focused on the bodies of giraffe and snakes in the context of the rock art of the Brandberg. The chapter, however, is more concerned with previous approaches to the analyses of these images in both the rock art of the Brandberg and other areas. The chapter seeks to demonstrate that the use of ethnography, as well as other various explanatory devices, has resulted in less applicable conclusions in the analysis of the snake and giraffe images than could be the case with a different approach to ethnography and interpretation.

Depictions of snakes and giraffe (*Giraffa camelopardalis*) are visually prominent in the San rock art of the Brandberg. Both these animals frequently are large and noticeable symbols at the sites. The bodies of the snake depictions may run at least half the length of the rock shelter, and are commonly many metres in length. At Snake Rock for instance the serpentine image can be seen from over a kilometre away from the site (Kinahan 1999) (Fig. 7). Giraffe images also are larger than other images of animals. The kneeling

giraffe at Amis 6 (see Fig. 8) is nearly 4 meters in length (personal observation) and has elaborate pattering on the body.



Fig. 7 Snake at Snake Rock, Rifkin 2007



Fig. 8 Giraffe at Amis 6, Pager 1989

The size in paintings of giraffe and snakes in the Massif is a feature which makes these animals stand out in the art. However, the significance of these two animals is also seen in the many interesting and varied manners in which they are painted**.** Significantly while painted individually, these two creatures appear to have been purposely linked to each other in the rock art of the Brandberg (Kinahan 1999; Lensen-Erz & Erz 2000), a link which has been discussed by other researchers (Guenther 1984; Kinahan 1999). In this chapter I propose to examine this link and then look at the previous arguments advanced for this link. I then examine these arguments in light of San ethnography and also consider other arguments advanced to explain the images of snakes and giraffe in other examples of San rock art outside of the Brandberg. Based on the ethnographical data I advance my own interpretation for the link between snakes and giraffe in the rock art in the following chapter. In addition I argue that from the ethnography regarding giraffe it appears that there is an attempt by the shaman to appropriate the powerful and positive potency of this animal in order to facilitate a trance state. This is a particularly important point as there are many potent animals which the ritual healer may draw on, yet in the depictions of giraffe and giraffe-snake conflations it is the giraffe potency which is being used rather than that of another animal. In the next chapter I elucidate the importance of this link.

Ways in which snakes and giraffe are linked in the rock art

I argue that there are three kinds of snakes in the rock art of the Brandberg. The first of these are naturalistic snakes which have both snake bodies and snake-like heads. An example can be found at Snake Rock (Fig.9). Second are depictions of snakes with apparently unidentifiable antelope heads. These occur occasionally at sites such as Amis 53 (Fig.10), Karoab 2 (Fig.11), and Ga'aseb 12 (Fig. 12).



Fig. 9 Snake Rock showing snake head in circle, Pager 1993

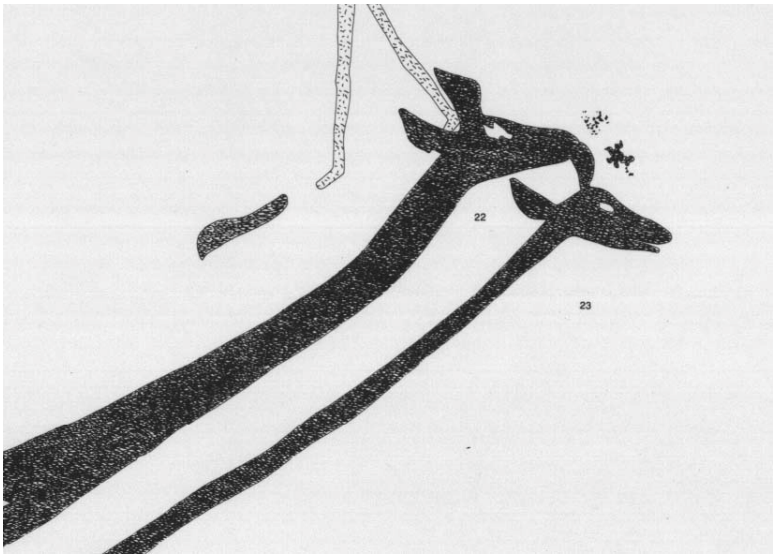

Fig.10 Snakes with unidentifiable antelope heads Amis 53, Pager 1989



Fig. 11 Snake with unidentifiable antelope head Karoab 2, Pager 1998

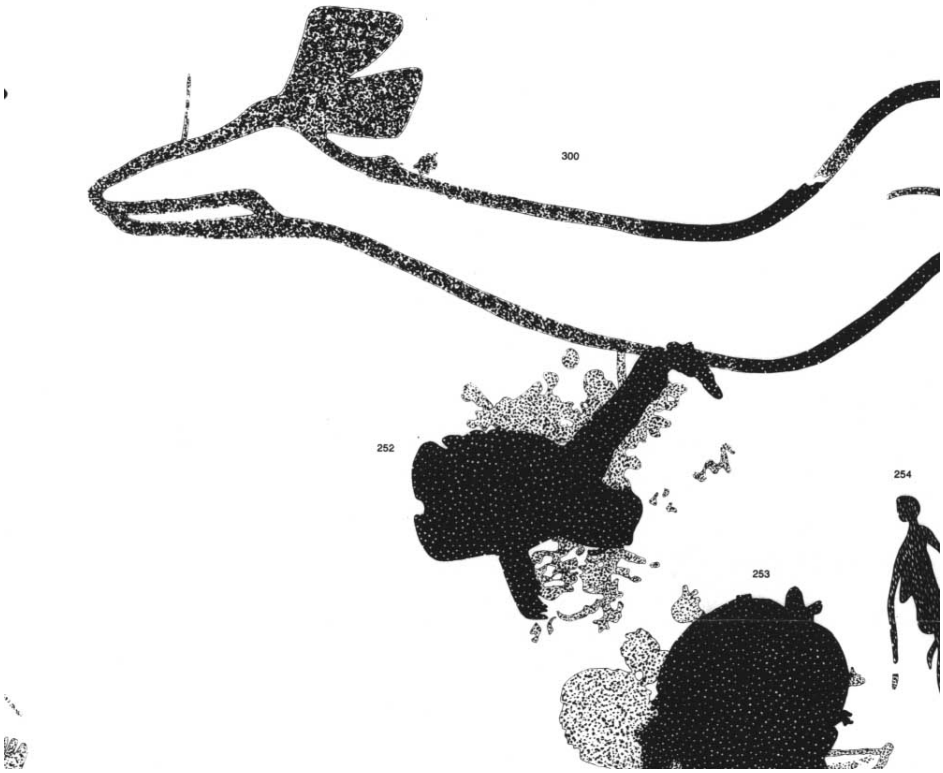

Fig. 12 Snake with unidentifiable antelope head Ga'aseb 12, Pager 1995

The third category of snake found in this area, and the category I specifically focus my interpretation on, are depictions of giraffe-conflationary snakes. These snakes form part of three categories of iconographic links, signifying the association between snakes and giraffe. However there is a fourth indicator of this link in a scene from the site known as Ga'aseb 8 (after Pager 1995) which I discuss in the next chapter. I need to emphasise that these categories are distinguished for the purposes of my argument. In categorizing the images I realize that the categories are arbitrary and set up by me, the researcher. I have constructed these categories for ease of reference, but these categories would not necessarily correlate to the way in which the San may have divided the art, if they

divided the art at all. Following this, I believe there are three main iconographic links between snakes and giraffe in the art:

1. *Giraffe-headed snakes* — Giraffe-headed snakes can be identified due to the presence of very definite giraffe heads attached to snake bodies. These giraffe-snake conflations as I call them, bear the characteristic head shape normally associated with giraffe images in the area. They also have ears of the same shape and their heads frequently bare two horns which are painted in the same manner as the horns found on giraffe heads in the art of this Massif (see Fig. 13 for comparative purposes). There are many examples of these images such as the snakes found at Naib 55, Amis 10, Kaorab 2 (Fig. 14), and Amis 53 (Fig 15)

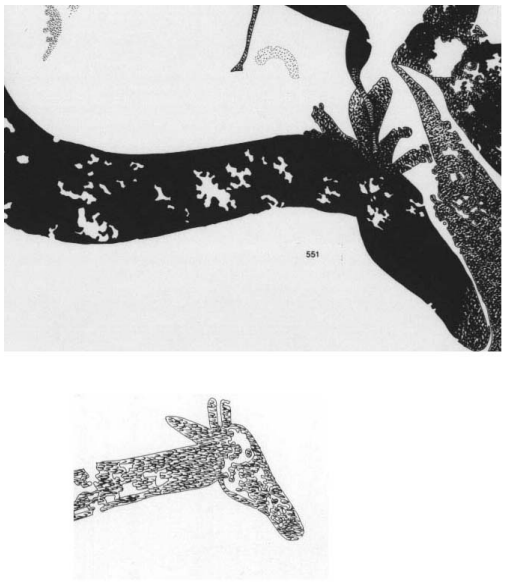

Fig. 13 Comparison between giraffe head (below) and giraffe-headed snake (above), Pager 1989



Fig. 14 Giraffe-headed snake Kaorab 2, Pager 1998



Fig. 15 Snake with giraffe head, Amis 53, Pager 1989

2. Grid patterning — Giraffe and snakes are linked in the art through the use of grid-patterning on the bodies of both animals. Although giraffe are painted with a spotted-type

of patterning (Fig. 16 and 17) as well as with plain white bodies (Fig. 18), they are most commonly painted however, with a grid-like pattern in their bodies found at sites such as Umuab 21 (Fig. 19), Ga'aseb 1 (Fig. 20), and Hungorob 43 (Fig. 21).

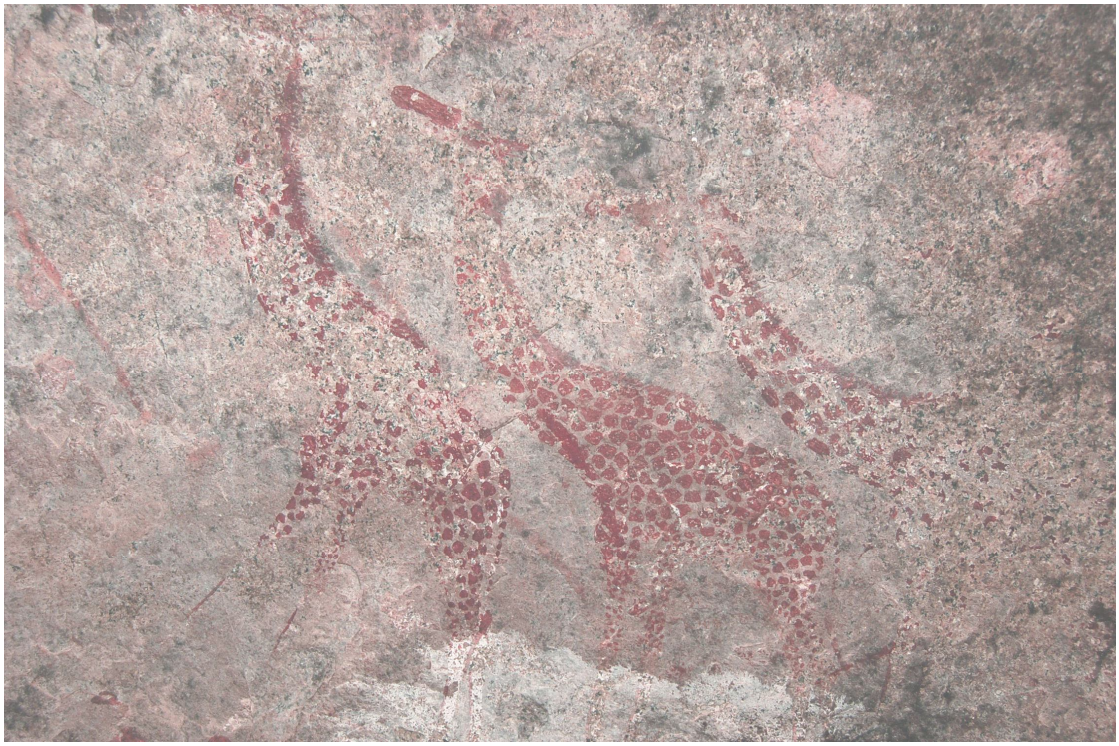

Fig. 16 Giraffe with spotted patterning Amis 10, Rifkin 2007

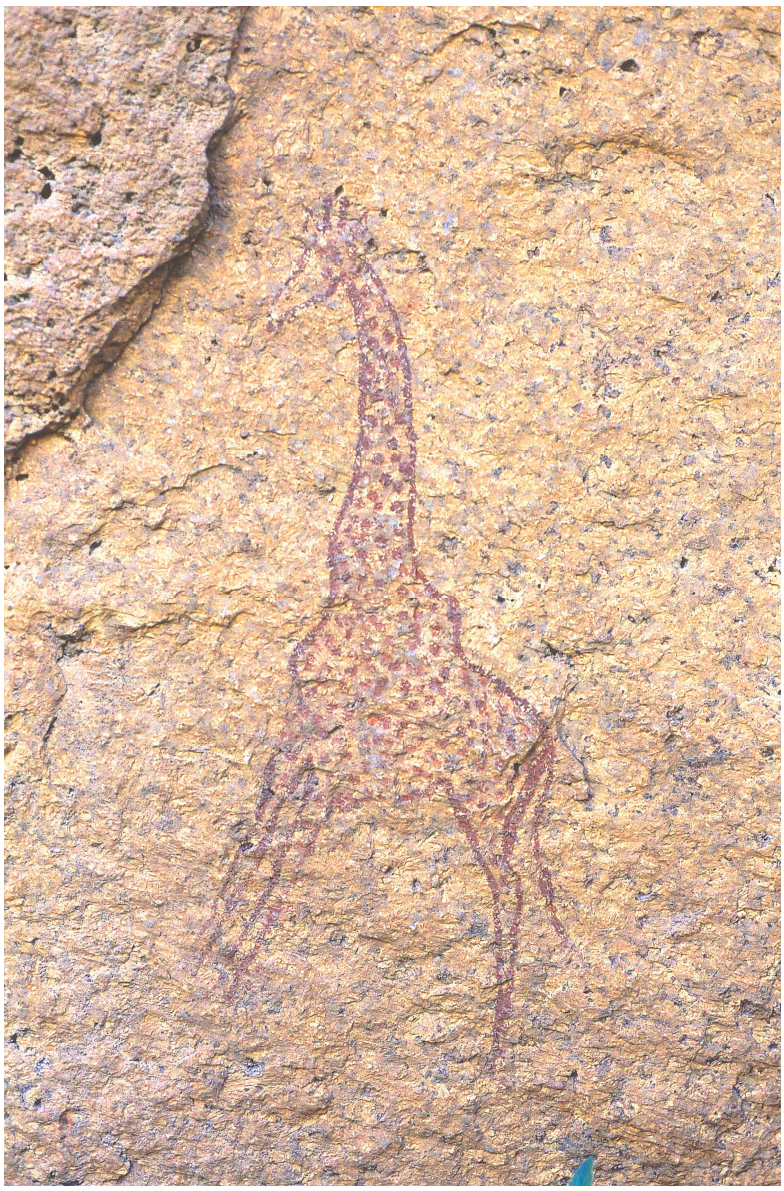

Fig. 17 Spotted giraffe in the Brandberg, site unknown, RARI



Fig. 18 Giraffe with plain white body Amis 10, Rifkin 2007

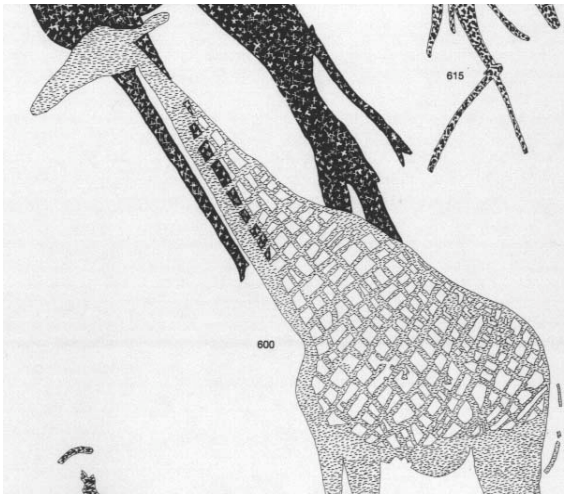

Fig. 19 Giraffe with grid-like pattern Umuab 21, Pager 1998

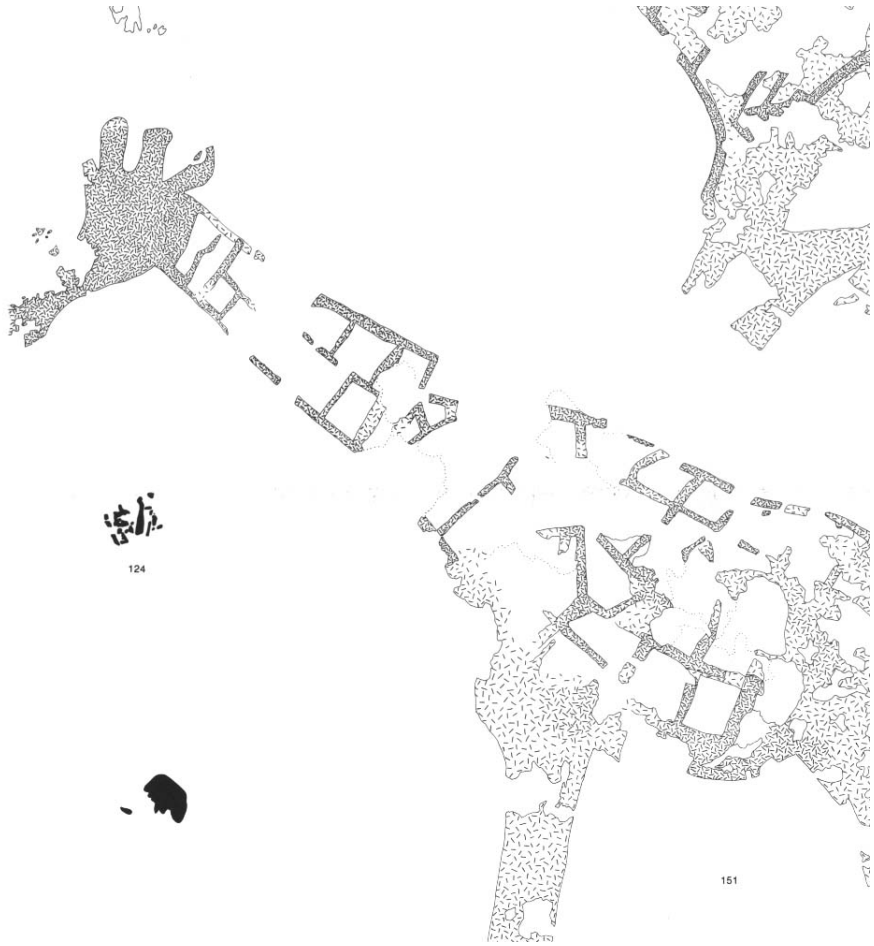

Fig. 20 Giraffe with grid-like pattern Ga'aseb 1, Pager 1995



Fig. 21 Giraffe with grid-like patterning and plain white giraffe Hungorob 43, Rifkin 2007

Grid-patterning is often found in the bodies of the snakes, even though there is no natural species with such bodily markings. Usually this patterning in the snakes resembles those patterns found in the bodies of the giraffe figures such as the snake at Naib 20 (Fig. 22). When this patterning occurs on the bodies of snake images, they are also frequently painted with a giraffe head (which is substituted for the snake head) further strengthening the link between giraffe and snakes such as at Amis 38 (Fig.23). Moreover, the use of grid-patterning for the bodies of the snakes suggests that there was something special about this kind of pattern, as opposed to the other patterns used to decorate giraffe images. Examples of grid-patterned snakes can be found at sites such as Naib 20, Amis 38 and Ga'aseb 12 (Fig. 24)



Fig. 22 Snake with giraffe grid-like patterning Naib 20, Rifkin 2007



Fig. 23 Giraffe-patterned snake emerging from water wash Amis 38, Pager 1989



Fig. 24 Grid-patterned snake Ga'aseb 12, Pager 1995

3. *Giraffe backlines* — Giraffe are often painted with only their heads and backlines painted in profile. There appears to be no other evidence of paint on the rock surface. John Kinahan (1999:343 – 344) has made a similar observation. He argues that these images are not incomplete due to the lack of any body or limb additions, but rather, the giraffe was intentionally depicted to *emphasise* only the shape of its backline and the details of its head. Interestingly, the curved line which represents the spine and the manner in which it tapers off towards the end is highly reminiscent of the way in which the bodies of snakes are sometimes depicted in the art:

> Invariably, the withers of the giraffe are shown as a slight curve of the backline at the correct proportional distance from the back of the head, thus serving as a reliable diagnostic feature. The same feature also occurs in paintings of snakes, many of which appear therefore to be transformations of giraffe, with the backline filled out and extended accordingly. (Kinahan 1999:344).

Thus, it would appear, given the other associations between the two, that the sinuous backline of these partial giraffe images was a link between the snake and the giraffe in one of two ways. Either, the backline of the giraffe was reminiscent of the snake to the painters, or the snakes were purposefully painted to mimic the backline of the giraffe images. Either way, it appears that the partial giraffe are meant to be giraffe taking on snake traits, or snakes taking on traits of the giraffe backline. Possibly, both creatures were taking on the characteristics of the other in the art, and are not meant to be seen as separate animals in the context of these images. Arguably it is difficult to distinguish between the two animals given that San thought with regard to their ritual beliefs is often complex and sometimes ambiguous. Distinguishing between the two animals in the images is also to miss the point of the conflation — the conflation signifies a related set of ideas which could not be symbolised without the conflation of the two animals. Examples of giraffe painted in backline only can be found at sites such as Karoab 2 (in two instances) (Figs. 25 & 26), Circus 3 (Fig. 27), and Ga'aseb 1 (Fig.28)

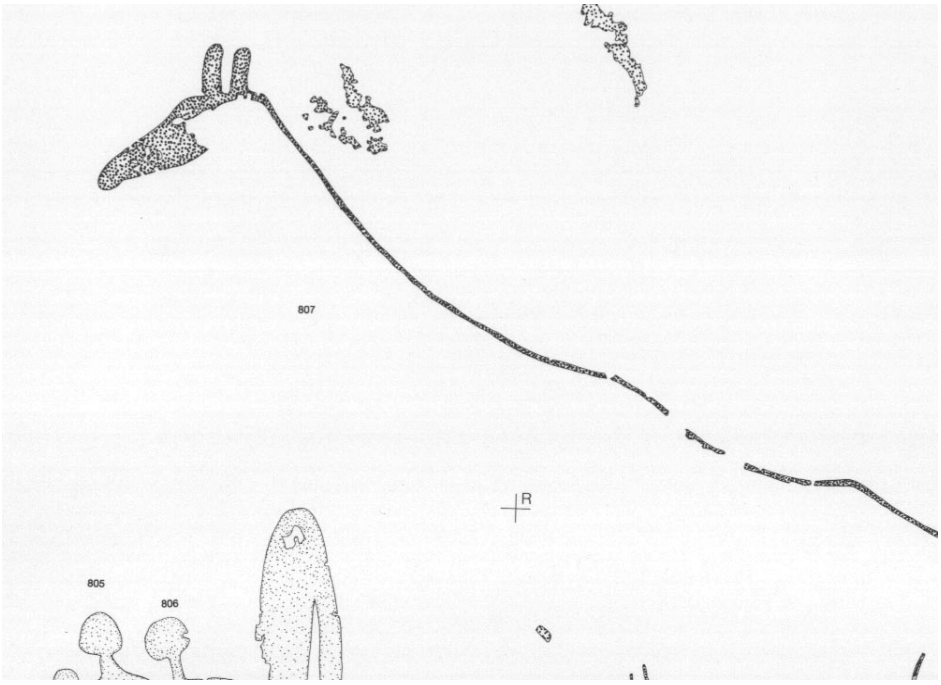

Fig. 25 Giraffe in backline only Karoab 2, Pager 1998

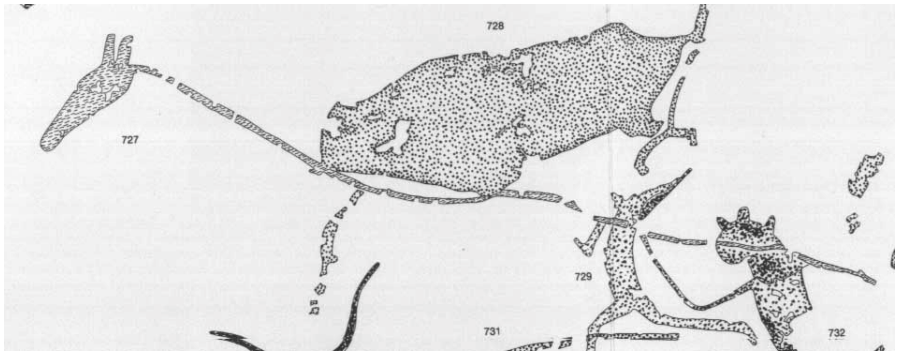

Fig. 26 Giraffe in backline only Karoab 2, Pager 1998



Fig. 27 Giraffe in backline only Circus 3, Pager 1995

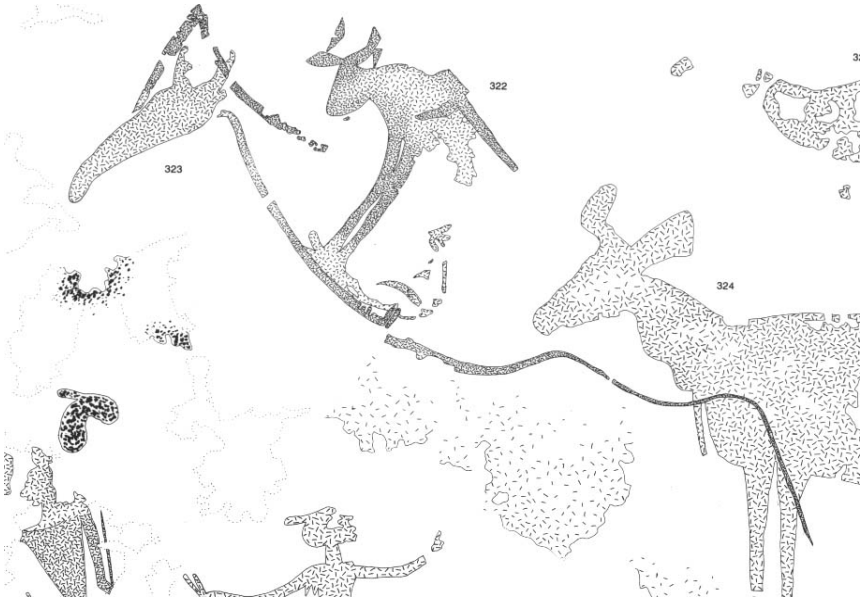

Fig. 28 Giraffe in backline only Ga'aseb 1, Pager 2005

This recurring association between giraffe and snakes in the Brandberg rock art suggests that the image makers recognized a special relationship between the snake and giraffe, which may have had some religious significance in the context of the rock art. Such an association, of course, is not a natural one, since there is no known species of snake with grid-patterning or a giraffe head. Yet this link between the two creatures is repeatedly emphasized in the Brandberg.

A common theme in the interpretation of the link between these snakes and giraffe has emerged from work done by previous researchers on this subject. I look at these interpretations first before moving onto ethnographic records relating to snakes and giraffe in the art.

Previous Interpretations

Mathias Guenther (1984) and Kinahan (1999) have both suggested reasons for the presence of giraffe-headed snakes in the Brandberg art, as well as general interpretations of giraffe and snakes in the art. Guenther (1984) was the first of these researchers to suggest that images of giraffe and snakes in the Brandberg were chiefly connected with ideas associated with rain and rain-making. Although he did not focus specifically on the giraffe-headed snakes (he refers to these as 'mythical horned-snakes'), he suggests that the images of giraffe were symbolically linked to the theme of rain (Guenther 1984:35). Extending on this idea, Guenther argues that rain would have been a central concern for the San in an arid mountain-region. Drawing from the idea of rain and giraffe associations, he suggests that giraffe are frequently painted in panels where rain or water are explicit motifs (*ibid.*). These water or rain motifs are thought to cement the argument that giraffe and rain are closely related concepts. As a result, Guenther considers the giraffe to be a rain animal. His argument for this is enhanced from an image depicting a giraffe standing with its head surrounded by what he (Guenther 1984:37) interprets as a cloud. This 'cloud' is thought to be issuing forth rain in the form of slanting lines and tapering vertical lines.

Guenther also mentions that giraffe are frequently painted with human figures climbing up and down their hindquarters (*ibid.*). He concludes that this suggests that giraffe are portrayed as life-giving and nurturing animals that:

> by virtue of its towering height, links the human and non-human creatures of the arid veld with the rain-bearing clouds, inducing these to yield forth their life-sustaining substance (Guenther 1984:37).

Interestingly, Guenther concludes that not only the giraffe, but also the elephant (*Loxodonta africana*) are linked symbolically to the rain. This is by virtue of the fact that elephants are depicted with giraffe in certain scenes. In these scenes elephants have been drawn in an inflated and floating manner. This manner of depiction is argued to represent a large, dark rain cloud (*ibid*).

Kinahan (1999) also views snakes and giraffe as linked to rain-making in the Brandberg. He proposes that the snakes, rather than the giraffe, are often deliberately painted in cracks and in the flows of water. This positioning of snakes in such a manner was, Kinahan argues, an attempt to establish a link between these snakes (and giraffe by virtue of their visual link to snakes) and the marks left by the rain (Kinahan 1999:343–344).

He also notes that the visual representation of giraffe can be linked to images seen in the first stages of trance (Kinahan 1991, 1999:344). Thus, the net-like pattern is argued to be similar to the fractured vision experienced by shamans in trance, and the extreme height of the animal alludes to the rising sensation which accompanies many trance experiences. It is the sensation of attenuation so commonly experienced in trance that is being emphasized in the painting of the backlines of the giraffe (Kinahan 1999:344).

According to Kinahan (1999:344) the giraffe-snake link is emphasized by the grid body markings found in giraffe and pythons (*Python spp.)*. He notes that although the bodies of snakes in the art very rarely show diagnostic markings, the snake images are often very large suggesting the size of the python. Pythons are linked to water (Kinahan 1999:344), and so might be the giraffe. Thus, he suggests that the depictions of snakes and giraffe

are linked to rain and rain-making, something he (Kinahan 1999:342) like Guenther, views as a central concern in the lives of the San in the desert region.

The consensus between the authors who have worked on the topic is that snakes and giraffe are being painted to celebrate their life-giving qualities and in particular, their association with rain and its properties of renewal. I now examine previous interpretations of snakes and giraffe in a wider southern African context to assess the roles of snakes and giraffe in other areas. In addition, I look at the ethnography about these two creatures to establish whether the previous interpretations of snakes and giraffe in the Brandberg are supported by ethnographic evidence. As the snake-giraffe link has explicitly been noted in the San rock art of the Brandberg, I examine the interpretations of snakes and giraffe in the art separately. I begin with snakes.

Snakes in San belief and art

Research on the ritual and social significance of snakes for San and Khoekhoen peoples in southern Africa has been extensive (e.g., Orpen 1874; Bleek and Lloyd 1911; Lewis-Williams 1988b; Schmidt 1979, 1997; Dowson 1994; Hoff 1997; Mallen 2004). Moreover, it has been widely noted that there is an obvious similarity between the beliefs of San and Khoe-speaking peoples regarding the symbolic role of snakes, and those of their Bantu-speaking neighbours (e.g., Hammond-Tooke 1962; Schapera 1971; Schoffelleers 1979; Dowson 1994; Mallen 2004). The result of these publications is a widespread idea amongst researchers that the ritual and symbolic meaning of snakes is somewhat similar amongst the three indigenous groups within southern Africa (i.e. San, Khoekhoen and Bantu-speakers), particularly in the associations between snakes and rain-making rituals (Schmidt 1979; Dowson 1994; Hoff 1997; Mallen 2004).

However, a review of the ethnography indicates that while there are many similarities in beliefs about snakes between groups, there are also some important differences (see the previous chapter for the importance of noting differences when using the ethnographies for rock art research). These differences are noticeable when one compares various San and Khoekhoe ethnographies relating to snakes, in particular their role in rain-making. These differences highlight the complicated perceptions of snakes held by San and Khoe speakers, illustrating that while connections between snakes and rain were significant, rain was not the only phenomena indicated by the use of snakes in oral literature and rock art. Indeed, given the influences and interpretations of the Khoe beliefs about rain I try not to use them much in this dissertation as they seem to have been highly affected by Bantu speaker belief systems. That said, occasionally I need to look at them for the purposes of my argument but do so with caution. Instead I prefer to look at the rock art itself to look at what message it may be portraying and link that to the ethnographies which appear to match the rock art in the most salient manner.

While much has been made of the links between snakes and rain symbolism in the interpretation of San rock art (Dowson 1994; Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2004; Mallen 2004), the fact that there are differences in the beliefs of various San groups regarding snake symbolism means that some depictions of snakes in San rock art may not automatically qualify them as related to rain and its rituals. Interpreting the depictions of snakes in the rock art of the Brandberg therefore requires consideration of all known aspects of the semantic spectrum regarding snakes, before it can be ascertained whether or not they were related to rain-making as some of the images of snakes in other parts of southern Africa appear to have been.

Ethnography relating to snakes in San belief

I now turn to an analysis of the ethnographic material relating to snakes collected from the San and Khoe-speaking peoples of southern Africa. I group the ethnography thematically in order to evaluate whether all or some of the Khoe and San beliefs about snakes can be used to interpret the meaning associated with the snakes in the rock art of the Brandberg. I believe that Khoe ethnography is a relevant point of reference in looking at the meaning of snakes amongst indigenous groups as it could have been influenced by San ethnography, or the inverse may have been the case. It is pertinent to look at the similarities and differences, particularly in an area such as the Brandberg where it is thought that these images were painted prior to the arrival of pastoralists (Kinahan 1989). Assessing Khoe ethnography from southern Africa might give us an idea as to how much ethnography on snakes has bee influenced by San beliefs, or the other way round to a point, but not necessarily wholly self-evident. However, when looking at art as old as the Brandberg art we cannot really say their belief systems were influenced by pastoralists and thus it is probably wiser to stick to San ethnography rather that looking at the ethnography also held by Khoe groups.

Snakes and rain-making

Research amongst southern African peoples has demonstrated that snakes are frequently connected to rain-control rituals. Ethnographic evidence from San, Khoe, and especially Bantu-speaking groups indicate that many of these groups hold similar beliefs.

The most extensive southern San ethnographic collection comes from the Bleek and Lloyd (1911) ethnographic records relating to the /Xam San of the Northern Cape Province, South Africa. Here we find numerous mentions of the supernatural qualities attributed to snakes, particularly in relation to rain.

The /Xam people considered specific snakes (particularly cobras and puff adders) as well as the tortoise and water tortoise to be things put aside by the rain as its 'meat'. For that reason they were regarded as powerful things and were feared greatly. It was believed that the rain 'pelted' the San with these 'strong things' (Bleek & Lloyd 1911:303). They were regarded as the Rain's 'things' and thus were an embodiment of *!Khwa* the supernatural deity associated with rain .

It has also been noted that puff adders (*Bitis arietans arietans*) particularly were linked with rain. It was stated by a /Xam informant that puff adders became visible after the rain had fallen (Bleek 1933a, 1933b, 1956:653). The correlation between puff adders and rain was influenced by the belief that the colours of the puff adder resemble the rainbow:

> The /Xam believed this connection to be a result of the species' "green/yellow" *(Ikai:n)* color that resembles the rainbow (L.V.6.4384 rev.). This connection led on to an association of the puff adder with the sky: "One of the rain's things it is. And one of the sky's things it is; that which is coming out of the sky it is" (L.V.6.4385 rev).

Like the /Xam, another group of southern San from the Maloti Mountains appear to emphatically associate snakes with rain. When the Maloti San informant Qing interpreted a painting of a rain animal to Joseph Orpen he identified the quadrupedal rain animal as a 'snake' (Orpen 1874):

> That animal which the men are catching is a snake! They are holding out charms to it, and catching it with a long rein (Orpen 1874:5).

In addition to this illuminating reference to snakes as rain animals, Orpen's collections also refer to the conception held by the Maloti San that snakes would "…fill the country with water." (Orpen 1874:5).

The use of the word snake to describe the rain animal is not that unusual when one considers that certain beliefs about snakes held by the Maloti San mirrored those regarding the rain animal, including the idea that both these creatures lived to some extent under water. However, it is pertinent to note here that there is very sparse ethnography from the Maloti San indicating that snakes were in fact rain animals in every case. In this instance, most researchers have relied on images themselves demonstrating something related to the rain to make such an inference. Thus, the ethnography by no means conclusively indicates a widespread belief in the Drakensberg San that a snake was a rain animal.

Snakes and water

An extension of the association between snakes and rain making is illustrated by a generalized link between snakes and water in San mythology. While not all groups of San specifically imbue snakes with rain making qualities; many of them do believe that snakes are connected to bodies of water and in some instances, the creation of these bodies of water.

The !Kung tell a tale concerning snakes and water, particularly concerning a python, a snake which features prevalently in their stories, often in myths in which

women play a central role. In many of these myths the python is in fact a woman, known as Python Girl. One myth (Biesele 1993:121–131) featuring the Python Girl tells a story of the creation of the world. In the various versions of this story the Python Girl's jealous younger sister, the Jackal, tricks Python Girl into falling into a spring. In order to get her out of the spring, where she has to spend the night, all the animals are called to help. The only animal with legs long enough to retrieve Python Girl from the spring is the giraffe. In most versions of the story, the Python Girl has given birth whilst lying at the bottom of the spring.

Megan Biesele (1993:134–138) analyses the various versions of this myth and comes to the conclusion that Python Girl symbolises exactly what 'good' female behaviour should be. In contrast, her sister the Jackal is behaving in a manner wholly unbefitting for her state, which is that of a menstruating woman. Biesele (*ibid.)* suggests that this story elucidates the belief that women 'originate' in water, whereas men originate in fire (Biesele 1993:38). Therefore the coolness, smoothness and beauty of the python reflects exactly the qualities associated with women and their power. However, the important thing to note about this tale is that it does *not* emphasise any connection between snakes and rain making or rain animals, but rather focuses on the differences between good and bad behaviour accorded to women in San society.

//Xegwi San tales recorded by E.F. Potgieter (1955) in what is now Mpumalanga Province in South Africa, relate to a group of San who spoke a dialect similar to that of the /Xam. These tales indicate that they too associate snakes with water. The informants told Potgieter (*ibid.*) that a man wishing to become a shaman must plunge into a pool and come out with a creature thought to inhabit the pool which

was a ‘snake as big as a python’. If the snake did not struggle with the man, the man was destined to be a shaman. He then killed the snake and performed a public dance with the neck of the skin tied to his forehead and the rest trailing behind him. Here we also have an association between snakes and water. However, yet again there is *no* association between snakes and their rain making abilities. Rather we see the potency of snakes being emphasised, particularly the idea that a man may garner enough potency to become a shaman by killing a python. Given the beliefs about pythons in Bantu speaker culture which have many similarities (see Schapera 1971), this tale is likely to have a Bantu speaker origin more so than a San one.

The !Kung and the Nharo both have stories relating to the creation of waterholes and rivers, which are a direct result of the action of a snake. Elizabeth Marshall Thomas recorded a story relating to snakes from the !Kung in Botswana. It relates to a character named Pishiboro (who is a god) and his two wives. It is given as an example of how carnal knowledge came to Pishiboro (Marshall Thomas 1959: 78).

In this tale Pishiboro is tricked into eating his wives genital organs, thinking them to be the meat of a baby giraffe. After he has avenged this wrongdoing by possessing his wives and conceiving children with them, Pishiboro comes across a night adder’s home. Pishiboro thought that there were only baby snakes in the hole, so that night when the baby snakes began to dance, he danced with them. The mother snake was hiding in a hole nearby and she leapt out and bit Pishiboro whilst he was dancing. The poison from the bite caused him great pain, inducing him to writhe around and kick his feet out as he attempted to crawl back home. Through this process the dry valleys (*omarambas*) were believed to have been created. All the

water which flows in the rivers, and all the rain are believed to be liquid from Pishiboro's decaying body as he eventually died from the snake bite. However, it is not the snakes themselves which are responsible for theses creations, but rather the actions of the mythological god, Pishiboro, which creates this water and rain. This is an understandable trait since it is chiefly the action of the great god to supply water and rain in San society. Interestingly though, there is a link between giraffe and snakes here, as well as the supernatural abilities of snakes in the instance of the dancing baby snakes, which is reminiscent of the trance dance and also the spirits-of –the-dead which come to dance at trance dances. It is possible that the creation of the San band and their safe keeping is linked positively to the giraffe and negatively to the snake when looking at this ethnographic tale. However, this is an idea which I will come to presently.

A similar tale from Nharo folklore (Guenther 1986, 1999: 121) illustrates that they had analogous beliefs about the creation of riverbeds and waterholes in the Kalahari being related to the actions of their trickster deity (Pate) and the puff adder:

> Pate walked and he saw a puff adder. She was sleeping in a hole in the sand with her young ones. He went over to the hole. He jumped over it and defecated on the puff adder and her young ones. He did this over and over again, until the puff adder thought she would teach him a lesson.
> And so when Pate came the next time and when he jumped, the puff adder bit him in the balls. They swelled up to a tremendous size, the size of boulders. Pate was in terrible pain and he ran all over the country digging holes to relieve his pain (by cooling his testicles). This is how every hole in the ground, the pans, rivers, caves and little depressions were formed. (Guenther 1999: 121; a //Gana variant is noted by Tanaka 1980: 25).

From the ethnography it becomes clear that there may have been an association between some snakes and water. This association, however, is not found in all groups, but only in the groups referenced above. In addition, the snakes in the story regarding Pate did not bring the water to the pans and rivers, they only made it possible for Pate to create these

depressions in the ground. Importantly it seems that in all these tales, the association between snakes and the gods was a negative one, even though the outcome was positive. This becomes an important point latter in this dissertation.

Snakes and transformation

Snakes feature repeatedly in accounts of San shamanic transformation during altered states of consciousness. In particular, trickster deities are reported to commonly take the form of snakes.

Maloti San myths indicate the abilities of shamans and deities to transform into snakes. A mythical character called Qwanciqutshaa is fed snake fat that apparently has a powerful effect on him making his nose bleed. It has been noted that nosebleeds are linked to the process of entering deep trance by shamans in San culture (Lewis-Williams 1981: 78, 83). Thus, the fact that Qwanciqutshaa's nose began to bleed after eating of the snake fat is indicative of the power of snake fat to assist with altered states of consciousness and the transformation therein. Once the fat was consumed, Qwanciqutshaa then threw himself into the river and changed into a snake (Orpen 1874:7). What is evident from this myth is that the Maloti San believed snakes to be one of the creatures into which shamans could transform during an altered state of consciousness (Mallen 2004).

Human transformations into snakes are also mentioned in other instances in the Orpen collection. For instance, when Cagn's (/Kaggen) daughter runs away to live with the snakes, who are also men, her father transforms the snakes back into men

(Orpen 1874:5). In another instance a snake is described as leaving a water hole and turning into a person by gliding out of its skin (*ibid.:7*).

These myths indicate that shamans were thought to be able to transform into snakes under certain circumstances. An old !Kung shaman related his journeys to the spirit world to Biesele (1979) in which he described the spirit world as a terrifying place filled with horrible creatures including biting snakes. The only way in which to survive these journeys was to transform himself into a black mamba (*Dendroaspis polylepsis)*. I would like to bring attention to the fact that the spirit world (for the northern groups of San) is said to be filled with horrible creatures such as biting snakes (Guenther 1999). This suggests a negative, rather than a positive connotation with snakes, something which is arguably a theme amongst the northern groups of San.

In addition to shamans, San trickster deities often exhibited the ability to assume serpentine forms. The Namibian !Kun related a number of beliefs to Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd concerning a trickster deity known as /Xue. /Xue who is described as capable of transforming into a myriad of creatures and elements (Bleek & Lloyd 1911: 405 -411). He is thought to become an ant, a butterfly, a fly, water, a buffalo and a snake amongst other things. Similarly, /Kaggen, the chief trickster deity of the /Xam, could willfully assume the form of a puff adder particularly to frighten hunters who had shot his favourite animal, the eland (Bleek & Lloyd 1911), which notably is yet another powerful but negative association with a snake.

Snakes and transformation are also a common feature in Nama, Damara and Hai//om mythology, particularly regarding the mythical serpent known as Turos. Turos is commonly believed to be a snake, but appears in some myths as a cow that descends from the sky during thunderstorms (Schmidt 1979:9). This transformation indicates that this snake is not only imbued with mythical transformative properties, but is also linked to the occurrence of rain. Moreover, the form of a cow is only one transformation attainable by this mythical snake. Amongst the Damara and Hai//om it is believed that the snake can also turn into an antelope or human being (Schmidt 1979:10). I do think that the belief that a snake can become a cow which transcends from the sky is probably Bantu speaker in origin. The Hai//om and Damara are hunter-gatherers (although the Damara now keep stock) and the Nama are pastoralists. It seems odd that they would have come up with beliefs relating to cows in an autonomous fashion. For that reason I do not think that his piece of ethnographic evidence, although related to snakes, will suffice when interpreting San beliefs about snakes.

These behavioural characteristics of snakes have also been used as a reason for their strong associations with transformation and shamanic travel. Two aspects of snake behaviours, namely the fact that they shed their skins completely and that they spend much time underground under rocks and in subterranean holes and passages are strongly reminiscent of travel to the spirit world and transformation. Thomas Huffman (1983) has noted that the ability ascribed to San shamans to travel underground, entering and exiting it through holes in the earth's surface is strongly reminiscent of snake behaviour (*ibid.*:51). Also, the shedding of the skin has been argued to be akin to the death and rebirthing process associated with trance (*ibid.*).

In addition, I would like to argue that the shedding of the skin can be akin to the process of death, but the rebirthing process is as a spirit-of –the-dead as one transcends into the spirit world in some instances.

Snakes and the House of God

Aside from the mythical qualities of snakes in relation to rain, water and transformation, snakes themselves were thought to have much power and for that reason were frequently associated with elements in the San cosmology such as the deities and supernatural potency. Certain snakes were thought to be so powerful that they inhabited the house of God.

Biesele's (1993) work amongst the !Kung or Ju/hoansi from Kauri close to the border between Namibia and Botswana, indicates that the !Kung believe that snakes are imbued with great potency. The !Kung of the Nyae Nyae region believe that the black mamba is an animal with great *n/om* or supernatural potency (as is the python). For this reason, mambas are believed to live with their great god Kaoxa in his house in the sky (*ibid.*:94), along with the other animals which possess this incredible amount of *n/om.* It is this supernatural potency that accounts for the creation of the Mamba Song, which the !Kung believe is imbued with the same potency as the snake. However, the Gautscha !Kung could not harness the *n/om* of this song, as it had not 'really' been given to them (Marshall 1969:36). This is because if a person receives a song from god (in this case *#Gao N!a*) he or she must also receive the *n/om* of the song (*ibid: 36*). Therefore, the Gautscha !Kung had not been given the *n/om* of the Black Mamba song, and thus could

not possess it. This indicates that snakes are imbued with an incredible amount of power and are 'strong' things, although in most cases not in the most positive way.

Snakes, omens and the dead

The House of God where the snakes can be found is also in many instances described as the place in which the dead dwell. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that snakes are intimately linked with the dead in certain myths, particularly from the Namibian !Kun who stayed with Bleek and Lloyd in the 19th century. In addition to the !Kun, the Damara and Hai//om also narrated beliefs demonstrating a connection between the dead and snakes. The important factor to remember here is that the Hai//om and the Damara are hunter-gatherers in origin (Barnard 1992) and come directly from the area in which the Brandberg is situated. Therefore, in keeping in line with my arguments from my previous chapter I do believe their ethnographic accounts to be closest to the original beliefs of the San of that area.

!Nanni, one of the Namibian !Kun living with Bleek and Lloyd, recounted a belief about snakes seen near graves. The Namibian !Kun were almost certainly !Kung, simply recorded differently by Bleek and Lloyd (1911) as a result of their orthography. This is due to the fact that the !Kung inhabited northern Namibia for most of the known past until the government moved the group to Botswana (Gordon 1984). !Nanni stated that when "a man dies, he becomes a snake, and a snake is a spirit. A snake bites him, he dies, he is a snake" (Bleek & Lloyd 1911:431). Thus, a man becomes a snake when he dies, and also when bitten by one. However, !Nanni said that a woman can only become a snake at death if she dies from a snakebite. Otherwise she remains a mere spirit (*ibid.*:430).

The !Kun also believed snakes to announce death in the family (Bleek & Lloyd 1911:431–433). Thus a particular light coloured, timid snake which lies on its back in the veld is said to portend death in the family (*ibid.)* and therefore should not be killed. However, women seemed to be able to kill the snake even when it is lying on its back. The story tells of how a woman needs to lay her skin necklace down next to the snake, put it on its stomach, and then killed the snake (*ibid.)*.

However, the people of !Nanni's country would never kill any snake found near a grave. (Bleek & Lloyd 1911:428–431). The reason given for this was that snakes found near graves were believed to be the dead person's snake and thus the spirit of the dead person, that is, a spirit-of-the-dead. Lizards and a certain small antelope were also believed to be embodiments of spirits of dead people when found at gravesites.

What is apparent from these three stories from the !Kun of Namibia is that snakes are thought to be a representation of spirits-of-the-dead, and are also sometimes omens of death. The relationship between snakes and spirits-of-the-dead is also indicated in the work of Samuel Dornan (1925). He found that the Kalahari Bushmen considered baboons, springbok and snakes to be people in another state of existence (Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1989:134).This finding may not link snakes to the dead since Dornan's informants may have been referring to shamans. However, since shamans were capable of taking on the form of most animals when they were in an altered state of consciousness, it seems possible even if tenuously that the 'people' being referred to here were sprits of the dead. If Dornan was referring to shamans in another state of existence I think that he would have mentioned the term 'shaman' or its indigenous equivalent in

another state of existence, or his informants would have. By using the term 'people' I think that he may unknowingly have been referring to the people found in the spirit world , which are spirits-of–the–dead, which are people like those in the living world, simply they exist in the spirit world. In addition it has also been argued that baboons are spirits-of-the-dead rather than shamans in another form (Turner 2006). Thus, it would seem that for Dornan's San, baboons, springbok and snakes were forms which spirits-of-the-dead took, rather than forms taken by shamans in some instances. However, the uncertainty of this statement seems to suggest that either possibility was being suggested.

Other San peoples of Namibia also associate death, the dead and sickness with snakes. The Damara and Hai//om associate a well-known supernatural snake, known as the Big Snake, with the ancient deity //Gamab (Schmidt 1997:12). The snake is regarded as the deity's agent, bringing sickness and death to humans. This is in contrast to the Herero who regard the Snake as a health bringing agent (Andersson 1856:329). The Damara and Hai//om beliefs are in line with the beliefs elucidated in the !Kun stories from the Bleek and Lloyd collections. They not only portray snakes as spirits-of-the-dead and omens of death in the family but also as harbingers of sickness and disease (Bleek & Lloyd 1911). Since spirits-of-the-dead are widely regarded as bringing bad-luck and ill health to Namibian San bands, it appears from the ethnography that snakes, which are associated with them, would do the same.

Having complied a set of beliefs regarding snakes in San ethnography, I now move on to looking at beliefs concerning giraffe and the interpretations of their role in the art. Both these sets of ethnography (on snakes and giraffe) are vital to my interpretations of the images in the Brandberg. Indeed, both these sets of ethnographical discussions inform my

arguments for and against the use of certain ethnographical evidence in my interpretations.

Giraffe in San belief and art

The research on giraffe imagery is not as extensive as that on snakes. Most of the research conducted on giraffe imagery is focused on the giraffe images in the Limpopo-Shashe Confluence Area (LSCA) (Eastwood 1999; Eastwood & Eastwood 2006). In this area the giraffe have been interpreted as a symbol of supernatural potency and are described as figures of "power and grace" (Eastwood & Eastwood 2006:99). In particular, the painted emphasis on the dorsal line in certain images of giraffe (where it is painted in red) suggests that this was a particularly important bodily component of the giraffe's power and potency, and its connection to the trance-state experienced by shamans (Eastwood 1999:20). This is because *n/om*, the potent energy which induces trance states, is believed to boil in the stomach before moving up the spine and out the back of the neck, catapulting a shaman into the spirit world (Katz 1976, 1982:41–42). Thus, the emphasis on the dorsal line, coupled with the giraffe's inherent potency suggests that giraffe are an animal whose power shamans are trying to harness in order to reach an altered state of consciousness (Eastwood 1999:20).

It has been noted that the ethnography makes many references to the giraffe's particular connection with altered states of consciousness, as well as its frequent connections to the weather (Eastwood & Eastwood 2006:100). Thus, giraffe are interpreted as being associated with rain because the !Kung believe that the forms of certain clouds resemble the patterning on giraffe hides (Marshall 1957:239). The frequency of depiction of giraffe

with their young in the LSCA suggests that not only was this animal one of supreme potency, but that it also indicated concerns with sexual reproduction and well-being (Eastwood *et al* 1999:69).

In the rock art of the Matopos in Zimbabwe, giraffe are amongst the numerically dominant subjects (Mguni 2002:1). In a study of formling motifs in this area, it was noted that giraffe often occur in relation to formlings, apparently more frequently than any other species of animal (Walker 1996:73–74; Mguni 2002). The giraffe and formling pairing is often a central motif at these sites comprising large images often placed high up on the walls (Walker 1996). In addition, certain formlings appear to have reticulated giraffe markings on some of their vertical cores (Mguni 2002:119). The giraffe have been interpreted in light of their association with these formlings. Siyakha Mguni (1997, 2002, 2005) has argued that formlings are representations of 'Gods House' (Mguni 2002). The ethnography explicitly says that certain animals are associated with God's House and one of these animals is the giraffe, due to its incredible amounts of *n/om*, as previously mentioned (Mguni 2002:145). Thus, the giraffe and giraffe markings in association with formlings suggest that the animals are painted to reflect their potency and association with God's House (Mguni 2002:146, 187, 195). Formlings appear to occur in the Brandberg too, where they are also interpreted as depictions of God's House (Mguni 2002). Thus, the constant association between giraffe and these formlings in the rock art of the Brandberg may suggest that the potency of the giraffe is being drawn on in these images.

Ethnography on giraffe

The ethnographic records of the beliefs held by the San concerning the giraffe's symbolic role are not as extensive as the records on snakes. Certain key themes do, however, emerge concerning giraffe. Three key areas in which giraffe are implicated are in beliefs about potency, supernatural travel and concerns with the weather.

Giraffe and n/om (n/um)

Records from the Kalahari San indicate that giraffe are animals imbued with an incredible amount of supernatural potency, referred to as *n/om* by the !Kung. This potency is most eloquently expressed in a frequently quoted incident whereby an old !Kung woman named Beh had a dream that she was alone in the field when god (*G//aoan*, the great god) gave her a medicine song known as the Giraffe Song Great (Biesele 1993:67). The rhythm of the song came from the sound of giraffe running across the veld mixed with the sounds of rolling thunder. This song became a great medicine song due to the fact that giraffe are *n/om* animals, and a song filled with this giraffe *n/om* was a song destined to become a great medicine song (Marshall 1962:249; Barnard 1979: 74; Biesele 1993). Thus one informant told Lorna Marshall (1969:367) that the Giraffe Song Great was so powerful it could cure any illness. This is an important point in that it highlights the powerful illness-healing properties of the giraffe and the important appropriation of giraffe potency by shamans at dances. If the song is a great medicine song this is an example of appropriation of giraffe potency by shamans at dances.

The *n/om* of the giraffe pervades every aspect of the giraffe, from their *n/om* songs to their physical components. Various parts of the giraffe body and its physical processes

are used in ritual contexts. This is regarded as another manner in which their *n/om* can be harnessed (Biesele 1993:94). For example the !Kung believe that by placing the urine of a supernatural giraffe (given to them by god) in a tortoise shell with a burning ember (Marshall 1969:360), the curing *n/om* of the giraffe can be harnessed. Thus, the smoke from the shell is allowed to waft over the attendees at a dance as it has a general beneficial effect on the well-being of those at the dance, again emphasising the healing properties of the giraffe and the appropriation of giraffe potency by shamans at the dance..

However, the *n/om* songs, and the use of giraffe bodily fluids does not give a shaman any control over these animals. Rather it gives them access to the potency inherent in these songs and fluids:

> The dances are named for these things because the things are vital, life-and-death things and they are strong, as the curing medicine in the music is strong (Marshall 1962:249).

The strength of the *n/om* possessed by these animals is an essential component of the trance dance and has both beneficial and dangerous effects if not controlled properly (Marshall 1969:351). Thus, any animal possessing *n/om* would be regarded as equally important, particularly in the case of harnessing its power during trance to assist with healing and the attainment of the deep trance state known as *kia* (Katz 1982) in which shamans may begin to actively cure illness.

Thus the giraffe potency was harnessed at healing dances by shamans to great effect. It was one of the most powerful animals used in the semantic spectrum of the northern San groups (Marshall 1962,1969,1976,1999; Katz 1982). It was one of the chief vehicles by

which a shaman could travel to the spirit world. This was by way of harnessing the potency of the giraffe (through the breathing in of the smoke from the tortoise shell or by turning into a giraffe during trance) and thus entering the spirit world. Along with eland, gemsbok, hartebeest and other 'great' game animals, the giraffe meant travel to the spirit world in its most potent form. It seems clear from the ethnography, and the multitudinous paintings of giraffe in the northern parts of southern Africa that this animal was especially potent for the ritual healers and an animal often harnessed during trance for its immense potency in order to facilitate travel to the spirit world. It is also often implicated in healing and its healing ability is often referenced. The ability to travel to the spirit world is a topic I discuss in the next section of this discussion on giraffe ethnography.

Giraffe and supernatural travel

Giraffe are occasionally implicated in travel to the spirit world. A direct reference to the use of giraffe for supernatural travel comes from an account recorded by Megan Biesele (1979). It related to a trance experience of a shaman called Old K"xau:

> Just yesterday, friend, the giraffe came and took me and said, 'Why is it that people are singing, yet you are not dancing?' When he spoke, *he took me with him and we left this place.* We travelled until we came to a wide body of water. It was a river. He took me to the river. The two halves of the river lay to either side of us, one to the left, one to the right. Kauha [god] made the waters climb, and I lay with my body in the direction they were flowing. My feet were behind, and my head was in front. That's how I lay. Then I entered the stream and began to move forward (Biesele 1979:55–56; my emphasis).

From this account it appears that Old K"xau was experiencing out of body travel. The fact that in the rest of the account he tells of how the giraffe took him to God's House, suggests that this experience was borne from an altered state of consciousness and resulted in travel to the spirit world.

It is important to note from this account, however, that the giraffe is the means by which Old K"xau travelled to God's House. The reason for the use of a giraffe as a vehicle to the spirit world may encompass many possibilities. Old K"xau may have seen the actual animal. Or he could be interpreting the sense of attenuation felt during the trance experience, and the entoptics seen during trance as the form and markings of a giraffe. Kinahan (1999) has already argued that the height of the giraffe can be connected to the sense of attenuation experienced by shamans during trance. Dowson (1992), and Kinahan (1991, 1999) noted that the grid-like patterning on giraffe hides bears strong resemblance to grid-shaped entoptics seen by some during trance. Thus there is a use of stylized giraffe markings in the rock art in the form of grid patterns found on the body of the giraffe in the art. These may be an extension of the grid patterns seen during trance and these grid patterns could be construed as giraffe images (Dowson 1992).

However, what is clear, is that the giraffe was potentially an animal whose form and markings leant itself to being one of the vehicles that could transport a shaman to the spirit world during out-of-body-travel. In fact, Guenther (1984:37) records images of giraffe from the Brandberg which depict humans running and climbing up and down the giraffe's hindquarters. These images seem to confirm the fact that the giraffe may have been an animal which could facilitate travel to the spirit world by virtue of its natural height and patterning specifics. In addition, Mguni's (2002) observation that giraffe are most often associated with formlings in the Matopos, and that their reticulated markings are seen on the crests of formlings all point to the idea that giraffe and the spirit world, or God's house are intimately related concepts.

Giraffe and weather

Much has been made of the connection between giraffe and rain control in the interpretation of Brandberg rock art (Guenther 1984; Kinahan 1999). Unfortunately, these interpretations have not made many references to the ethnographic beliefs about giraffe which do implicate them in concerns with the weather. It is, therefore, important, to note that giraffe are not referred to in the ethnographic record as being specifically imbued with rain-control properties, or even specifically related to rain.

Giraffe are part of a group of animals believed by the !Kung to possess a force called *n!ao*, in addition to *n/om*. *N!ao* is an influence possessed by certain animals and people, which can be good or bad (Marshall 1957). Good *n!ao* brings rain and pleasant weather, bad *n!ao* brings cold (Marshall 1957: 233, 235). *N!ao* in human beings is manifested at birth, and the mother has no control over whether her child receives good or bad *n!ao*. The *n!ao* a person receives is determined at the time the uterine fluid flows onto the ground (Marshall 1957:235). Some children will receive good *n!ao*, others bad, non-rain bringing *n!ao*.

However, animals' *n!ao* properties can be used to control the weather to a certain degree. Blood-letting, particularly cutting the throat of the giraffe, could be used to stop or start the rain if the hunter had exercised what appears to be either good or bad influence over the animal when it was killed (Marshall 1957:239; Biesele 1993:108). If a hunter habitually had a good influence over giraffe (indicated by the weather that followed his killing of a giraffe) then by cutting the throat of the giraffe and letting its blood fall on the ground he could bring rain (Marshall 1957:239). The opposite would be true if bad weather normally followed the slaughter of the giraffe. The same applied in the case of

other animals hunted by the !Kung, particularly big meat animals such as the eland (*Taurotragus oryx)* and gemsbok (*Oryx Gazella*).

However, it is very important to note that the !Kung do not believe in the ability to actively control the weather through trance purposes, or even really through hunting. Shamans were chiefly used for curing rituals (Marshall 1957:237). Unlike the /Xam, no one in the community appeared to be a specialist at rain making (Marshall 1957:237) and the power that hunters had over *n!ao* animals was not something which could actively be controlled. Giraffe's were simply imbued with the quality of *n!ao* and thus could have a good or bad influence over the weather depending on the interaction of the hunter with the giraffe when the giraffe was hunted. However, not even the hunter could actively control his influence over the *n!ao* properties of the giraffe (Marshall 1957).

From the ethnographic accounts it is clear that giraffe were considered one of the most important animals for northern San, particularly for the !Kung. The giraffe had significant potency which could be harnessed during trance, and had the ability to influence the weather in accordance with the *n!ao* of the hunter, but importantly, the hunter had no control over these influences over the weather.

Having examined the beliefs of various groups of San relating to snakes and giraffe I now re-examine the previous interpretations of the San rock art of the Brandberg. In light of the ethnographic evidence, I assess whether or not these interpretations are justified, specifically in interpreting the meaning of the snake-giraffe connection in the rock art.

It is clear from the ethnographic evidence that beliefs about snakes held by southern African Khoesan peoples are complex and somewhat confusing. Not all groups have the same beliefs about snakes. Nor do all groups agree that snakes are associated with rain. Some link them to water and the creation of pans and waterholes, yet sometimes this relationship is more about trickster deities acquiring carnal knowledge than about the snakes actual link with water (e.g. the stories about Pishiboro and Pate from the !Kung and Nharo groups). In addition, there are also connections between spirits-of-the-dead and snakes for some groups. This link (and others as mentioned) emphasizes the negative qualities of snakes, qualities which are at odds with the positive elements associated with rain-making and potency.

Giraffe, on the other hand, have fairly clear symbolism for most San groups. As mentioned, they are concerned with potency and supernatural travel, as well as the weather. However, what is important to note from the !Kung ethnography is that the giraffe is not thought to be an animal specifically related to rain, nor is it somehow imbued with the ability to control rain. Rain influence is dependent on the *n!ao* of the hunter according to the !Kung.

The rock art of the Brandberg is situated in an area which is flanked by San groups (mostly !Kung, and more importantly Hai//om and Damara) who between them have beliefs about snakes which encompass all these complexities, as well as clear beliefs about giraffe. The question now arises as to how we interpret the giraffe-snake conflationary images found in this art using this confusing array of ethnographic data regarding snakes on the one hand, and beliefs about giraffe on the other. More

specifically, what is the significance of overtly associating certain snake images in the Brandberg with giraffe?

Considering the arguments advanced for interpreting the Brandberg rock art (Guenther 1984; Kinahan 1999) which conclude that the rock art of the Massif was primarily associated with rain making, it might seem obvious to believe that snakes are being used in the rock art because of their associations to water, and giraffe due to their so-called powers over rain. In addition, the conflation of giraffe and snake imagery could be argued to emphasize a link between these images and the weather, since giraffe contain *n!ao* (Marshall 1957; Biesele 1993).

However, these conclusions are not as obvious as they may seem, particularly in regard to rain making. Importantly, there are no San groups in Botswana or Namibia who overtly associate snakes with rain, or even with the ability to control the weather. These groups also have *no* concept of a rain-animal, nor do they believe that rain can easily be controlled by shamans. In fact the contrary is reported. The !Kung told Marshall (1957:237) that shamans trance for curing purposes and they have no shamans who can control the rain. As mentioned previously, it was the job of shamans to enter trance to plead with God to bring rain. The rain was then thought to be brought at God's discretion (Marshall 1962; Heinz 1975).The Nharo also did not have rain dances, nor did they seem to believe that the rain could actively be controlled in the manner which the southern San could through the capture of the rain animal. Thus, Guenther (1986:254) reported: "I found little evidence among the Nharo of any 'rain dance', an esoteric cultural trait commonly ascribed to Bushmen by the local European farmers."

Thus, it seems unlikely that the northern San would associate a particular creature (such as a snake or a giraffe) with rain-making. In fact, all the animals which these groups do associate with weather, such as the giraffe, eland and kudu (*Tragelaphus strepsiceros*) are not necessarily thought to have positive associations with the weather. Rather, they are thought to simply have powerful effects on the weather itself through *n!ao* (Marshall 1957; Biesele 1993), which can have the result of bringing rain, but may also cause undesirable weather to prevail. Thus the San of the Namibian and Botswanan region do not appear to particularly link certain creatures with rain and rain making, despite the fact that giraffe are associated with the weather. The only exception to this is the chameleon (*Brdypodion.sp*) which Mathias Guenther (1986) recorded as being an animal associated with having some power over rain amongst the Nharo of Botswana.

However, given that some San (and indeed Khoe speakers) do have a particular belief in the association between snakes and water does indicate that snakes can tenuously be argued to have a connection to the weather and in some cases to rain. This is because in some cases the god associated with controlling spirits-of-the-dead is also the god associated with control of the weather, particularly rain (Bleek 1928a, 1928b; Schapera 1930; Guenther 1986).

Thus, for the Angolan San, *//Gaua* was the deity associated with spirits-of-the-dead (Bleek 1928a: 46). These spirit people were associated with strong winds and their deity was thought to cause thunder and lightning (Bleek 1928b:123). The Namibian !Kun mentioned a trickster deity named */Xue*. */Xue* was chiefly responsible for the transformation of people into spirit beings upon death, and was also thought to be

connected to the thunder, lightning, strong winds and rain (Bleek & Lloyd 1911). Moreover, /Xue could assume the form of certain animals, in particular, snakes.

Lyn Wadley (1996:277) points out that the connections between the dead and rain were common associations in some San lore. The /Xam believed that the dead rode the rain (L.Viii.-28.8465) and were thought to be its custodians (Bleek 1933b:305; Wadley 1996:277). The dead were also said to have some control over the occurrence of rain and were pleaded with in some instances when rain was needed (Bleek 1933b:384). Indeed, even for the !Kung, there was some association between death and weather control in the form of *n!ao*. Thus, a person's *n!ao* was dictated by the type of weather which followed the persons birth, and in the case of a person's death, the kind of weather associated with his or her *n!ao* would be activated (Marshall 1957).

Therefore, it seems probable that forces of the weather featured somewhat in the beliefs of the San artists responsible for the execution of the Brandberg rock art. The visual connection between snakes and giraffe in the rock art moreover suggests that snakes may have been seen to have some force over the weather, possibly rain. Giraffe, as discussed, were one of the animals believed by the northern San groups to be redolent with *n!ao* and thus would have had some link to weather rites. Snakes have been associated with rain in San rock art, specifically in the rock art of the Drakensberg region (although with very little regional ethnographic proof), but I have demonstrated that it is difficult to associate snakes with rain in the Brandberg. Moreover, if snakes have an additional symbolism linked to spirits-of-the-dead, which are in turn implicated in weather control, it is possible that from the context of the rock art (their connection to giraffe) and the ethnography,

images of snakes in the rock art of the Brandberg can be said to represent some concern with weather control.

However, I argue that this interpretation, although supported by some ethnographic evidence and previous research, is not conclusively borne out in the ethnography, or the rock art, but is rather a quite large intellectual leap made by researchers following the accepted norm instead of looking at the more pertinent evidence, such as the rock art itself. I state this for the following reasons:

1 — The concept of *n!ao* is not only associated with the giraffe. As I have already stated, other large game animals were thought to possess this quality. Therefore, animals such as the kudu, the eland, the gemsbok and the hartebeest (*Alcelaphus buselaphus*) would also represent weather changing concepts in the rock art. The presence of all these animals in the rock art of the Brandberg suggests that if the concept of weather control is an element in the art, it is amply expressed by the depiction of these animals. Because these creatures are very directly associated with weather control, it is arguable that they far better express concerns with weather than depictions of giraffe-headed snakes could, given that snakes have no direct connection to *n!ao*, and no direct connection to the weather, other than through spirits-of-the-dead.

The connection between snakes and giraffe in the imagery also suggests that snakes in this context are not necessarily implicated in weather control. Giraffe are themselves animals with weather influencing abilities. Their presence in the rock art is enough to suggest this potent influence. The inclusion of their attributes in depictions of snakes does not necessarily enhance their *n!ao* abilities, again because snakes have no obvious powerful influence on the weather.

Moreover, the fact that the only identifiable creature associated with snake depictions in the rock art is the giraffe also raises questions as to the link between snakes and the weather. If the depictions of snakes somehow add a quality to the *n!ao* abilities of potent animals, it seems likely that snakes would be conflated not only with giraffe, but with animals such as the kudu and eland. However, conflations between snakes and other identifiable animals are possibly absent from the rock art of the area.

2 — There are no beliefs amongst the San in the northern areas regarding their own specific ability to control rain. It could not be caught, as the rain animal could, but could only be prayed for, something which Schapera (1930) mentions many northern San groups doing. Once prayed for, the falling of rain was dependent on God's benevolence. Thus, given that rock art images are either depictions of trance experiences, or as Kinahan (1999) argues are preparation for the experiences in trance, it seems unlikely that any of these images depict rainmaking scenes, since that simply was not the job of the shaman in northern San belief. Shamans, as already mentioned, were rather chiefly concerned with curing rituals.

3 — Kinahan (1999) argues that snakes and giraffe were purposefully painted under flows of water from the rain to signify a connection between these animals and the rain. The use of water precipitate does not necessarily mean there is a connection between rain and giraffe, or snakes. The precipitate also covers other animals in the art, as well as human figures. Are we to believe that precipitate covering all images in the rock art means that the images are associated with rain making? Given that water itself is associated with the trance experience of moving underwater, and that the northern San

groups seem to have no specific beliefs about the control of rain, it would probably be more appropriate to interpret the positioning of images under precipitate as an indication of the importance of underwater travel in the trance experience, if indeed these images were deliberately painted under water washes at all.

4— The painting the giraffe-snake conflations is highly unusual in southern Africa. It suggests a unique and unusual message was being portrayed here. To simply equate these images with the oft argued and unquestioned rain association is to overlook the uniqueness of these images and to deny the fact that they are so rare in their depiction that their meaning is possibly very regional and site specific and cannot be conflated with previous interpretations of images of giraffe and snakes.

The use of conflationary images therefore suggests that snakes are being depicted with giraffe characteristics for reasons other than weather-control. The link between snakes and giraffe further suggests that the qualities which prompted the use of giraffe characteristics in snake images are religious and symbolic qualities attributed to the giraffe, which are not those directly associated with *n!ao*.

I therefore conclude that the images of giraffe-headed snakes in the Brandberg are not related to concepts of weather control, and are not connected to rain-making, unlike the images of snakes in the Drakensberg region. In this chapter I have noted the following

- The manner I which snakes and giraffe are portrayed in the art of the Brandberg
- The previous interpretations for giraffe and giraffe-snake conflations
- Ethnography on snakes and giraffe, mostly from the northern regions of southern Africa which I believe to be more applicable in my interpretations.

- Argued against the concepts of giraffe or snakes being inherently tied up to ideas of weather control or rainmaking due to these ideas not existing in the ethnography of northern San groups.

In the next chapter, I turn to examining the images of snakes and giraffe in the Brandberg rock art itself; in particular, one telling panel which I believe can help answer many questions relating to the interpretation of snakes and giraffe. From the evidence supplied by the rock art it is likely that snakes and giraffe represent another important component of the San religious belief system. This role is suggested not only by the presence of snakes and giraffe in the art, but specifically by the connection between snakes and giraffe. This connection is implied in the images, and links to the symbolism of these creatures as elucidated in the ethnography.

Chapter 4

Conflations and Corporeality: The snake-giraffe link

The previous chapter examined whether or not snakes and giraffe in the art were linked to concepts of weather control. Given the ethnographic data and imagery in the rock art, it is arguable that the giraffe – snake conflations, and many of the giraffe images in the art do not necessarily relate to the control of weather as has been previously argued (Guenther 1984; Kinahan 1999). Rather, a different and more central concern for the San groups in the north is suggested in these images. By examining the imagery itself, in particular a key panel in the Ga'aseb Gorge, as well as ethnographic and neuropsychological data, I draw out how this central concern is manifested in these images.

Ga'aseb 8

I turn my attention now to a set of related images that I believe are key in the interpretation of the meaning of giraffe-snake conflations in the Brandberg rock art, as well as the giraffe imagery. The site, known as Ga'aseb 8 (after Pager 1995) is found in a gorge called Ga'aseb which is located on the south side of the Brandberg granite Massif (Fig. 29).

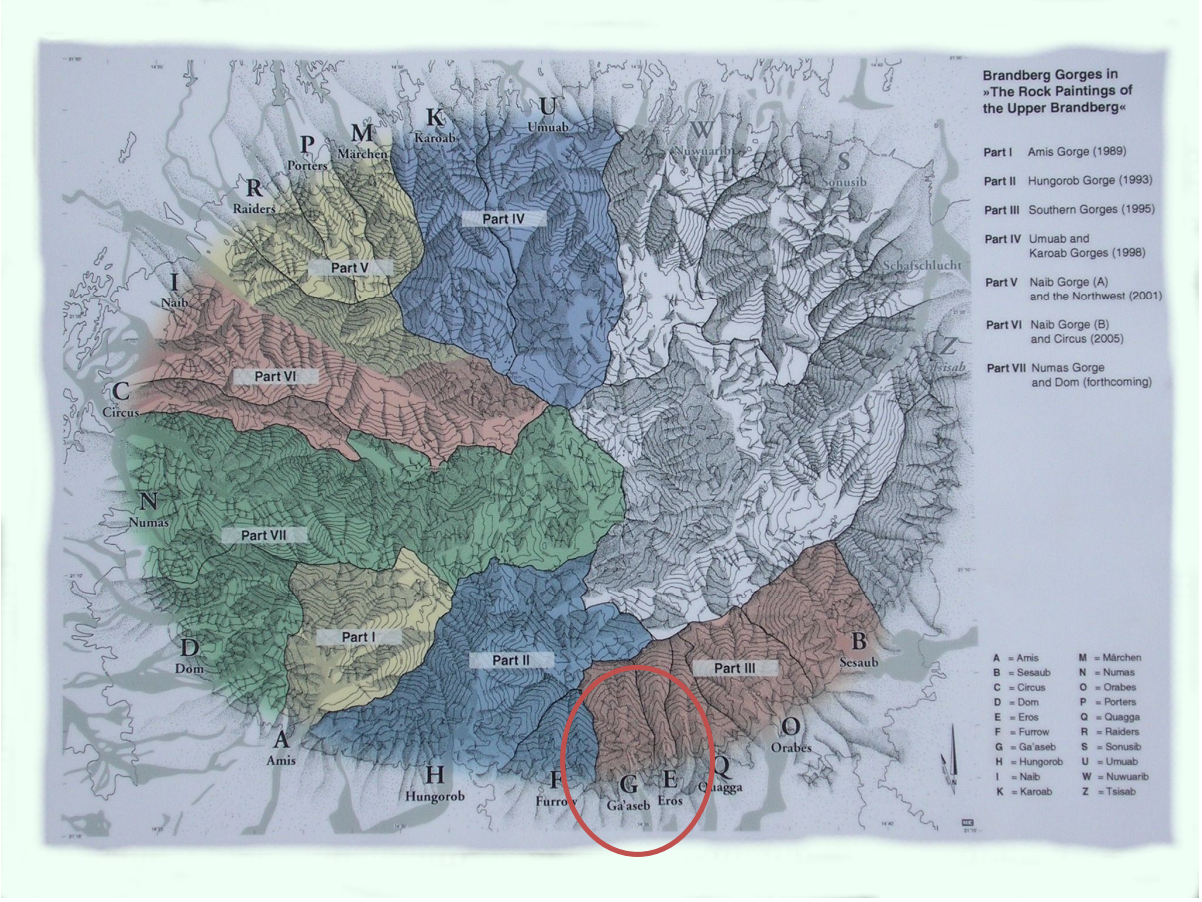

Fig. 29 Brandberg map showing Ga'aseb gorge on the south side of the Massif

The site itself is situated in a deep granite shelter, which has protected most of the images from water seep, and has thus contributed to the excellent state of preservation of certain images (Pager 1995:86). The site is 50 m long and 20 m at its deepest point. There are a number of partially preserved human figures at the site. Many of these figures carry arrows, and some carry bows. In the centre of the shelter, high up on the granite overhang are a set of images or a 'scene' (cf. Lewis-Williams 1992) of remarkable preservation (Pager 1995:86).

This 'scene' is comprised of three human figures, apparently approaching a giraffe figure located on the left of the panel (Fig.30 and 31).

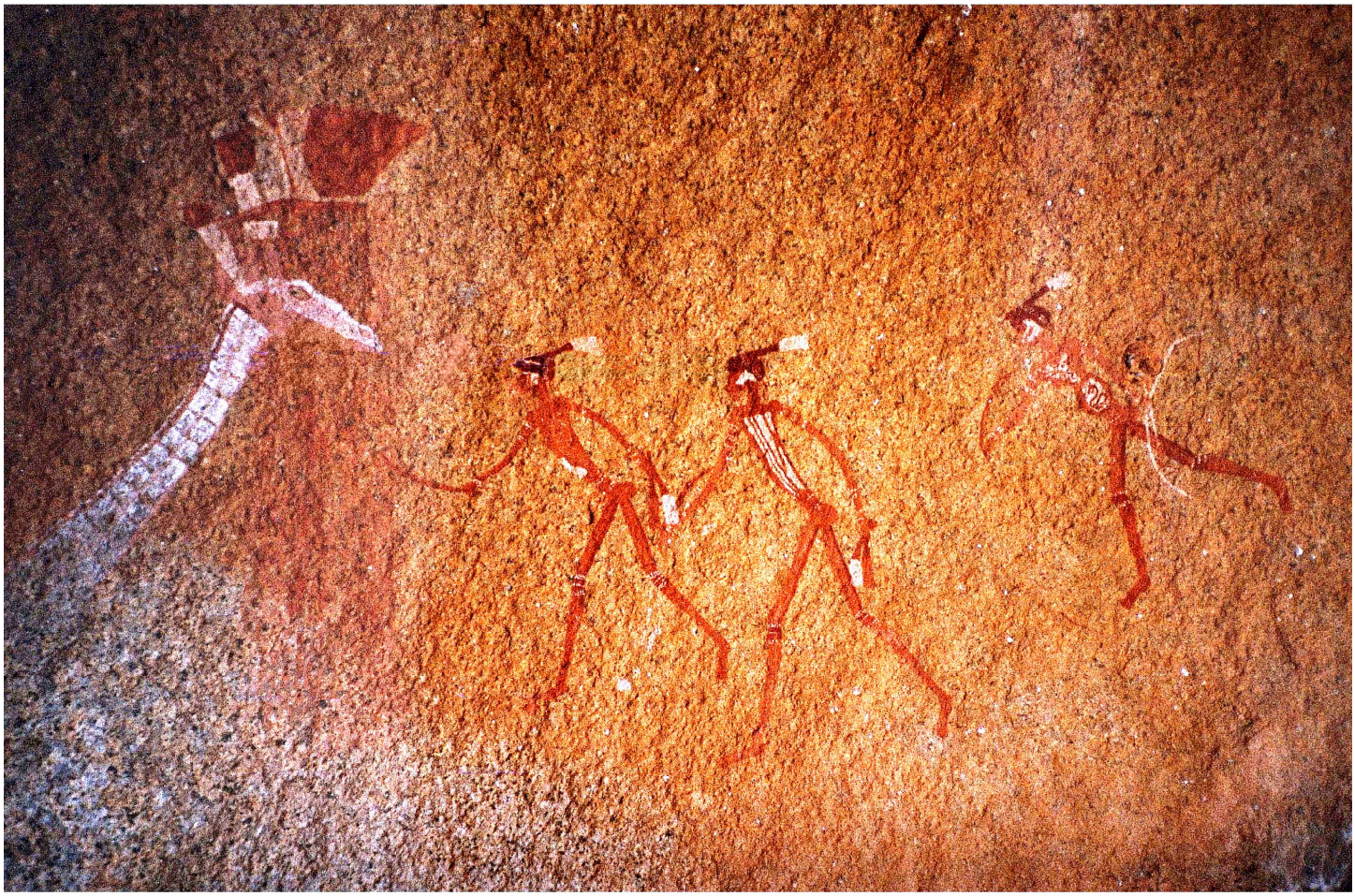

Fig. 30 Scene from Ga'aseb 8, Lenssen-Erz 2006

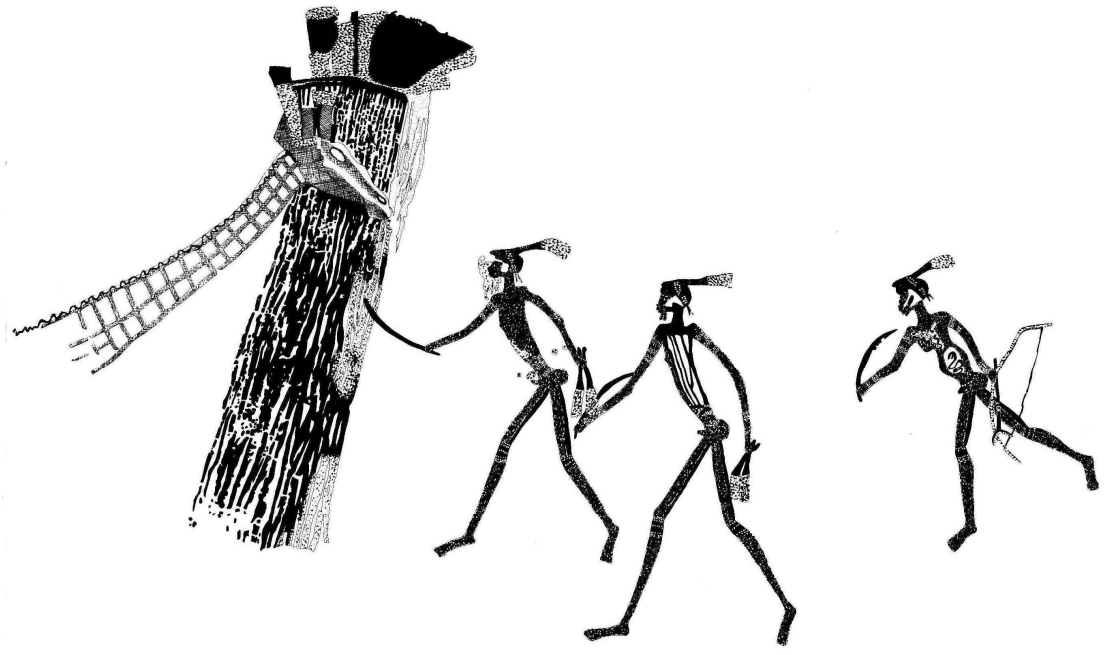

Fig. 31 Re-drawing of scene from Ga'aseb 8, Pager 1995

The human figures are richly detailed. The right-hand most figure from the giraffe is depicted with a hollow torso in which there appears a possible curved eared snake present (Fig. 32). There are also lines in the chest which may be snakes (Fig. 33). The torso of this figure (and of the other two figures) and the depiction of a penis suggests that this (and the other two human figures) is a depiction of a male. In his left hand he holds a D-shaped bow and an arrow, and in his right hand is an unidentifiable stick-like object. His face is slightly prognathic and has some white markings on the cheeks (Fig. 34). These markings and the shape of the face led Harald Pager to argue (Pager 1995:87) that the head of this figure may be that of a springbok. However, the other two figures also have white markings on their faces. In addition, the figure's prognathic face does not in any way resemble the ordinary shape used in depictions of springbok faces in the rock art of the area. Therefore, I would argue that this is simply a human face with no obvious animal associations.



Fig. 32 Torso of right-hand most figure at Ga'aseb 8 showing possible eared snake in the stomach, Lenssen-Erz 2006



Fig. 33 Right-hand most figure at Ga'aseb 8, Lenssen-Erz 2006



Fig. 34 Re-drawing of right-hand most figure from Ga'aseb 8 showing prognathic face with white markings, Pager 1995

The middle human figure, located to the left of the right-hand most figure, is also depicted with a hollow torso. However, in his torso are a number of vertical and possibly non-representational lines. I argue that these lines may be non-representational as they are not representative of any other images present in the rock art of the area, or indeed of southern Africa.

This figure too holds the same unidentifiable stick-like object in his right hand. In his left hand are two unusual rattle-like objects. These appear to be the same shape as the protrusions each man has from his headdress, and a reversal of colours of the protrusion coming from the giraffe's head (Fig.35).

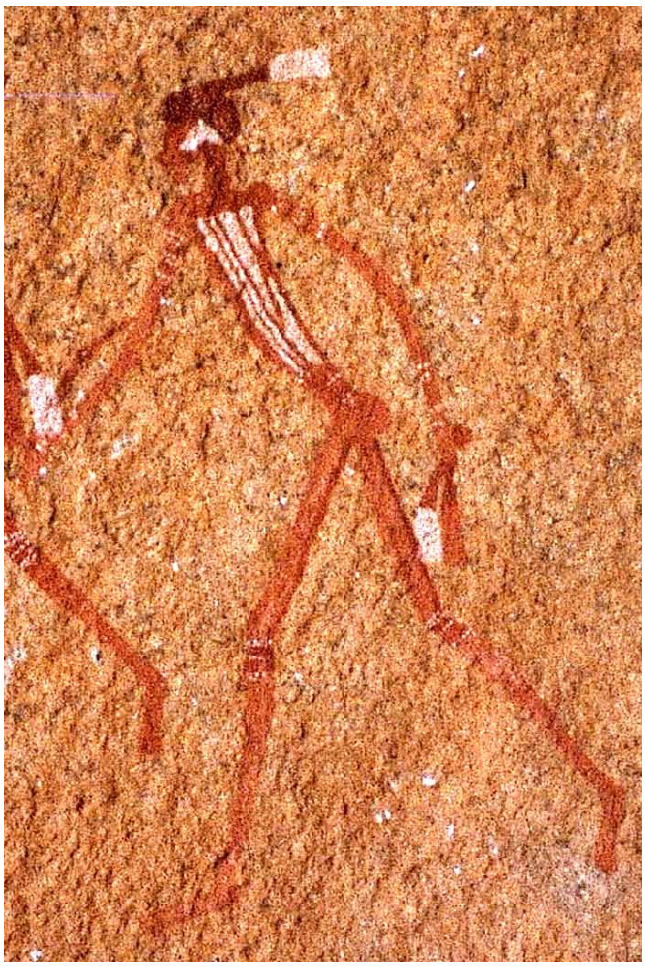

Fig. 35 Middle human figure Ga'aseb 8, Lenssen-Erz 2006

The left-hand most human figure has a solid torso. He too holds out the same stick-like object to the giraffe. In his left hand he carries two unusual rattle-like objects which also mimic the protrusion from his headdress, similar to the previous figure (Fig. 36). His stick-like object has been described as touching the 'rain' which is believed to be falling behind the giraffe's head (Pager 1995:87). This 'rain' is a set of lines painted behind the giraffe's head.

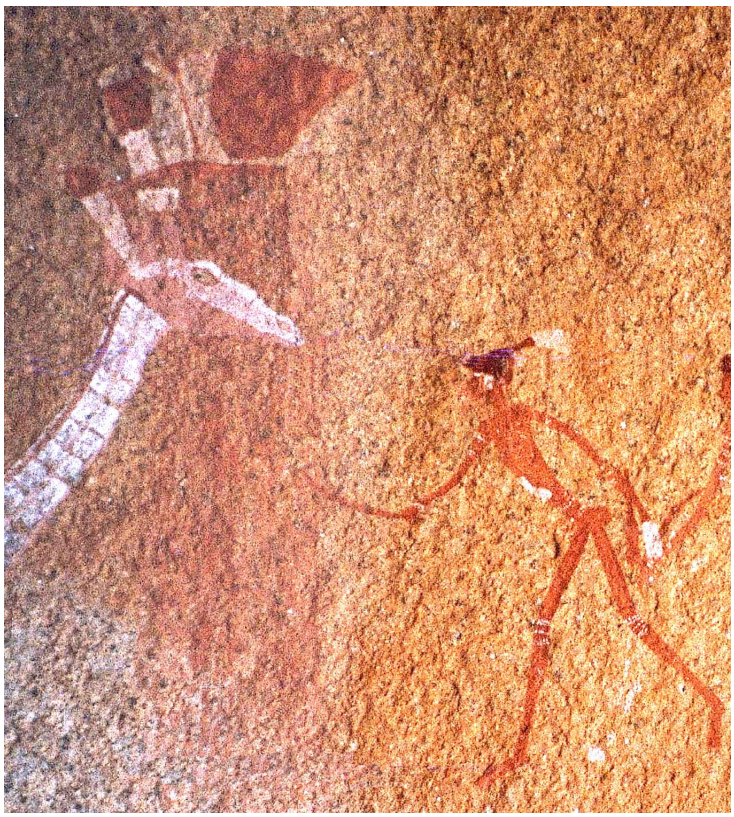

Fig. 36 Left-hand most figure from Ga'aseb 8 in relation to the giraffe, Lenssen-Erz 2006

However, it is not feasible to argue that the 'rain' represented by these unsteady and unclear set of lines, which appear to emanate from a very strange form, is in fact representational of rain. They do not appear to me to look very much like rain, and could in fact be representational of almost anything since we are not sure of exactly what they art. Therefore, I argue that these are currently unidentifiable lines rather than rain. Whilst some images in San rock art may be stylised, I do not believe that the San in the Brandberg, who were so capable of representing images as they appeared in nature, would suddenly use a highly stylised version of the representation of rain. For this reason, I simply cannot accept the argument that this is a depiction of rain.

The giraffe image appears to have disappeared somewhat since, as only the neck and head of the giraffe are visible (Pager 1995:87). However, this giraffe is not an example of the giraffe depicted with only the backline and head visible as I discussed in the previous chapter. This is because the body of the giraffe at Ga'aseb 8 is partially filled out and it is clear that the image was not meant to be a profile of a giraffe head and neck (see Fig. 37, and compare Fig. 38).

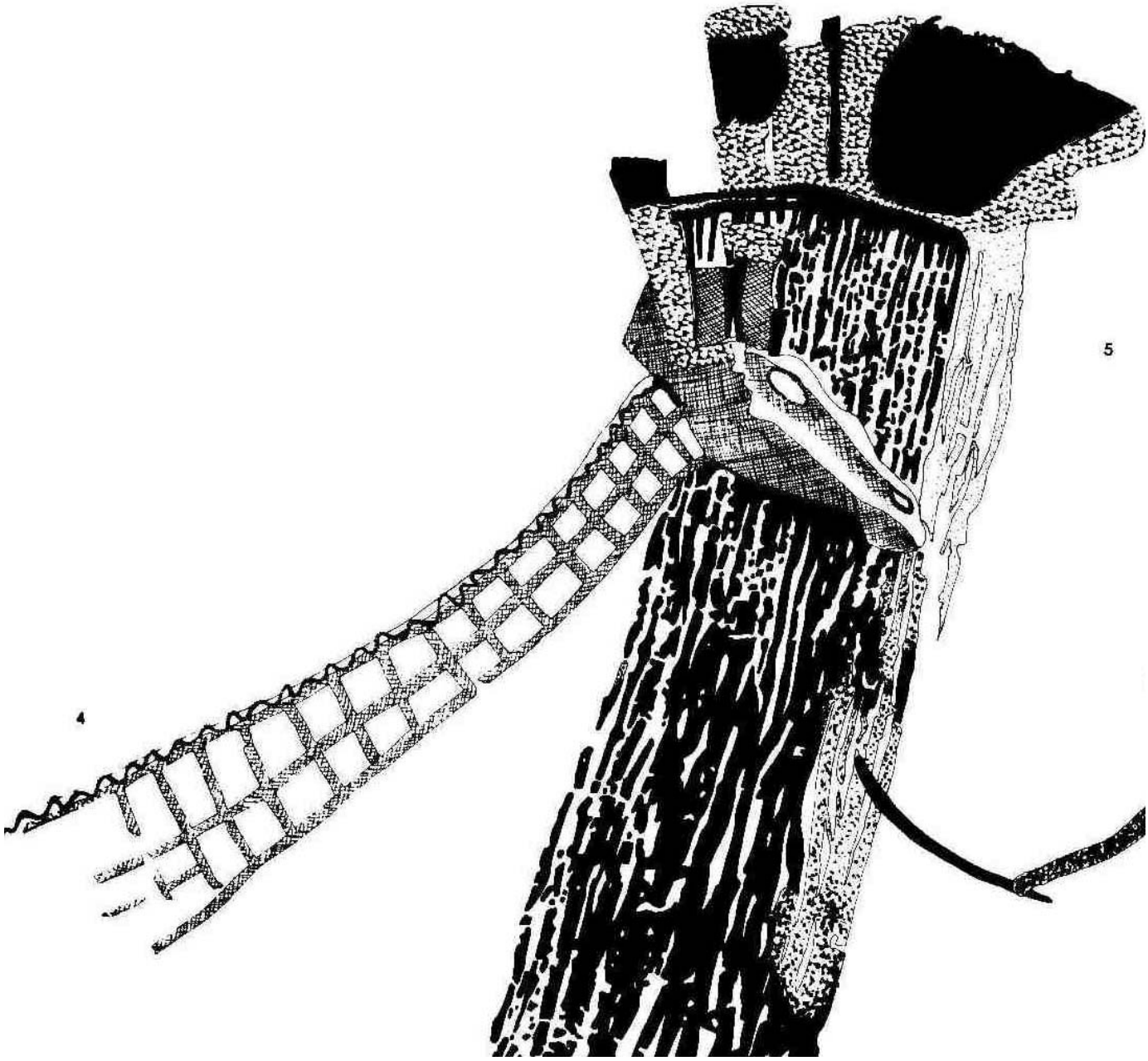

Fig. 37 Ga'aseb 8 giraffe neck, Pager 1995

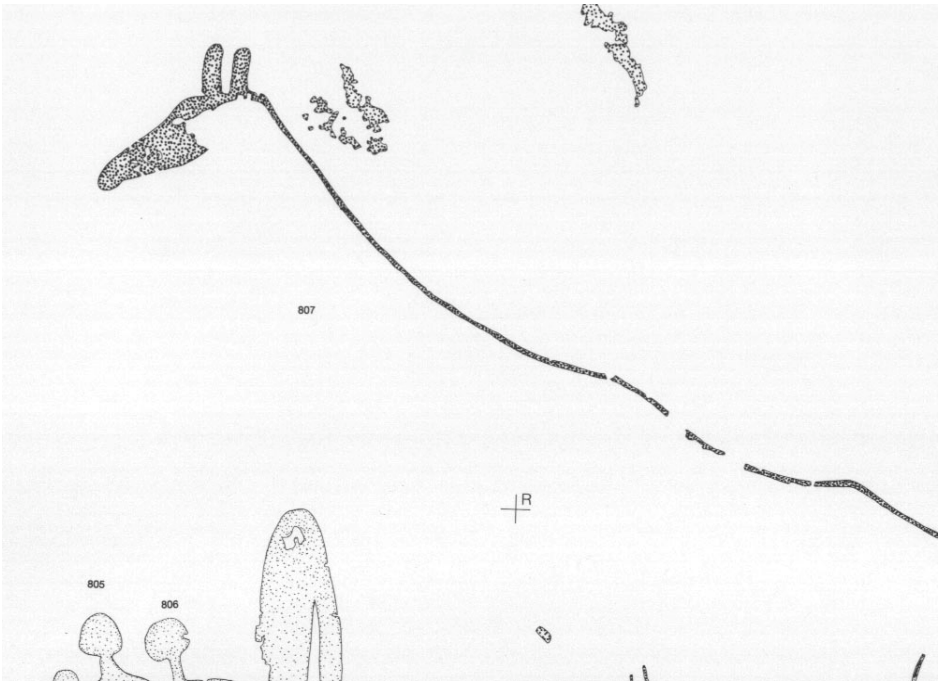

Fig. 38 Giraffe painted without infill, Pager 1998

The neck has a grid-like pattern frequently used on giraffe images in this area. The head appears to have four projections coming from it. Two of these may be ears, and the other two may represent horns. However, one of the projections is remarkably similar in shape to the rattle-like objects in the hands of the two men closest to the giraffe. The only difference is that the colours on the projection have been inverted. More importantly, there appears to be a wavy line *in* the giraffe's neck, which ends in an oblong head. This head is located at the base of the giraffe's head (see Fig. 39 and 40). I argue that it is a head as it mimics the style of heads of a particular creature found in the Brandberg art which I shall come to presently.

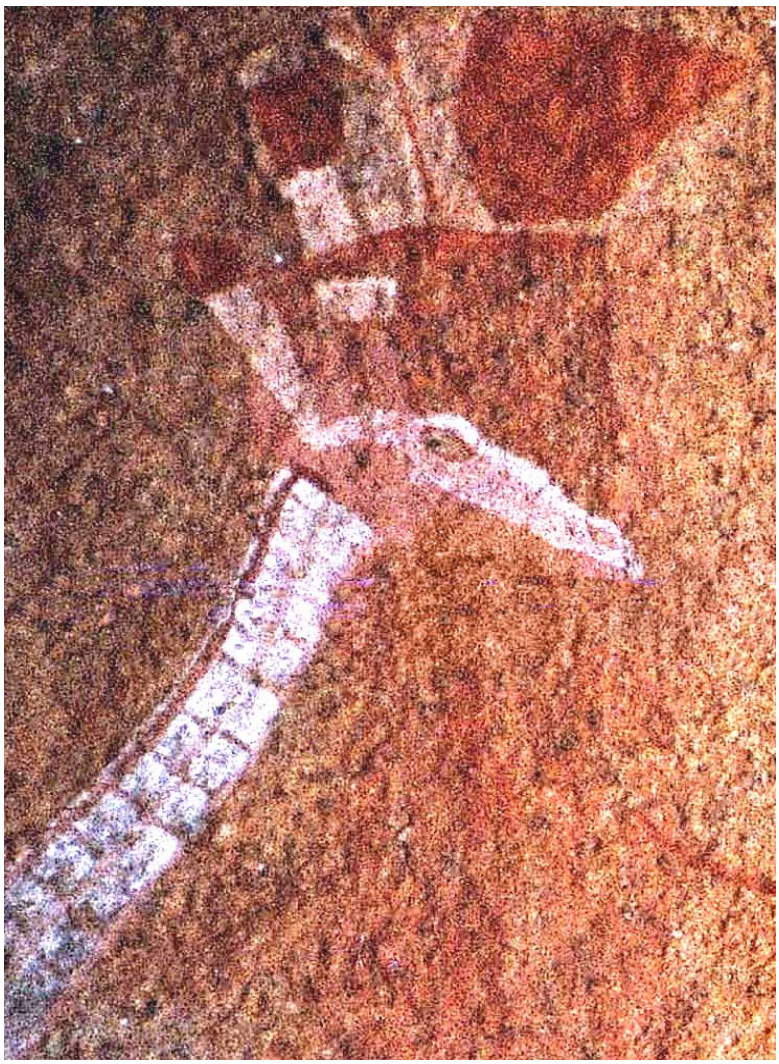

Fig. 39 Giraffe at Ga'aseb 8 with snake in neck and head, Lenssen-Erz 2006

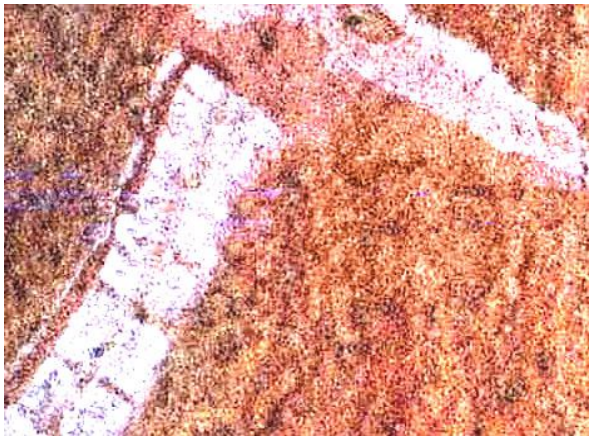

Fig. 40 Close-up of apparent snake in the spine of the giraffe at Ga'aseb 8 ,Lenssen-Erz 2006

The wavy line in the giraffe's neck has been interpreted as the giraffe's mane (Pager 1995:87). However, the wavy line has a solid line adjacent to it, suggesting that this straight line is the outline of the giraffe's neck, and that the wavy line is inside the neck, not on top of it as one would expect with a mane. Moreover, in other depictions of giraffe in the area which include manes, the manes are painted with very distinct hairs which rise from the back of the neck **(**see Fig.41**).**

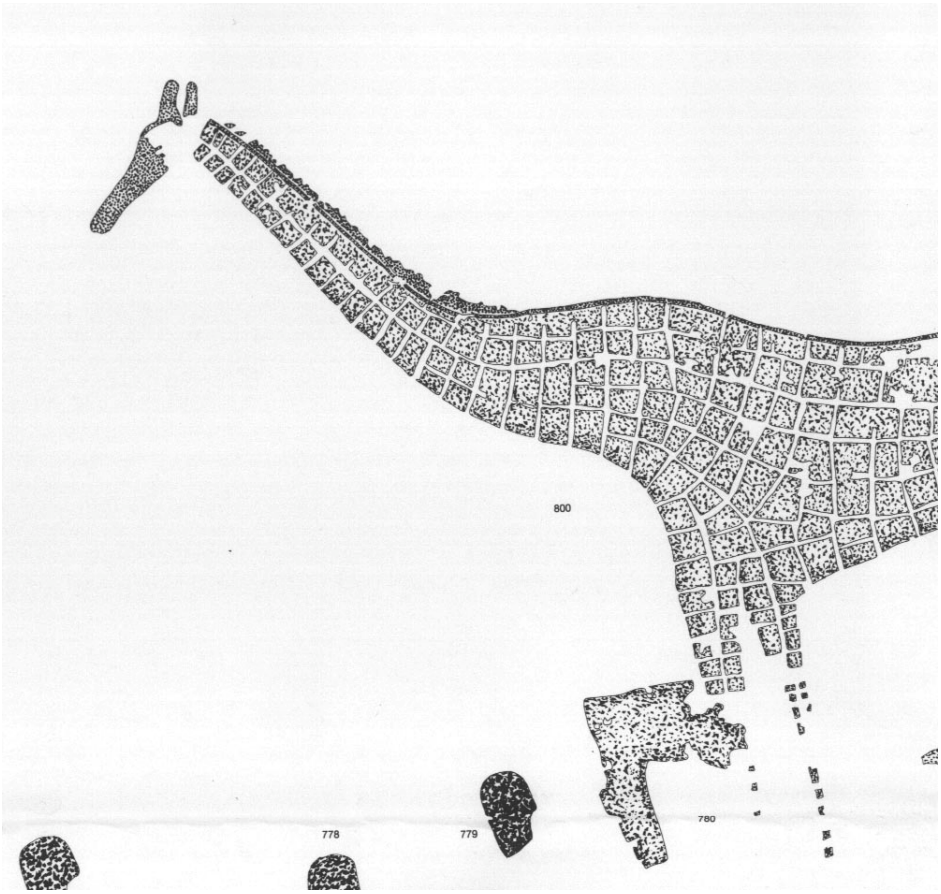

Fig. 41 Giraffe from Karoab 2 with distinct mane, Pager 1998

It seems unlikely that in this particular image the mane would be represented in such a markedly different manner. In addition, the wavy line ends in what may be a head inside the giraffe's head, suggesting that this is not a mane at all. As stated, this shape is

reminiscent of 'heads' of a particular creature already found in the art of the Brandberg and for this reason I argue it is a head (see Fig. 42) . Given the shape of the head at the end of the wavy line, and the proportions of the line, it is far more likely that this is a representation of a snake in the giraffe's neck. Snakes are occasionally painted in a similar manner, such as the very small snake which can be found at the site Ga'aseb 1 in the Ga'aseb Gorge located on the south side of the Massif (see Fig. 42).

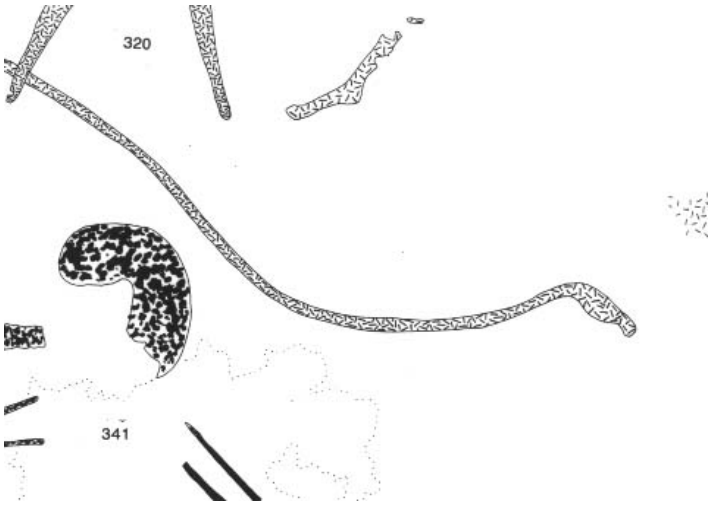

Fig. 42 Small, unidentifiable snake from Ga'aseb 1, Pager 1995

The inclusion of the snake in the torso of the righthandmost human figure, and the snake in the giraffe's neck raise intriguing possibilities as to the meaning of this image (see Fig. 43). In order to understand this image it is necessary to consider the conditions under which the San believed that forces and creatures were capable of entering the body.



Fig. 43 Righthandmost Figure from Ga'aseb 8 with snake in stomach, Lenssen-Erz 2006

The only instance whereby something might enter the body is during the healing rituals performed by San shamans, or occasionally things may enter the body to make someone sick and are removed by the shamans during trance. For this reason, I now examine these rituals in order to identify the nature of the snake found in the stomach of the human figure, and use this evidence to argue the reason behind the inclusion of the snake in the giraffe's neck.

San Healing Rituals

In interpreting the imagery at Ga'aseb 8, as well as the other giraffe, and giraffe- snake conflations found in the rock art of the Brandberg, it is important to understand the healing rituals of the Khoesan peoples. I suggest that there are two aspects of embodiment involved in healing. The first concerns the embodied aspect of healing for the shamans themselves. The second is concerned with the embodied processes for San society in general relating to their appreciation of the trance dance and of the demonstration of the process of going into trance as portrayed by the healer. I will summarise the general embodied aspects of San society in the following chapter.

Concepts and sensations of healing

Rain-making, game control and healing are the most important reasons for shamans to enter trance in San society (Lewis-Williams 1981, 1982:434, 1984a:278). Healing in particular encompasses many somatic elements as it is directly concerned with the presence of illness in the body, as well as illness in society. Healing is perceived as ridding the body of illness by drawing the illness out of the body of the patient (Marshall 1969:347; Barnard 1979; Katz 1982). It also served a larger function of ridding society of

illness (*ibid.)*. This is because all illness in the body was thought of as metaphor for illness and social disease and disorder in society in general.

This idea is summed up in the research of Blundell (2004) which highlights the fact that spirits-of-the-dead bring disease and death in the form of arrows which they shoot into the body which causes physical illness. In addition the spirits-of-the-dead bring disorder to society since they steal the souls of the living to serve as companions and lovers in the spirit world and thus abuse the social set-up of the San band because they cause a loss which impacts on members of the San band. When there is illness in the band this threatens the social order as it may result in the death or illness of hunters and individuals responsible for caring for children and families in the band. Without these members of the band, there is social disorder. Thus disease and disorder can be both physical and social, an idea which is espoused in the work of Turner (2003:1). Discussing social organization broadly he points out that all disease is social disorder. Thus metaphorically, literally, and socially, all disease can cause disorder. Moreover, Mathias Guenther (1999:195 – 196) has pointed out that in addition to the healing activities of shamans, they also take on the role of social mediator in the band. This is because the shaman may pointedly address tension issues in the group (*ibid:* 195), berating the individuals and the group for quarrelling through his actions at the trance dance. Guenther is not clear as to how exactly the shaman manages to do this, but I would argue that through the healing activities of the shaman he is in essence restoring normal social order by curing illness and thus reinstating the normal day-to-day functions of the group free of illness and other limiting factors (Guenther 1999:196).

Although the use of trance to heal illness and draw sickness out of the body and society appears to have been practiced by most San groups in southern Africa, the process of healing is best understood amongst the !Kung of Namibia and Botswana, and the Nharo of Botswana due to large amounts of ethnographic research conducted on this topic amongst these groups (e.g. Schapera 1930; Marshall 1962, 1969; Katz & Biesele 1986; Katz 1982, Katz et al 1997, but see Low 2004 for an in depth discussion of healing in both San and Khoe groups in southern Africa). Indeed, as seen from my previous chapter, healing is the primary function of shamans in the north and central areas of southern Africa. Thus, it is groups from these areas, particularly the !Kung, Nharo and !Kun that I use most extensively to demonstrate San healing rituals, although I also focus on the /Xam as they have healing rituals in which they draw out illness from the body.

Illness causation in San communities

The chief cause of illness amongst the San is thought to be as a result of arrows of sickness shot into the body by the spirits-of-the-dead or *//gauwasi* (the name used by the !Kung), or malevolent shamans in the case of the /Xam (Bleek & Lloyd 1911, Mashall 1969). These *//gauwasi* are attracted by the singing and clapping as well as the firelight during a trance dance (Marshall 1969). It is at this dance that they attempt to take the souls of the living San, and aim to inflict death and disease on band members (*ibid.,* Marshall 1999).

However, the San peoples (see Schapera 1930, Low 2004 for comparisons) believe that the spirits may use other methods of causing illness, and some illness may not necessarily be the result of the actions of spirits-of-the-dead. Thus, in a /Xam description of the actions of malevolent shamans in what appears to be a healing ritual (Bleek 1935:2-5),

illness and death-causing agents in the body are said to *be* certain creatures An informant said "I have seen people who were ill, and the person who snored the sick man said that a butterfly was killing him; a white butterfly" (Low 2004). These creatures, once snored (sucked) out the of patient's body, were then taken into the healer's body from which they were expelled, in this instance through the healers nostrils (*ibid.*). In other instances the /Xam appear to have believed that a creature could enter a person and cure him or her of their illness (Guenther 1999:187) and the job of the shaman was then to suck the spirit creature out of the patient, and cast it away with the illness it was carrying.

The Berg Damara (a later form of the hunter-gatherer Damara as recorded by Barnard 1992) thought that illness in the body was a result of actions of 'elders' which appear to be spirits-of-the-dead. These beings would do the work of their god, *//Gamab*, which was to inflict illness in the Berg Damara (Vedder 1928). The illness would be caused by these beings introducing small stones, thorns, small knives, scorpions and small snakes into the body. If these objects were not removed in time they would result in illness and even death in the recipient (Vedder 1928:63). They also thought that living beings (lions or leopards) could taske refuge in the body and needed to be removed by a curer who would use his mouth to suck this creature out of the patient's body and into his own, and would then proceed to spit the creature into a tortoiseshell with a burning coal in it which would in effect kill the creature (Vedder 1928:65). This is reminiscent of the tortoiseshell used during healing dances in order to invoke giraffe potency so that shamans could perform healing rites, as expressed in the previous chapter. I believe that the snake in the stomach of the righhandmost shaman depicted at Ga'seb 8 is a good example of the snakes being either shot into the body by spirits-of –the-dead or an example of a shaman taking this creature into his own body to be expelled into the spirit world. This is yet another reason

I believe that snakes can be argued to be spirits-of –the dead, an argument which I will come to presently.

There have been other documented accounts of San healing practices involving spirits in the body, and more specifically, snakes. Thus, the Orpen (1874) records show that even the Maloti San had a concept of spirits causing illness in the body. It appears from Qing's testimony that part of the healing ritual involved the healer placing his hands on the body after covering them with his or her own sweat. When the ill person coughed, the healer could receive what has caused illness, 'secret things'. Chris Low (2004:89) interprets this as being linked to other accounts from travellers who witnessed shamans receiving illness in the form of a spirit or creature from a patient's body. The traveller Jacob Gordon (1988:216) states the following account of a Bushmen healer in Namibia which was recorded in about 1785:

> I amused myself greatly with the Bushmen who were a pleasant people. I saw an old woman practising magic and snorting a devil or evil spirit - which she said she could see and looked like a cobra - out of her son's body, so that her nose bled. She staggered away with it as though she were drunk while another held her under the arm. She was swiftly given a stick with which she walked unassisted and struck the ground. She again snorted on her son, rubbed his stomach with buchu and also rubbed some buchu into the noses of several women who were sitting there as well.

Aside from snakes being one of the creatures that could cause illness when *inside* the body, there are instances whereby snakes have been reported as causing illness in the body in a manner similar to that of the spirits-of-the-dead. Therefore, Charles Andersson **(**1856**)** records the Namaqua as believing in a great snake, referred to as both Toros and Tauros, being able to cause illness in people by shooting arrows into the stomach which sorcerers had to coax away by squeezing on that part of the body.

Spirits-of-the-dead and the manifestation of illness

San groups appear to have had a set of beliefs concerning the manifestation of illness and death which included the possibility that spirits-of-the-dead could cause illness and indeed death in patients not only through the use of arrows of sickness, but also by planting various creatures in the body of the patient. One of the creatures thought to be able to shoot such arrows, and indeed manifest itself as illness in the body, was a snake (Andersson 1856), which, as we have already seen is a belief also held by the Damara whom were and still are hunter-gatherers in Namibia further strengthening the idea that snakes were thought of as malignant rather than powerful creatures. This is a significant point to which I shall return later. However, most often illness was believed to be caused by spirits (and in some cases malevolent shamans who are arguably spirits-of-dead-shamans) at the trance dance, or Great Dance (Blundell 2004:82). These spirits were attracted to the firelight at these dances, as well as by the longing to steal the souls of living San to take into the spirit world often to be an additional lover or spouse. Capturing living souls was made possible by causing the illness and eventual death of humans through inflicting arrows or illness-causing creatures at the dance (Marshall 1969). In order to cure the patient, the shaman in attendance would need to extract either the arrows or the creature and take them into his or her own body before expelling them along with the illness they cause, out of his or her own body (Bleek & Lloyd 1911; Vedder 1928; Barnard 1979).

The process of extracting illness from a patient, and expelling it from the healer's body appears to differ slightly between accounts and amongst groups of San people. Curing can be done on an individual basis, but the most potent form of the healing activity in San

society is in the form of the trance dance or Great Dance as Blundell prefers to refer to it (Blundell 2004:82).

The trance dance is a traditional dance in which the objective is to reach a deep trance state (Marshall 1969; Guenther 1999:182) (*kia*). It is in this state that the most potent healing activities are carried out (Katz 1982). The healing can take place once the dancer's potency has been activated. This potency is known as *n/om* amongst the !Kung, and *tsso* amongst the Nharo (Guenther 1999:184). Potency is said to boil in the pit of the stomach of a dancer, aided by the use of heat in the form of hot coals which the dancer may use to catapult him or herself into deep trance (Barnard 1979). When the *n/om* has reached boiling point, it will vaporise and rise up the dancer's spine, and the dancer will begin to sweat very profusely and tremble violently (Lee 1967, 1968; Marshall 1969; Katz 1976,1982:95; Lewis-Williams 1980:471). When this has occurred, deep trance or *kia* has been achieved and the medicine man (or woman) may then begin the curing rite (Katz 1982:107).

In this state the healer will kneel before the patient and perform a variety of actions to expel the sickness within. He may flutter his hands around the patients or place them on the patient's body, drawing the disease out into his own body (Barnard 1979: 73). The process of drawing disease into the body, as well as expelling it from the body, is described as being incredibly painful and terrifying. Thus the process is accompanied by violent shaking, crying and screaming (Katz 1982:107).

In addition to the use of the hands to draw illness out of a patient's body, there are other methods which a healer uses to expel sickness and bring good health to the patient and

the band. The !Kung may use tortoise shells. These are filled with magical substances believed to be sent by their greater god, *#Gao N!a* (Marshall 1969:360). These substances include the urine of their lesser god *//Gauwa* (who is said to be lord over the spirits-of-the-dead), the urine of a supernatural giraffe and a plant material called *!Gaishe (ibid*.:360), a plant not identified to species. A burning coal is also placed in this tortoise shell. The shell is then waved above the attendees at the dance by the dancer, and the smoke is thought to have a general good effect on the people who breathe it in. In addition, an important element in healing for the !Kung is the use of sweat and saliva. The sweat from the armpits, forehead and chest of the dancer (and in some cases their saliva) is rubbed on the body of the patient in the particular area of illness, to aid the curing process (Katz 1982:107).

The Nharo believe that in order to cure, they need not only for potency to boil in their stomachs, but a temporary union with a spirit of the dead (known as a *g//ãũa*) in their bodies (Barnard 1979:72). This *g//ãũa* is under the control of the medicine man and remains unaffected by the illness taken into the body of the medicine man. The medicine man then expels the *g//ãũa* who takes the illness with it back to the spirit world. An alternative view expressed by the Nharo is that the illness is taken into the body of the shaman, who then leaves his body and takes the illness with him, whereby he pleads with a *g//ãũa* to take the illness back to the spirit world (Barnard 1979:72).

It is evident from the literature that spirits-of-the-dead are the chief bearers of illness (amongst the northern groups), both physical and social. The illness may manifest itself in the form of small arrows and other objects, but the spirits-of-the-dead may also cause illness themselves through entering the body. In some cases, spirits-of-the-dead are

described as being more benevolent in the instances where they are used by shamans to cure illness, and then are expelled from the body whereby they take the illness back to the spirit world. However, the common theme to all these beliefs is that illness is brought by, and can be taken away by, spirits-of-the-dead.

If the only agents of illness in San society are spirits-of-the-dead, then the notion of these spirits and their illness are intertwined concepts. Whether the spirit-of –the-dead is causing illness through objects, or through the presence of that spirit in the body of the victim, spirits-of-the-dead are more connected with illness in San society than any other concept. It is for these reasons that sprits-of-the-dead have been argued to be an embodiment of the illness which they bring (Blundell 2004:90 – 98). Indeed, there can be no real separation between spirits-of-the-dead and illness, since in San society, there appears to be no real formal distinction between the verb and the noun (Low 2004:72). Thus, illness and to make someone ill are one and the same things. Therefore, as much as spirits-of-the-dead are spirits of departed people, they are conceptually, inherently a recognizable form standing for illness in San society.

This concept has been well illustrated in depictions of spirits-of-the-dead in San rock art found in the Nomansland area in the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa (Blundell 2004). By identifying a class of images known as Eldritch Images, Blundell (2004:97 – 112) demonstrated that these images are painted in a way which enhances the death, disease and disorder brought by these beings by purposefully depicting them as disfigured, grotesque, and deformed. Thus, for the San in the Nomansland area at least, the spirits-of-the-dead were conceived as having the physical form which matched their purpose. Thus, spirits-of-the-dead *were* the illness they brought to society, which is

reflected in their appearance. Therefore, there appears to not be a notion in San society that illness is a separate entity from its agents, even in the rock art of the Eastern Cape.

Given the depictions in the rock art of spirits-of-the-dead as somatic representations of the illness that they cause, it is seemingly the case that spirits-of-the-dead are inherently combined with the general somatic concepts held in San society. I would argue that this is especially true for the shamans which take the spirits-of-the-dead into their being and expel and/or travel with them into the spirit world.

If the concepts of spirits-of-the-dead and illness are inseparable in San society, then when a shaman takes either an illness causing creature, a spirit-of-the-dead, or their arrows into his body, he is in effect taking illness and all its painful somatic components into his physical form. Whilst the demonstrations of trance dancers in San society are related to external observation of the trance experience, which I discuss in the next section, taking illness into the body of the shaman is very much a private experience. The shaman experiences the illness in a personal manner. The sensation of the potency (and the illness that I argue needs to be taken with potency) travelling up the spine and into the spirit world would be part of the 'lived experience' of the shaman, that is, his own personal bodily experience of healing, rather than the 'lived experience' of all of the participants at the dance (although it could be argued that all observers at a dance experience the process in different ways, and have a different mental and physical reaction to it) (Blundell 2004). Thus, the manner in which illness moves out of the body is portrayed in San discourse and culture will very much reflect this personal embodied experience.

However, given that we know that San society places much emphasis on teaching novice shamans about what to expect in the spirit world and the feelings they will experience when going into trance (Lewis-Williams 1994:279 – 280), we can expect that in a particular San society the lived experience of illness travelling in and out of the body may begin to become prescribed by what other shamans tell a novice shaman to expect. In this way the personal lived experience will make a transition to a socially imposed group one. Nonetheless, this socially imposed experience will still stem from some particular shaman's personal experience of what it means to absorb and expel illness from the body. Therefore, we cannot expect that all societies will describe the sensation in the same manner, or relate it to the same set of metaphors. This point is vitally important for the purposes of my interpretation of the rock art of the Brandberg. Later in this chapter I will link the personal embodied experiences of shamans expelling illness to issues and images prevalent in the rock art.

The body and the trance dance

What is most important to consider in relation to San healing rituals is the extreme somatically visual component of the healing process, and the manner in which illness is conceived in San society. This somatic component is vitally important not only for the shamans themselves, but for those present at the dance. This is because the only manner in which other members of the band are aware that potency is activated in the shaman, and that he has reached the state of *kia*, is through the somatic clues given off by his bodily actions during the dance. Thus, the trance state has to be communicated to the

observers of the dance. Moreover, other social messages may also be communicated through the somatic portrayal of the healing dance in the rock art.

Previous analyses of the trance dance have been markedly functionalist in their outlook (see Blundell 2004:82), concentrating on how the dance may function to reproduce social harmony in the band and release social tensions (e.g., Marshall 1969; Katz 1982, Kats *et al* 1997; Keeny 1999, 2003). These analyses have rarely focused on the idea that the trance dance may rather function to *generate* social contradictions in society (Blundell 2004). In his work on the trance dance, Blundell (2004) has interpreted the importance of the somatic nature of the dance as a means in which to reproduce social inequality in the dance.

Blundell focuses chiefly on the activation of *n/om* (or *!gi* by /Xam speakers) during the dance. Blundell (2004:83) notes that the activation of this *n/om* is primarily through the physical actions of the trance dancers, and once ignited, the *n/om* needs to be controlled. Blundell (*ibid*.) divides the roles which contribute to the activation of *n/om* at the dance into three specific categories:

1. There are the women and young girls who do the clapping and singing. This clapping and singing is crucial in that it controls the ebb and flow of the potency. They do this by varying the pitch and intensity of their singing and clapping. The speed of their clapping and singing controls the intensity of the dance, and thus the intensity of the *n/om* which the shamans are activating and using.

2. There is an important distinction between the dancers who may partake in the trance dance, and the actual shamans themselves. This difference is directly

related to the supernatural potency. There is a distinction in San society between shamans, or *n/omkxaosi* and dancers. *N/omkxaosi* are those dancers who can truly be considered shamans and whom have mastered the control of potency. The rest of the dancers have not yet learnt how to control supernatural potency, and often therefore tend to be younger dancers still in the process of learning. More importantly, these young dancers can be distinguished by their obvious lack of physical prowess during the dance (Katz 1982; Blundell 2004:84). They are not yet capable of mastering the very obvious abdominal contractions required to ensure, and indeed to demonstrate to the rest of the community, the boiling of the supernatural potency in their stomachs, nor can they dance for as long as the older, more experienced shamans in the group. They are thus excluded from the prestige and title of *n/omkxaosi* because their bodily actions give them away as not yet being competent enough to perform the healing process. Their function in the dance is more to support the shamans during intensive states of trance, or *kia* than to actually embark on the healing process themselves.

3. The third role is that of the *n/omkxaosi* themselves. These are frequently the older members of the band. More importantly, they are the individuals who show the most physical prowess in the dance. Their abdominal contractions are highly visible, indicating definite activation of potency, coupled with profuse sweating. This is a visual sign that they are actively working with the potency which becomes so pertinent in the healing process (Blundell 2004:84). I argue that not only are the abdominal contractions and sweating, the trembling of the body and the screaming important for reaching the state of *kia* , they are also important physical signifiers of the ability of the shaman to reach the state in which he

> transcends his (or her) body and enters the spirit world. These actions demonstrate the competency of the shaman to heal to the rest of the band.

Blundell (2004) has used these distinctions to argue for a differentiation in San society based on the physicality expressed by shamans versus dancers at the trance dance. He argues that this show of bodily prowess marks the status of the shaman as somewhat different to that of other members of the group. He notes that during his visit to Tsumkwe in Botswana there was much critical discussion of the dance after it took place, and that much of that discussion focused on the physical prowess of the shaman during the dance. Moreover, physical dominance at the dance frequently leads to benefits in other areas of social life (Blundell 2004:85). Since supernatural potency is associated with sexual potency, many shamans who demonstrated such physical dexterity during trance, frequently received more sexual interest from the women in the community. This often leads to jealousy between the older men who were no longer capable of performing quite as dynamically at the dance as younger, more virile dancers (*ibid.)*.

What is important from this discussion of the dance is that it highlights the fact that physicality is the primary mechanism of communication of the trance state between shamans and the rest of the community. In addition, it may lead to political differences in that competent shamans receive more prestige in society than ordinary dancers (Blundell 2004:85). Most importantly, it emphasizes the idea that society's conception of what it is to be a shaman is understood through the locus of the body, especially through various visual bodily states during trance.

Given that illness and healing are both components of San society with an inherent physical quality I return to the imagery at Ga'aseb 8. I interpret the meaning of the snake and giraffe images with reference to the healing rituals of the San, in particular the corporeal aspect of the Great Dance or trance dance.

Interpretation of the scene at Ga'aseb 8

The key images at Ga'aseb 8 are the three men walking towards the giraffe figure. In particular, the snake in the stomach of the right-hand most man, and the snake in the giraffe's back are the components of this scene which are the most intriguing. I first examine the snake in the stomach of the male figure.

The ethnography on the Great Dance shows that the stomach is an incredibly important physical locus of the corporeal expression of healing. It is the point where *n/om* boils, and is also the place where illness or spirits-of-the-dead assisting the shaman can in some instances be 'stored' when taken out of a patient (Katz 1976), as already discussed previously. It is from this point that the potency travels out of the body via the *n//au* spot at the back of the head into the spirit world. Moreover, I have argued that one of the forms which spirits-of-the-dead take can, in some instances, be snakes. The ethnography from Namibia gives compelling reasons that these hunter-gatherers believed that snakes could be a manifestation of illness, and therefore possibly spirits-of-the-dead. In addition, spirits-of-the-dead and the illness they bring are one and the same thing, thus spirits-of-the-dead *are* the illness they bring to society. Thus, I suggest that the snake in the stomach of the male figure is most likely to be a representation of the illness taken from a patient during the healing process, or a representation of a sick person; I base this interpretation on the following reasons:

1. I have already noted in my discussion on illness, and in my previous chapter that one of the forms spirits-of-the-dead could take, and were symbolically related to, were snakes. Moreover, in the ethnography relating to the dance, it was demonstrated that some groups believe that snakes can be put into people to cause illness, along with arrows and other creatures such as lions.

2. The concepts of illness and spirits-of-the-dead are interchangeable in San society. The location of the snake in the stomach lends itself to the idea that it is a representation of illness, rather than a spirit-of-the-dead itself since most San groups believe that illness, not spirits, are taken into the body of the shaman when he or she is healing a patient or the band itself. Even if the snake is a representation of a spirit being taken into the body, we know from ethnography, as previously discussed, that shamans can occasionally take spirits-of-the-dead into their bodies to assist with healing, or draw spirits causing illness out of the body of ill patients. The ethnography regarding snakes as illness causing agents and spirits-of –the-dead comes not only from traveller's accounts as recorded by Chris Low (2004) but also from Barnard (1979, 1992) who has recorded these beliefs amongst the Hai//om and Damara groups, both of which were originally hunter-gatherers in the area, and the Bleek and Lloyd collection (1911) from their interviews with boys from the Namibian/Angolan region, as well as Andersson (1856) and Gordon (1988) who were travellers to the region.

3. I have already mentioned the fact that the experience of illness is an embodied one, particular to the shaman undergoing the healing ritual. This process may become embedded in society through the training of novice shamans and cultural 'schooling' of what to expect in the process of curing illness. Therefore, I argue

that in addition to representing illness, depicting a snake in the stomach of the shaman may be depicting the embodied experience of what it feels like to have illness in the body. I believe that snakes may be a good metaphor for the sensation that shaman feels during the process of potency moving out of the body up the spine. This is because the trembling feeling of illness moving up the conduit of the spine has a natural visible metaphor in the wriggling movement of snakes as they move. If we read the image at Ga'aseb 8 from an embodied perspective it can be argued that the snake in the stomach of the human figure and in the spine of the giraffe may be reflecting what the shamans in Brandberg society felt was the best visual indicator of the experiences they felt when taking in and expelling illness from the body. This is because the snake represents illness, but can also represent the feeling of potency travelling out of the body. Illness is expelled through the *n//au* spot at the back of the neck, and it is also the place where the shaman is catapulted into deep trance which takes it into the spirit world. I will argue that in the case of giraffe-snake conflationary images we have a unique instance where the idea of illness and potency may be conflated into the idea of potency travelling up the spine and absorbing the illness in the body of the shaman with it. This is of course a new and non-ethnographically supported argument, but it seems to be compelling when looking at the art in the Brandberg itself. The idea is new, but new ideas are necessary to move a discipline forward.

4. I doubt that the snake can stand simply for potency boiling in the stomach of the figure. Potency does not entail the incorporation of creatures into the body, although some groups may use the potency of animals to activate the trance experience (see for example the !Kung, Biesele 1993). In most rock art it is

> simply emphasized by the images either bending over in dance postures, or by distended stomachs. Whilst I cannot necessarily say that the San in the Brandberg would have depicted potency in the same manner, it seems strange that there are not many other images of individuals with snakes in their stomachs in the art, despite there being portrayals of the trance dance. For these reasons I reject the idea that the image indicates only potency or strength in general in the stomach of the figure.

The idea that the snake is not just a representation of a spirit-of-the-dead, but a representation of illness in the body of a shaman, and possibly the embodied sensation of having illness in the body is further emphasised by the presence of the snake in the giraffe's neck at this site. The neck of the giraffe is the important factor in this argument.

Ethnography on giraffe, as discussed in the previous chapter, indicates that giraffe are one of the most potent animals in the symbolic realm of the northern San. Thus, the healing songs of the !Kung were named after giraffe (along with other animals) in order to harness this potent quality (Marshall 1962; Biesele 1979, 1993). These songs were chiefly used during the Great Dance which was fundamentally concerned with healing (Marshall 1969). In addition to their powerful healing songs, giraffe themselves were also thought to have healing qualities and thus the urine of a supernatural giraffe was used in the tortoise shells of healers to improve the curing properties of the smoke from the shell (Marshall 1969).

Equally significant is the idea that giraffe are a means by which shamans could travel to the spirit world (Biesele 1979) and thus could in some contexts be considered a creature which could be used to facilitate supernatural travel. This idea, as Guenther (1984) and Kinahan (1991, 1999) have argued, has much to do with the corporeal aspects of the giraffe, and the giraffe standing for a metaphor for certain states in society in the Douglas sense (as discussed in the previous chapter). As Dowson (1992) argued the grid pattern seen during the entoptic phase of the trance process may also be construed to be a giraffe thus further linking this animal to the process of travel to the spirit world.

These facts all point to the incredible supernatural potency of the giraffe amongst the northern San groups. The giraffe was clearly a vitally important animal for these groups and was redolent with powerful potency which, when harnessed, could catapult a shaman into the spirit world with ease. This almost certainly means that for the shamans, the giraffe potency was specifically harnessed for the means of travel to the spirit world. In the context of this dissertation, this means that the images of giraffe, and in particular giraffe-snake conflationary images are a direct representation of what seems to have been a vitally important animal in the San ritual spectrum whose powers were so significant that it could rid the society of social and physical ills possibly better than that of any other animal.

At this point I should like to suggest another aspect of the giraffe which is important to its metaphorical symbolism as a creature representing spirit world travel and which I argue is represented in the rock art of the Brandberg. Giraffe have obvious necks, longer and more visually prominent than those of any other creature in Africa. As discussed, spines, and by association necks, are important conduits to the spirit world for the San healer as

it is at this point in the body which *n/om* moves up the spine to the nape of the neck and in addition rids the body of illness (a point which I argue for presently). It is also where boiling *n/om* moves to the neck, catapulting a shaman into deep trance and thus sending him or her into the spirit world. I suggest that the size and proportions of the giraffe spine/neck are useful for emphasizing this incredibly important component of trance. Since the visual physical aspects of trance, incorporating trembling of the body and spine, are vital for communicating the sensations of the shaman to the other attendants at the dance, it is not surprising that an animal with such visually evident spinal traits would be used to demonstrate the process of the passage of *n/om* and illness to the spirit world.

Indeed, in the rock art of the Brandberg the spines/necks of giraffe are painted in such a manner so as to suggest that this connection between the corporeal sensations of the shaman and the giraffe are being conveyed. At certain sites giraffe are painted with unnaturally wavy backlines — see for example Naib 87, Amis 137, Circus 28 and Amis 10 (see Fig.44).



Fig. 44 Giraffe from Amis 10 with wavy backlines, Pager 1989

These backlines, I argue, appear to tremble in the same manner which the shaman trembles during the healing process. Since it has been indicated from the ethnography that shamans tremble incredibly before reaching the state of *kia* (Katz 1982) I argue that the representations of giraffe with wavy backlines are connected to the sensations of the healer during trance and the quivering of their bodies. Thus, these giraffe backlines are visually connected to the trembling of shamans during trance and are highlighting the fact that potency moves along the spine just before the shaman is catapulted into the spirit world, taking all illness causing agents with him.

At this point I wold like to argue a unique and unusual possibility being portrayed in the backlines of giraffe in the Massif. I have already suggested that the wriggling nature of snakes may be associated with the trembling experience of a shaman in trance and his

experience of potency moving up the spine. In the images at Amis 10 we see unnaturally wavy backlines confirming that this may have been the case. At Ga'seb 8 we see a very wriggly snake in the spine of the giraffe, with a head ending in the neck where illness is normally expelled through this *n/om* spot. We also frequently see very wavy snakes painted in the rock art (refer to earlier images of giraffe-snake conflations in the Brandberg). At this point I would like to propose that, although this is not actively recorded in the ethnography, it may be possible that the San of this area were conflating the sense of illness moving out of the body through the *n//au* spot at he base of the neck with the sensations of trembling and heat associated with potency moving up the spine of the healer. This is a possibility when one looks at the rock art of the region. Even though this is not recorded in the ethnography, there seems to be little other way in which to explain the presence of the snake in the giraffe's neck at Ga'seb 8, the trembling backlines at Amis10, or the wavy corporeal depictions of giraffe-snake conflations seen at some sites in the area. Although a contentious point, I believe this conflation between potency moving up the spine and the expulsion of illness at the *n//au* spot may have resulted in an interpretation of illness somehow being part of the potency which made its way up the spine of the healer, taking the illness with it which the healer would take to the spirit world in order to deposit it there and protect the band from its negative influence. Although this is a tenuous argument, I am arguing from what I see in the rock art, rather than trying to map the ethnography onto the art. The art appears to portray something different to what we currently have recorded in the ethnography and thus I think that the argument can be put forward as a new and possibly revolutionarily explanation for the images of giraffe and giraffe-snake conflationary images in the area.

These wavy backlines in the giraffe are therefore another visual indicator that shamanic somatic experience is being portrayed through the conduit of giraffe imagery in the art, and that there is a link between the shaman and the giraffe in the art, even if this link is not an obvious one showing people turning into giraffe. The idea is simply that giraffe were the best physical representation of the somatic experiences of the shaman in trance, and therefore in some way stood as a metaphor for the trance experience of the shaman and quite possibly were representing shamans themselves undergoing the healing rite through accessing the potency of the giraffe through the dancing and singing of the giraffe song. They would take illness into the body and expel it into the spirit world. As already argued, the giraffe represents the best animal metaphor for illness moving into the spirit world given its long neck and grid patterning, and moreover, can therefore be seen as an animal symbol for a special group of individuals in society with specific somatic powers in the same manner in which the pangolin represented importance in a select group amongst the Lele (Douglas 1963).

Guenther (1984:37) also records that there are depictions of giraffe with human beings climbing up the withers and neck of the animal. There is also an example of a human at Umuab 21 (Fig. 45) climbing the fractured grid patterning, which may be representative of a giraffe.

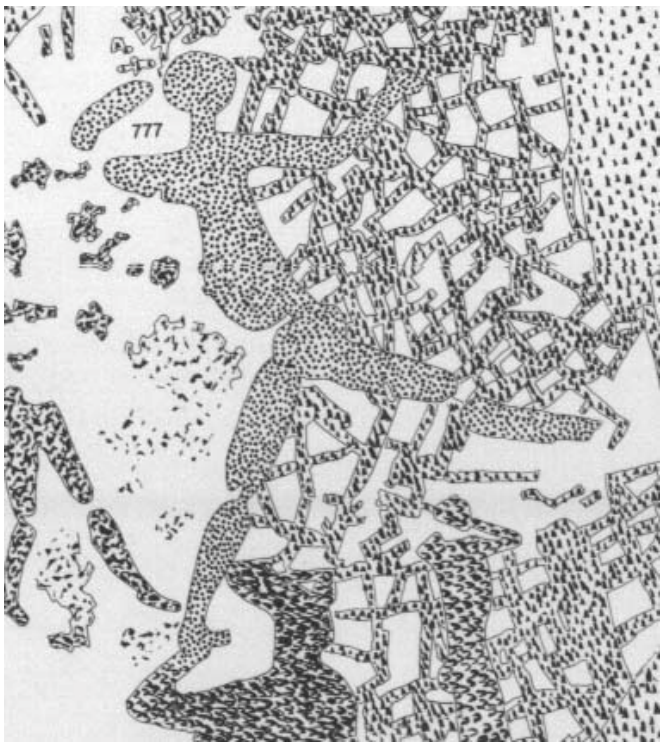

Fig. 45 Human figure climbing the fractured grid pattern at Umuab 21, Pager 1998

I would argue that together, with the trembling of the giraffe spines, these two kinds of depictions are highly representative of the nature of the giraffe's neck and spine, which is a mechanism of travel to the spirit world. Moreover, it is also a representation of the physical components of the healing dance experienced by shamans. This physical representation relates to the fact that giraffe are ideal metaphors for the somatic and neuropsychological experiences of shamans. As Kinahan (1989) has argued giraffe represent the attenuation experiences of shamans during trance. Dowson (1992) indicated that the engravings in Namibia of grid patterns were reminiscent of the entoptic experiences of shamans during trance and could be linked to the giraffe grid pattering.

Thus, there is an ambiguous, fluid symbolism with regards to the giraffe neck and spine (in all cases I am referring to the dorsal line rather than the spine-as-vertebrae after

Eastwood 1999), with the length of the neck representing the journey of illness to the spirit world (a point which I have argued may be the case for the San in the Brandberg), and the trembling giraffe's spines which suggest the trembling of shamans in the process of reaching deep trance, and the giraffe itself representing highly potent healers. Therefore, I argue that there is not a clear distinction between giraffe and shamans in the rock art of the Brandberg. It is not necessarily the case that giraffe *are* shamans; so much as they represent the somatic experiences of shamans during trance, and possibly the most competent shamans. The shamans could identify with them in a way that was not possible with other animals in their environment. At the same time, in the Douglas sense, the giraffe are animal representations of all the most desirable physical sensations required in order to be a good shaman, and therefore giraffe are a signifier of a particular desirable state in San society.

Thus, the image at Ga'aseb 8 enhances the significance of the giraffe's neck and spine, particularly in relation to the corporeal aspects of the trance dance. I have already argued the snake in the male figure's stomach to be a representation of the illness sent by spirits-of-the-dead. I have also mentioned that the spine is the mechanism by which illness may (according to my argument) travel to the *n//au* spot of a curer, thus leaving the body and being taken away to the spirit world, although this is a sensation which is chiefly driven by the sensation of potency rising in the back. The image at Ga'aseb 8 in which a snake is painted in the backline of the giraffe is a visual portrayal of the movement of this illness to the spirit world. I argue that the neck of the giraffe is a complex representation of the physical sensations of (illness moving up the spine of a shaman), a metaphor of travel to the spirit world, and is an indication of the incredible potency of the giraffe

which is harnessed during curing dances to enhance the power of the shaman in trance. I believe this to be the case for the following reasons:

1. The giraffe is the ideal vehicle for expressing the important physical components of trance as there is much emphasis on the spine/neck , and the neck and spine for many shamans trembles during the healing processes thus emphasizing their acute and heightened healing abilities.

2. The spine is the means by which illness may (in the case of my argument concerning the possible beliefs of the San of the Brandberg) travel from the body of the shaman to the spirit world. The snake is a signifier of a spirit-of-the-dead and the illness it brings. Thus, the snake in the giraffe's spine may be a portrayal of illness travelling to the spirit world, although conflated with the primary sensation of potency moving up the spine, and emphasizes the giraffe spine as a portal to the spirit world.

3. Portraying illness moving up the spine of the giraffe links not only to the movement of illness through the spine of the shaman, but merges the idea of the spine of the shaman being the catalyst for *kia* and thus the leaving of the body and travelling into the spirit world with the portal to the spirit world in the form of the giraffe's spine.

4. The portrayal of the giraffe as shaman (see pg 151 of original dissertation) and portal to the spirit world emphasizes in an animal body all the important embodied aspects and complex metaphors of healing as experienced by both the shaman and the community at the dance in a manner which no other animal in the rock art could.

5. The giraffe, due to its somatic similarities to shamanic trance experiences, could be a symbol of shamans, particularly competent ones in society, without necessarily having to always represent a transformed shaman.

In this chapter I have therefore discussed the following:

- The image at Ga'seb 8 is a starting point from which to understand giraffe and giraffe-snake conflationary images.
- The incredible potency of the giraffe was most likely harnessed by shamans when going into trance in this region
- The length of the neck and the grid pattern on the giraffe are perfect indicators of the somatic and visual hallucinations felt by shamans in trance, and as such were chosen by the shamans of the Brandberg in order to depict their transformations during the trance experience
- The snake in the neck of the giraffe at Ga'seb 8 may stand for a signifier of illness brought by spirits of the dead, or even a spirit-of-the-dead itself
- The somatic elements found in the trembling spines of the giraffe, the snake in the giraffe neck and the images of wavy snakes may represent a manner by which the illness, portrayed by snakes, was being carried to the spirit world. Although no ethnographic evidence exists on the matter, there has to be some manner by which illness leaves the body via the *n//au* spot at the back of the neck, and this appears to be supported by what we are seeing in the rock art. When looking at the images in the art of the area, it is possible to argue that the San here believed that the illness travelled up the potency of the giraffe spine along with the potency itself into the spirit world.

- The giraffe itself is a perfect representation of the somatic sensations felt by shamans undergoing the physical transformations accompanying the sensations of entering trance.

Having used the image at Ga'aseb 8 as a starting point for my analyses of the portrayal of the complex embodied and metaphorical aspects of healing and the trance dance, in my next chapter I move on to examining other images of giraffe and giraffe-conflations in the rock art. I subject them to the same analysis to see whether such imagery portrays similar or different ideas to those at Ga'aseb 8.

Chapter 5

The Other Bodies: Interpretations of giraffe and giraffe—snake conflations in the Brandberg in general

In my last chapter I examined the image from Ga'aseb 8, and argued the link between illness, corporeality, giraffe spines/necks and snakes to show that the image could be interpreted as a conglomerate depiction of all these concepts in the Brandberg rock art. I turn now to an examination and interpretation of other giraffe, as well as giraffe-snake conflations in the rock art of the Brandberg, drawing on the interpretative information derived from the imagery at Ga'aseb 8. I begin with a discussion of the nature and occurrence of giraffe in the rock art of the area.

Images of other giraffe and giraffe-snake conflations in the art

Giraffe

Of the 400 recorded sites in the Brandberg , roughly 29.7 % contain images of giraffe (Pager 1989). Giraffe are argued to be one of the most frequently painted animals in the area (Guenther 1984:34, Kinahan 1991; Pager 1995). Giraffe are painted to reflect a number of important characteristics. I believe that five of these are key to the interpretation of the link between giraffe and snakes in the rock art.

1. A number of giraffe are painted with unnaturally wavy backlines, as already mentioned at Amis 10 (Fig.46)



Fig. 46 Giraffe with wavy backlines at Amis 10, Pager 1989

2. Frequently the backlines of the giraffe are painted not just as single lines, but as bifurcated lines, such as those giraffe found at Naib 26 (Fig.47), Naib 58 (Fig.48) and Hungorob 117 (Fig.49).

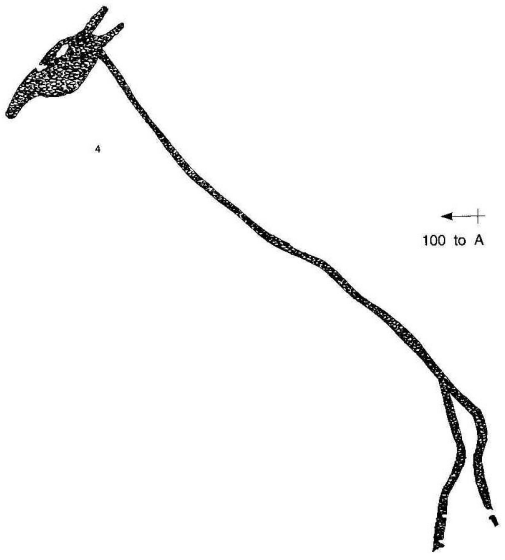

Fig. 47 Giraffe with birfurcated backline Naib 26, Pager 2001

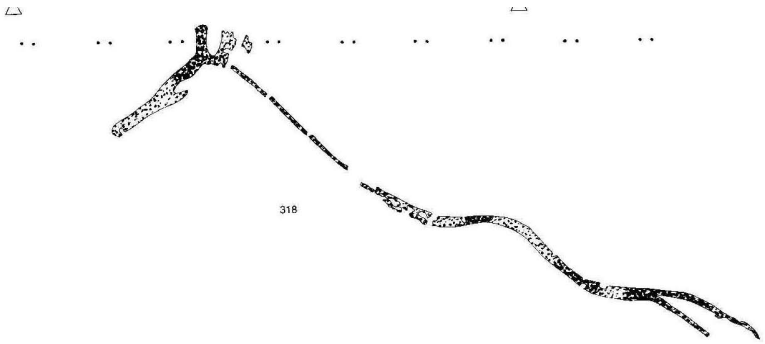

Fig. 48 Giraffe with birfurcated backline Naib 58, Pager 2001

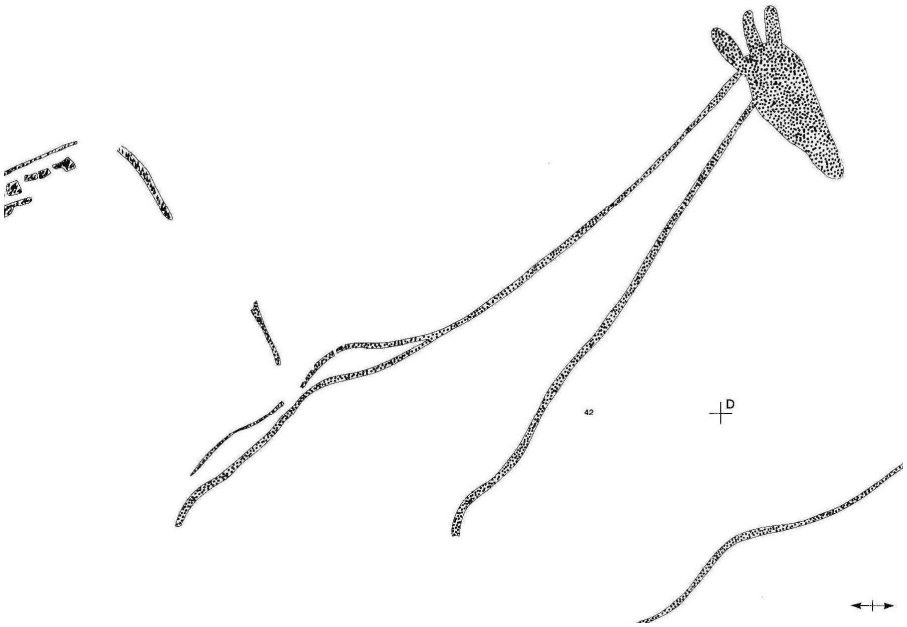

Fig. 49 Giraffe with bifurcated backline Hungorob 117, Pager 1993

3. In some cases giraffe may be painted with a white body, or their patterning may be either spotted, or have a stencil like appearance (such as at Hungorob 117) (see Fig. 50, and 51) and at Ga'aseb 7 (Fig. 52)



Fig. 50 Giraffe with stencil like appearance at Hungorob 117, Pager 1993

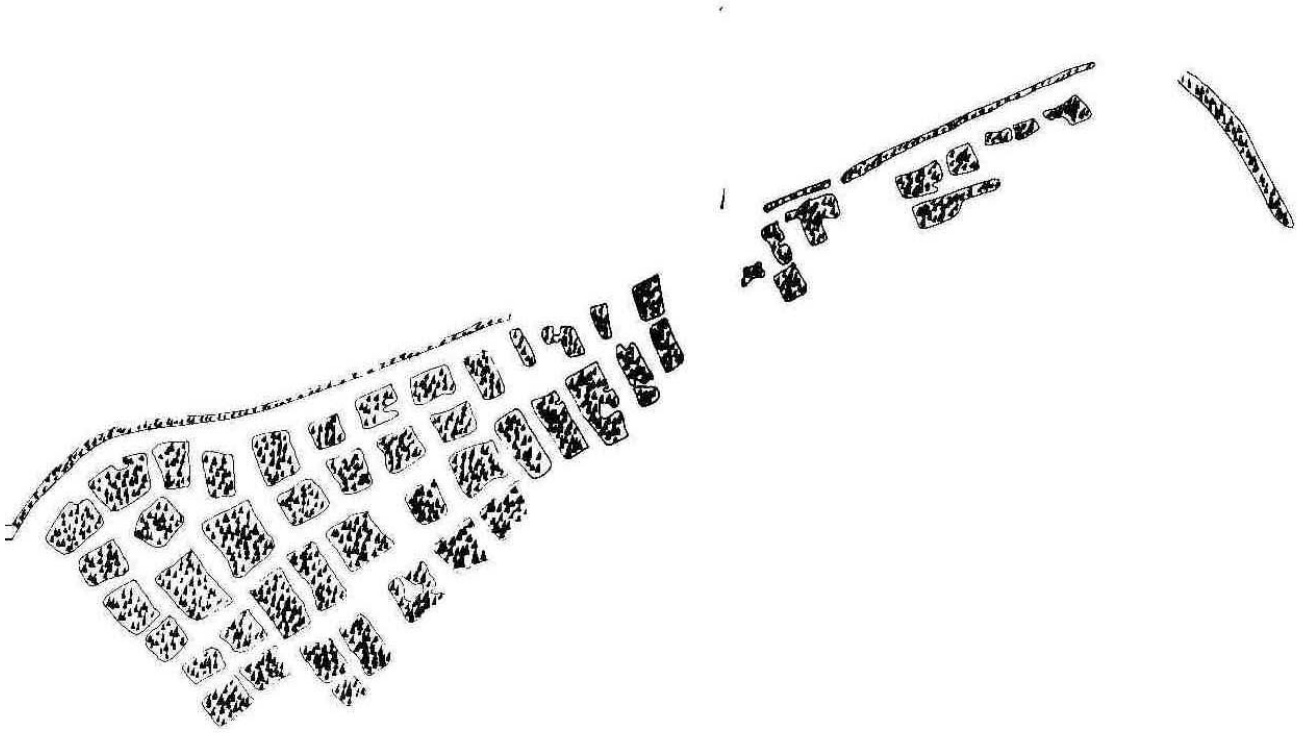

Fig. 51 Stencil patterned giraffe Hungorob 117, Pager 1993

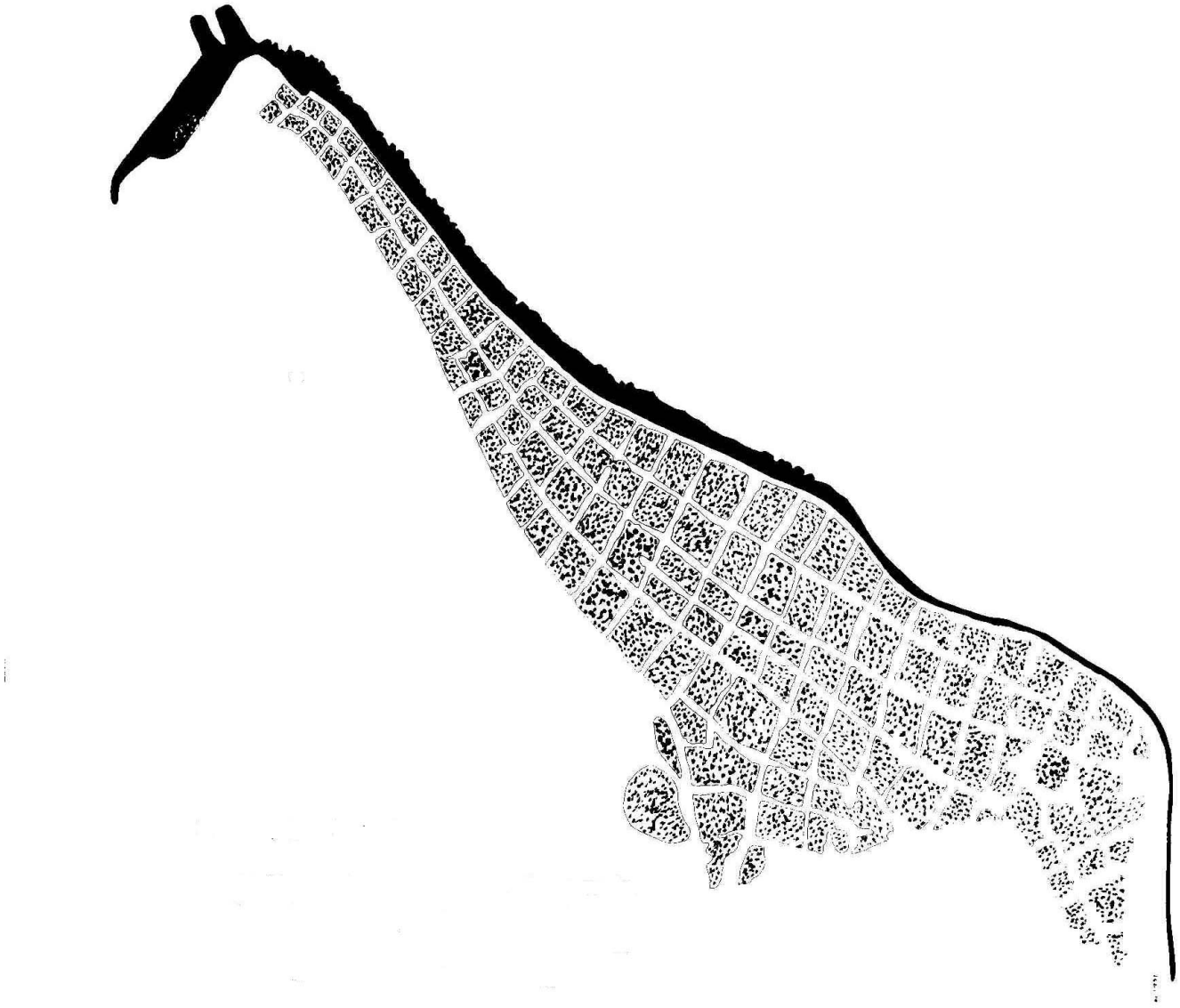

Fig. 52 Stencil patterned giraffe at Ga'aseb 7, Pager 1995

However, frequently giraffe are painted with very obvious grid patterning on their bodies. Examples of these can be found at Circus 7, Ga'aseb 4 (Fig.53) and Hungorob 3 (Fig.54).

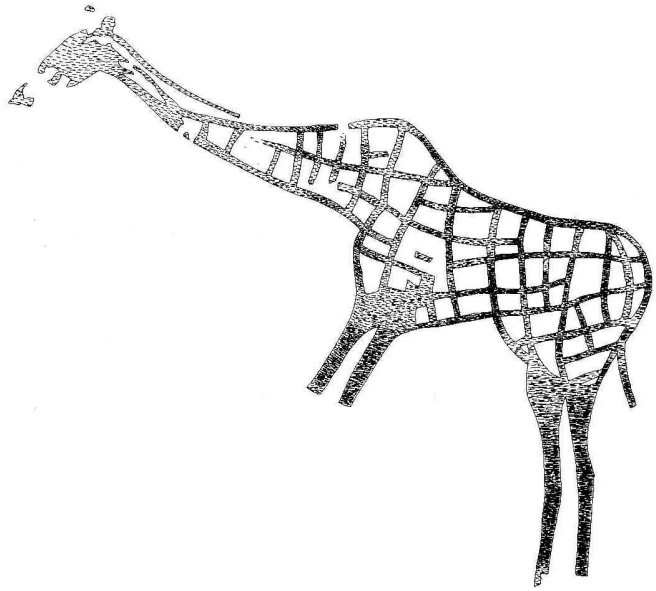

Fig. 53 Grid patterned giraffe Ga'aseb 4, Pager 1995

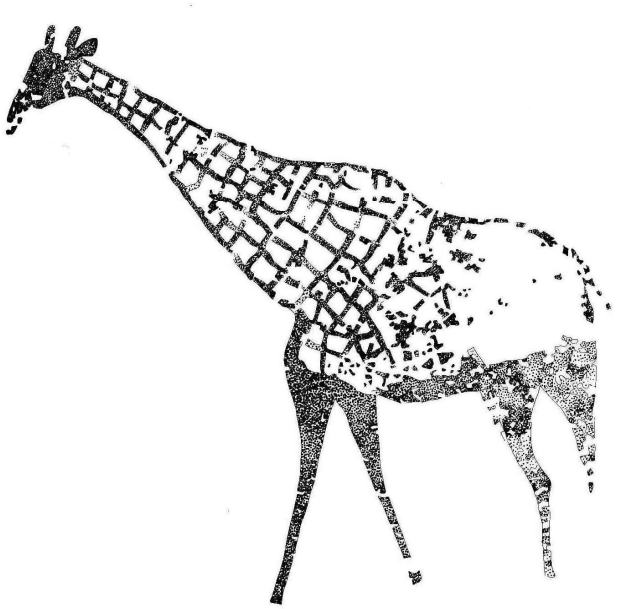

Fig. 54 Grid patterned giraffe at Hungorob 3, Pager 1993

4. In some instances giraffe are simply painted with just their head and backlines (thus in profile), with no other features. Kinahan (1999) has argued this to be a representation of not only giraffe backlines, but also of snakes, as the backline

has a very clear snake-like quality to it. It is this quality which echoes the giraffe-snake conflations found in the art of the area. Examples of these backlines can be found at sites such as Naib 163 , Circus 3 (Fig.55) and Karoab 2 (Fig .56).

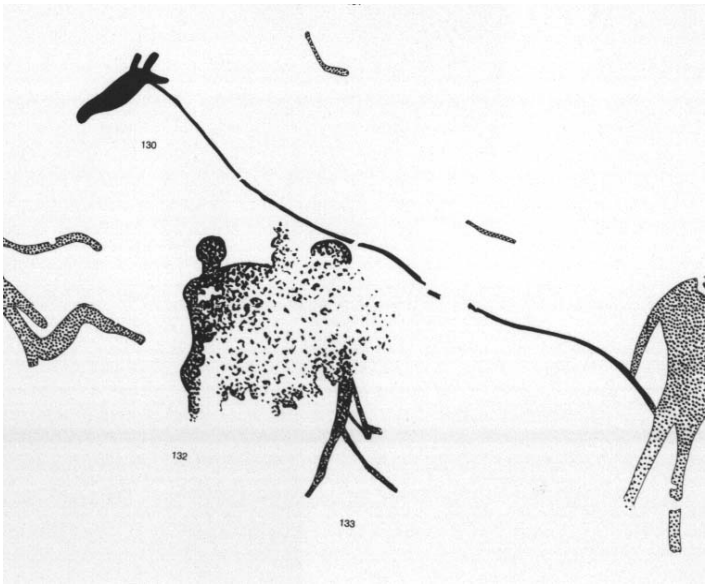

Fig. 55 Giraffe in profile only with no body apparent Circus 3, Pager 2006

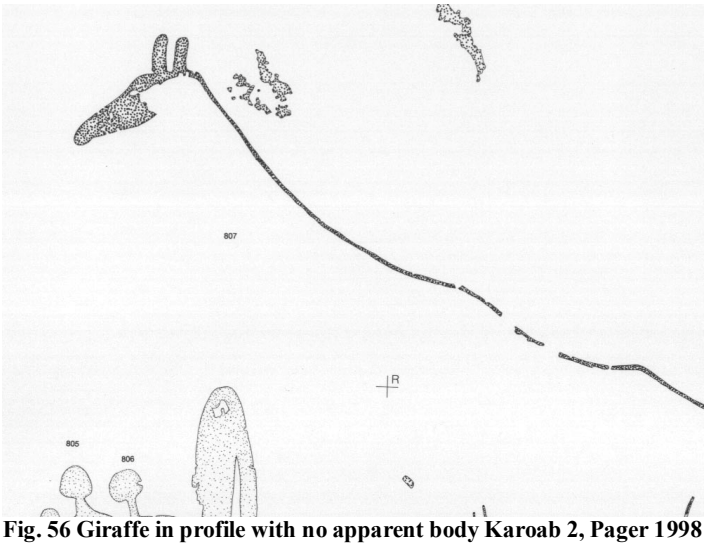

Fig. 56 Giraffe in profile with no apparent body Karoab 2, Pager 1998

5. Lastly, giraffe are sometimes depicted with emphasis on their stomach and chin areas. Thus, their stomachs and chins are often white or blank and have a number of red flecks or spots in them. In these instances, the stomachs are also

unnaturally protrusive. Examples of these can be seen at Circus 28 (see Fig. 70 at the end of the dissertation), in a scene similar to that found at Ga'aseb 8. Other examples have been found at Amis 10 (Figs.57, 58, 59).



Fig. 57 Giraffe from Amis 10 with emphasis on chins and stomachs in the form of flecks, Pager 1989



Fig. 58 Giraffe from Amis 10 with emphasis on the chin in the form of spots, Rifkin 2007



Fig. 59 Giraffe from Amis 10 with emphasis on a protruding stomach in the form of flecks, Rifkin 2007

These five characteristics are emphasized in giraffe of the area for the same reasons I believe that snakes are painted with giraffe heads and giraffe-patterning. Before I discuss the reasons for this, I will briefly outline the snake imagery which is a concern in this

dissertation. I am primarily concerned with the giraffe link to snakes, and for that reason I am focusing here on snakes which are painted with giraffe patterning and giraffe heads, thus giraffe-snake conflations. There are other kinds of snakes which I have discussed previously. These snakes may or may not be conceptually linked to the giraffe-snake conflations in the art. However, without a visual link between these other snakes, and the giraffe- snake conflations, it is difficult to argue whether the same conceptual framework can be applied to interpreting the snakes without obvious giraffe characteristics.

I turn now to an interpretation of the five key characteristics of the giraffe in the rock art. I believe these characteristics are painted in order to emphasize the link between the giraffe and snakes in the art.

I examine each of the five giraffe characteristics in turn, demonstrating how these qualities symbolically link this giraffe to the giraffe at Ga'aseb 8. In addition, I demonstrate that the giraffe are not only linked to the giraffe image at Ga'aseb 8, but that these giraffe may also be linked conceptually to the snake in the neck of the giraffe and the snake in the stomach of the human figure in the scene at the site.

I have already discussed the significance of the wavy backlines found in the giraffe. I argued that it was synonymous with the very obvious trembling of the shaman during trance. In addition, it demonstrates the importance of the spine during the trance experience as a conduit for illness and *n/om* to travel through the body of the shaman. Thus, in these instances the backline of the giraffe is being emphasized as a visual representation of the physical sensations experienced by healers during the process of healing. Moreover, I believe the giraffe spine to be a painted account of the fact that the

giraffe is a portal to the spirit world as much as it is a narration of the physicality of the healing process, albeit in a metaphorical sense.

Linked to the concept of the giraffe as a portal to the spirit world are the depictions of the split giraffe backlines and the grid patterning on the giraffe bodies. The split backlines are obviously not a natural feature in giraffe. Nor are the grid-like patterns on their bodies. Giraffe naturally are more likely to have patchy, spotted coats, which have been portrayed in some of the giraffe in the Brandberg. As mentioned, Dowson (1992) and Kinahan (1991) have argued that the grid-patterns derive from entoptic phenomena experienced during trance which can be construed as giraffe. As much as it is likely that this is one of the reasons for painting the grid patterning on giraffe, there are other manners in which these grid patterns, and indeed the split backlines of giraffe can be explained. My discussions of these two manners of depiction are a merger of points two and three in my earlier categorization of the ways in which giraffe in the Brandberg are painted.

A number of San have referred to what are known as 'threads of light' or ropes to god (Lewis-Williams *et al.* 2000). These San have said that they climb these ropes or threads during the trance experience in order to reach God's house. Informants say that "these lines may be the thickness of a blade of grass or as big as a rope" (Keeney 2003:38). Whilst there are a number of threads or ropes, it is the most important ones which travel to the Big God in the sky (Keeney 2003:42). The process of climbing these ropes has been described as not that of active climbing, but rather the sensation of floating up the rope (Keeney 2003:43):

> The shaking goes into my entire body. I then see the light come on me, and it directs me to work on others... It looks like a string of light. I just float with the string, and then I am taken into the sky. There I meet all my ancestors and the Big God (Keeney 1999:109).

Therefore, the feeling of ascending the rope does not require immense physical effort, but rather the rope or thread simply takes you, normally to the spirit world. It is also recorded, however, that these threads can go underground, and that the threads, when seen, are important aids to the curing done at the dance (Keeney 2003:44). Thus, shamans have reported that "We climb the invisible threads to God's village to rescue the souls of the sick ones, and bring them back to our village" (Katz *et al*. 1997:80). It is also pertinent to notice here that the informant talks about shaking going through his entire body. This again links the shaking sensations seen in the giraffe images in the giraffe of the Brandberg with the ethnographic information which could link the shaking of the spine to the shaking of the shaman in trance.

These threads or ropes have been identified in the rock art (see Lewis-Williams *et al.*2000 for an extensive discussion of threads of light). In these images, thin lines can be seen, often painted as if moving in and out of the rock face. People are frequently depicted climbing up, or walking along these lines. These images, particularly those lines with people on them; have been interpreted as a direct reference to the use of ropes or threads to get to God's house (*ibid.*). Since these threads move in and out of the rock surface, which is widely believed to be a veil, with the spirit world lying on the other side (Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1990) , it is argued that these are lines of travel to the spirit world (*ibid.*).

What is significant about the paintings which have been identified as threads of light is that frequently the line is not a single, linear one, but a divergent, split or bifurcated line. In some instances there are more than one line depicted and in a few cases there are many lines painted next to each other (Fig. 60). Moreover, occasionally these lines are represented as grid-like patterns, with individuals climbing or walking up them (see Fig. 61).

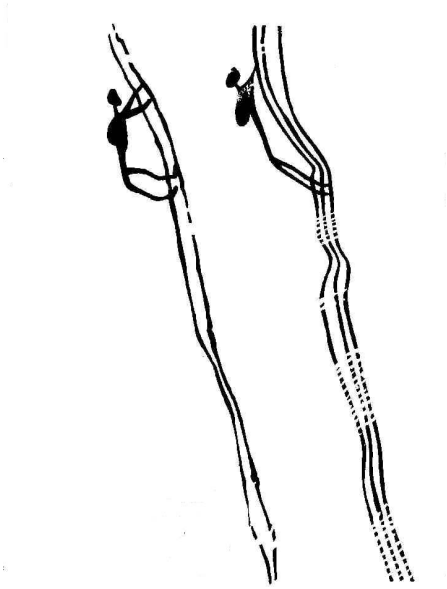

Fig. 60 Ropes to God representing two or more ropes, Keeney 2003

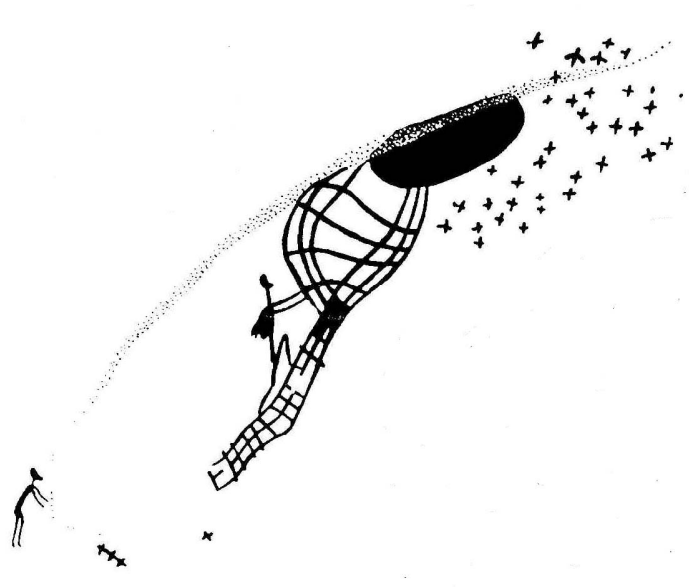

Fig. 61 Grid-like ropes to God, Pager 1975

All these manners of depiction of the threads have important consequences for the interpretation of giraffe in the rock art of the Brandberg. I have already mentioned the entoptic link between the grids seen during this phase, and the grids on the giraffe. Whilst it is possible that the grids were construed as giraffe, I argue that they were also in some instances construed as ropes to god, or threads. This is important when we reconsider what Old K'xau (importantly also known as K'xau the giraffe) recounted to Megan Biesele (1979) about his journey to the spirit world. He said the giraffe took him, implying that he simply moved to the spirit world via the giraffe. However he also mentioned the use of threads of light to travel to the spirit world. The sensation he described is similar to those described by modern healers in the Kalahari with reference to travel along these ropes to god. Thus the sensation of moving up the rope has been described as:

> If you dance and see this rope, you don't have to grab or touch it. You just float away with that rope. That line just takes you. You become so light that you simply fly away. You don't know whether your feet are on

> the ground or not… .You have no control over where you go. You can't say where you want to go. (Keeney 1999:61 – 62).

Old K'Xau said that the giraffe came and took him, with no reference to whether he had control over the situation. It appears that he had no real choice in the matter, but was resigned to moving with the giraffe, in this case underwater, to God's House.

Moreover, his travel to God's House was further facilitated by the use of threads of light which he travelled up to get to God's House. After his sub aquatic journey with the giraffe Old K'Xau emerged and stated:

> When we emerged, we began to climb the thread — it was the thread of the sky! Yes, my friend. Now up there in the sky, the people up there, the spirits, the dead people up there, they sing for me so I can dance... When I emerge, I am already climbing. I'm climbing threads, the threads that lie over in the South . . . I take them and climb them. I climb one and leave it, then I go climb another one. Then I leave it and climb on another. Then I follow the thread of the wells, the one I am going to enter! The thread of the wells of metal (Biesele 1979: 56, 61).

I argue that the sensation experienced by Old K'xau is comparable to those described by the shamans interviewed by Keeney. In this case, the threads may have been grid patterns which were construed as giraffe, but with the same attributes as can be experienced with threads of light. Lewis-Williams *et al.* (2000:129–130) have argued that in this instance the giraffe was an animal helper for Old K'xau and his source of *n/om* on his journey to the spirit world. I, however, advance a contrary explanation. The grid patterns of giraffe are already argued to be entoptics (Kinahan 1991; Dowson 1992) and indeed in the same paper Lewis-Williams *et al.* (2000:132) mention that both threads of light and grids are produced as part of the entoptic experience. Thus, there does not necessarily need to be a distinction between the grid patterning on the giraffe and the threads of light which Old

K'xau saw in his trance experience. Rather, I argue that the giraffe patterning may have been the original manner in which he experienced his altered state of consciousness, and that possibly he viewed the grid pattern as an entoptic phenomena and then it morphed into that of the giraffe as his initial means of accessing the spirit world in the same manner that threads of light serve as an access to the spirit world. However, once deeper in the trance experience the entoptic phenomena changed to represent threads of light which he could climb to God's House. This change is also related to the giraffe I believe, and is a point which I return to in my next section on giraffe as metaphors for travel to the spirit world.

Thus, I argue that in the Brandberg, depictions of grid-patterned giraffe are not only references to the entoptic phase of trance where grid patterns could be seen, but also to the ropes used to climb to God's House. Therefore, the grid-patterned giraffe are a representation of travel to the spirit world.

In point two of my discussion as to the five various manners in which giraffe are painted in the Brandberg I referred to their split or bifurcated, sometimes trifurcated, backlines. I believe that these split backlines can also be related to threads of light. They mimic the divergent lines seen in other paintings of identified threads (such as in the south Eastern Mountains in South Africa) and they are painted as part of the giraffe's spine. I argue this is the case for these divergent backlines for the following reasons:

1. The sense of attenuation and travelling upwards on these threads is visually well expressed in the length of the spine of the giraffe.

2. The threads seen during trance may also be construed in certain cases to be the backlines of giraffe. When the giraffe are painted in profile with bifurcated backlines I would argue that the artists are drawing on the idea of the backline being a conduit to the spirit world, and the backlines possibly being interpreted as some kind of thread of light.

3. I have already mentioned the cases where there are images of people apparently climbing up the backlines of giraffe as reported by Guenther (1984). This suggests, in line with the experiences of travel related by shamans in the ethnographic record that the giraffe spine was indeed seen as a portal to the spirit world, and moreover was seen as some sort of thread of light by which travel to the spirit world could be facilitated.

By framing both the grid pattern and the divergent back lines of the giraffe within the context of threads of light, we have a further explanation as to why the snake was painted in the giraffe's neck at Ga'aseb 8. Since the snakes at Ga'aseb 8 have been argued to be representations of spirits-of-the-dead, and/or the illness they bring, this illness would travel to the spirit world once expelled from the body of the shaman. Since the neck and the giraffe itself (in both its patterning and its backline) may be construed as a kind of thread, that is a means of travel to the spirit world, it would make sense that the snake was painted moving up the neck of the giraffe because this would be the means by which illness could travel to the supernatural realms.

I turn now to the fourth frequently depicted phenomenon in the rock art, which is the depiction of the giraffe spine/neck alone, with no body apparent such as at sites like Ga'aseb 12 (Fig. 62) and Hungorob 117(Fig .63).

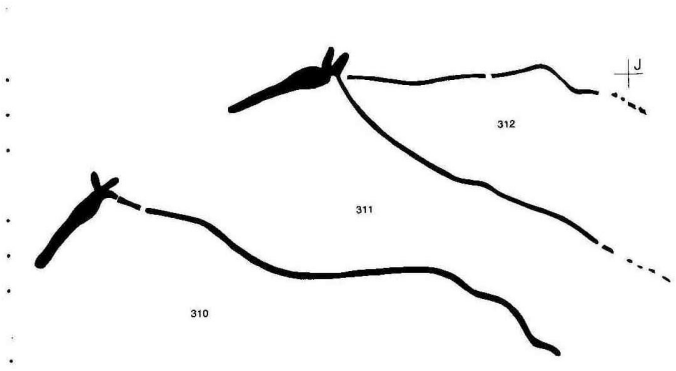

Fig. 62 Giraffe in profile with no body painted at Ga'aseb 12, Pager 1995

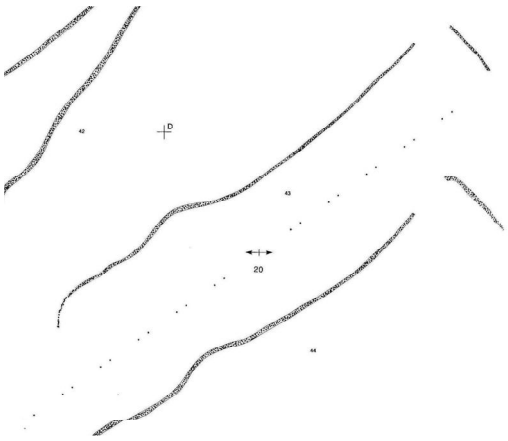

Fig. 63 Giraffe in profile with no body apparent at Hungorob 117, Pager 1993

I have demonstrated that the spine of the giraffe can be argued to be a means of travel to the spirit world. Thus, this is likely to be one of the aspects of the giraffe emphasized in these depictions. More intriguing, however is the concept proposed by Kinahan (1999:81) that these backlines are connections between giraffe and snakes, and that the backline in itself may represent a snake. It is true that, visually, the backlines alone appear to have the same undulating and flowing form of many of the snakes painted in the rock art. I

argue that the information needed to construe that the backlines may be snakes in these instances is present in the imagery from Ga'aseb 8, and from the depictions of giraffe-snake conflations.

The use of the giraffe spine to dispel illness has been a possibility which I have pointed out, (although somewhat revolutionary) seems to be indicated in the art. At Ga'aseb 8 there appears to be a depiction of illness moving through the spine of the giraffe in the form of the snake, and that the spine in this instance may be emphasizing the corporeality of shamans as exhibited at the trance dance. However, it has also been shown that giraffe spines may be construed as a conduit to the spirit world.

Spines are important in San society, and are chiefly linked with the movement of *n/om,* whilst the top of the head is where the shaman is catapulted into the spirit world. If this is true, it is possible that the backlines of giraffe can be construed as snakes, and may have been for the San of the Brandberg, since snakes are one of the representations of illness and spirits-of-the-dead in San society. Thus, the backline is a depiction of spirit world travel, but its snake-like quality may be an indication of the illness embodied by snakes which would move up the back and out of the body. Thus the giraffe backline, when painted in profile only, is another ambiguous and dualistic metaphor for both spirit world travel, and the snake (representative of illness) travelling up the spine of the giraffe to the spirit world where it would be expelled back into that world. Essentially, I am arguing that for the Brandberg San, there was no clear distinction between the two. Rather, the meaning was fluid and its interpretation was based on those who viewed and consumed the rock art, or who may have used the sites to go into trance.

The last important manner in which giraffe are depicted is with flecks in occasionally very protrusive bellies and in their chins (an unnatural feature, Smithers 1983). This is well demonstrated at the site of Circus 28. What is interesting about Circus 28 is that the scene depicting the giraffe is remarkably similar to that at Ga'aseb 8 (Pager 2005:410) (see Figure 69 attached at end of dissertation.).

In this scene there is a giraffe painted lying down with its legs curled under its body. The body sports a grid-like pattern and the back and neck is depicted as another of the unnaturally wavy backlines. Most of the backline is covered with the giraffe's mane. The belly of the giraffe is hollow, but is protruding and has four wavy lines in it. The chin and lower jaw of the giraffe have a number of small red spots painted in it. Approaching the giraffe from the right as one faces the painting are two human figures, both carrying bags and these figures are depicted with elaborate headdresses. Both these figures are holding out sticks to the giraffe in the same fashion as the male figures at Ga'aseb 8. However, there are no snakes present in this image, or indeed at the site.

The lack of snakes does not mean that similar elements to those at Ga'aseb 8 are not being portrayed here. I use this site as an example of the similarity between the concepts expressed at Ga'aseb 8. There are a number of images in the Brandberg depicting giraffe with flecks and lines in their bellies, (as well as distended stomachs) and in their chins such as the giraffe at Amis 10 and Umuab 21 (Fig. 64) which is not a natural feature of giraffe (Smithers 1983:228) . Comparing these stomachs to certain other giraffe in the Massif (Fig. 65) it is likely that the stomachs and chins were important in association with the corporeal sensations of healing.

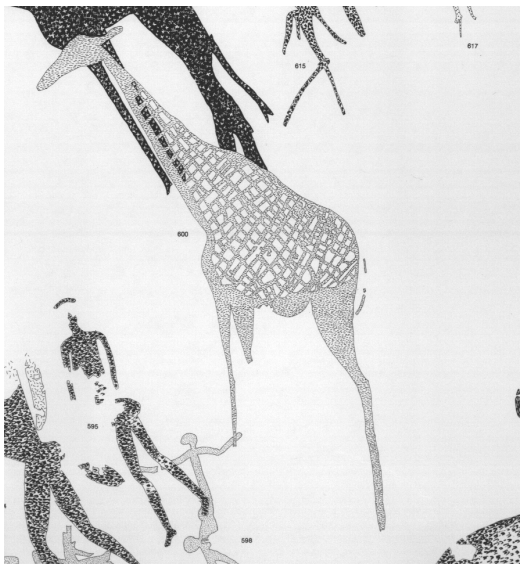

Fig. 64 Giraffe from Umuab 21 showing a distinctive distended stomach, Pager 1998

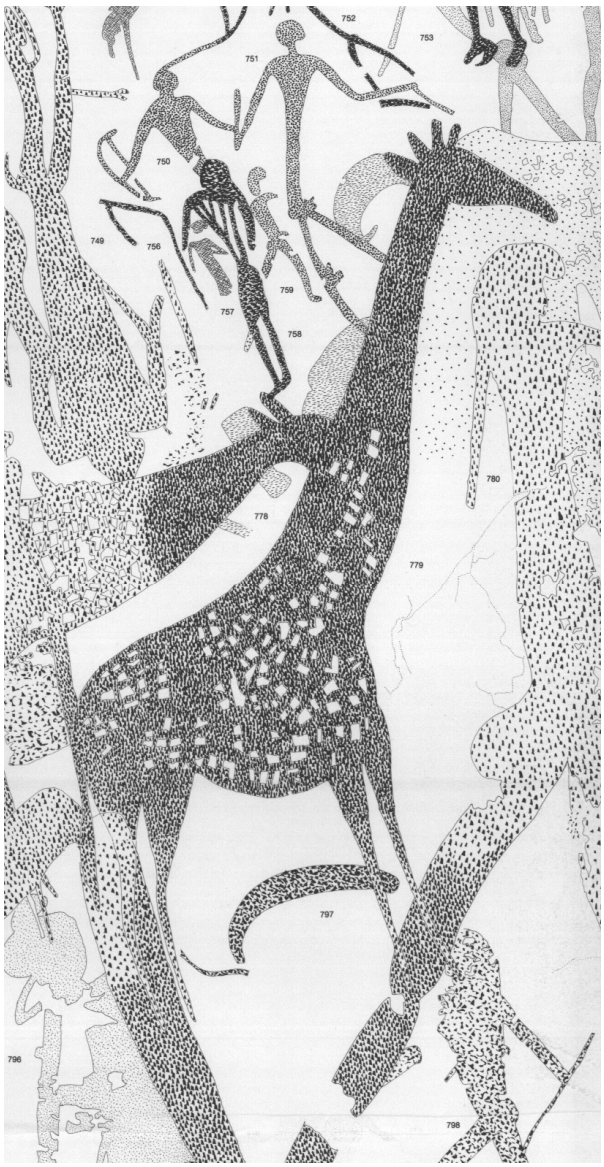

Fig. 65 Giraffe from Umuab 21 with far less distension on stomach, Pager 1998

Moreover, these images are sometimes depicted in giraffe with these unusually wavy backlines, again in the images at Amis 10. I argue that a healing emphasis is evident in these images. I have already demonstrated the importance of the stomach and the spine in the healing process, and that the giraffe is a good visual indicator of these physical sensations. Thus, in these images, I believe the supernatural potency of the giraffe is being drawn on and related to this supernatural potency as it is used in healing. The flecks in the jaw however, are also important. Both sweat and saliva are significant in the

healing dances (Katz 1982; Guenther 1999). Sweat is filled with potency and can be used for healing purposes (Orpen1874; Katz 1982) but is also an important visual indicator of the physical exertion of the healer (Blundell 2004). Saliva is also thought to be imbued with potency and can be used equally effectively to heal when rubbed on the patient (Barnard 1979). Thus, it is likely that the chin of the giraffe is filled with these flecks in order to demonstrate the importance of saliva in healing.

Therefore, the image at Circus 28, as well as other similar images of giraffe is, I argue, drawing on another aspect of the giraffe — that of its potency and healing powers. The imagery at Circus 28 is not necessarily distinct from the image at Ga'aseb 8. Both deal with healing and the process of removing illness from San society, the only difference being that different elements of this process are being emphasized in the images. Yet these images demonstrate what I argue is the connection between giraffe and healing, as well as the use of giraffe to send illness to the spirit world.

The giraffe thus is a complex metaphor in the rock art of the Brandberg. Instead of simply being a vehicle of potency, or an animal into which a shaman can transform, I believe it was an animal which symbolized a number of corporeal experiences felt by both the shaman and the community present at the dance. It was a corporeal 'jackpot' amongst the animals in the environment of the Brandberg in that it could portray both physical experiences of the shamans, healing and spirit world travel in a single body. This is not to say that shamans did not transform into giraffe during their trance experiences. Indeed there appears to be a single instance at Naib 15 of human transforming into a grid pattern which could be the beginnings of transformation into a giraffe (Fig.66).



Fig. 66 Human figure possibly transforming into a grid Naib 15, Pager 2001

Moreover, the giraffe certainly represented the shaman in a corporeal aspect. It was a significant metaphor for the corporeal aspects of shamanic activities and the community's perception of these. I also believe that the giraffe stood as a symbol for eminent shamanic powers in the sense that Douglas (1963) described the pangolin to stand as a symbol for eminence and leadership amongst the Lele. I now move on to the intricately related subject of giraffe-snake conflations.

Giraffe-snake conflations

Giraffe-snake conflations occur at a number of sites in the Brandberg which have already been mentioned. In interpreting these images, much can be drawn from the interpretation of giraffe, for the obvious reason that the snakes are being overtly associated with the giraffe. Through this connection, there are three connected metaphors expressed by giraffe-snakes conflations:

1. The snake at Ga'aseb 8 is a portrayal of the illness sent by spirits-of-the-dead. This snake is obviously connected to the giraffe. This same emphasis exists in the depictions of giraffe-headed and giraffe-patterned snakes. I tentatively suggest that all snakes in the rock art may be depictions of illness and/or spirits-of-the-dead given that the ethnography reports this is one of the concepts embodied by snakes. However, I would argue that the explicit connection between snakes and giraffe confirms this association concretely. Since giraffe in rock art are connected to healing in a number of ways already elucidated, and snakes can be connected to illness, the link between the two appears to emphasize that snakes are indeed an embodiment of illness when painted with giraffe features in the rock art.

2. The images of giraffe simply portrayed as backlines are possibly conceptually connected to giraffe-snake conflations. Both link illness to the curing vehicle of the giraffe. They allude to both the movement of illness up the spine of the giraffe, and therefore the healer, and to the general existence of illness in the spirit world in the form of sprits-of-the-dead.

3. The final and important manner in which snakes may be argued to be moving into the spirit world is due to the frequent presence of giraffe-snakes conflations, or part thereof, in formlings. As discussed in the previous chapter, formlings are images found in the rock art of the Brandberg and the Matopos which have been almost conclusively argued to be representations of God's House (Mguni 2000). Since God's House is where the spirits are believed to dwell (Schapera 1930; Silberbauer 1965; Marshall 1999), and where illness is sent when expelled from the body of the healer (Schapera 1930), it makes sense that these giraffe and giraffe-snake conflations would be painted entering these formlings, such as the image at Naib 20 (Fig. 67) and at Snake Rock. (Fig. 68) Since giraffe-snake conflations are an image of illness moving into the spirit world, they would ultimately end up at God's House. Although the snake at Ga'seb 8 is not portrayed as moving into a formling it does not take away the important concepts of potency related to the snake in the spine of the giraffe.



Fig. 67 Formling at Naib 20 with giraffe-snake conflation entering it at the bottom, Rifkin 2007



Fig. 68 Snake Rock formling with possible giraffe-snake conflation moving through it at the top (see circle), Rifkin 2007

Therefore, I argue that giraffe-snake conflations in the art are a depiction of the expulsion of illness from San society. Giraffe on the other hand are more a simulation of the physical experiences of the shaman during the healing process, and an illustration of a

portal to the spirit world. Nonetheless, both of these creatures appear to be more concretely associated with curing and supernatural travel in the rock art than they could be related to anything else in this instance. Thus, I would again refute the argument that these creatures are associated with rain making as Guenther (1984) and Kinahan (1999) have argued. In addition to the fact that rain making appears not to be a central concern for the northern San, the imagery in the rock art of the Brandberg is far better linked to concepts of curing and healing than rain making. Given that curing is the most important function of a shaman in both northern and central San groups, it comes as no surprise that this is being emphasized in the rock art.

From the arguments advanced above, it appears that aspects of the trance dance are being depicted in the rock art of the Brandberg. It is thus likely that these aspects were the central concern of the painters in this area. Giraffe and giraffe-snake conflations are thus a complex, intertwined and fluid metaphor for healing, disease and spirit world travel, the eminence of shamanic prowess represented by the symbol of the giraffe, and also represent concepts in a way not seen so far in any other San rock art in southern Africa.

Thus in this chapter I have argued the following:

- Giraffe-snake conflations are more than just a single depiction of a spirit-of – the –dead in the giraffe spine
- Giraffe spines can be seen as 'threads of light' or portals to the spirit world
- Giraffe were themselves important vehicles for spirit world travel

- Giraffe saliva and sweat are seen in the rock art and add emphasis to the idea that giraffe were seen as powerful healing symbols in the San society that once inhabited the Brandberg.

Conclusion

The Brandberg is one of the most densely painted areas of San rock art in southern Africa given the comparatively small area the Massif covers. Whilst this rock art has been extensively recorded and published by Pager (1989, 1993, 1995, 1998, 2001,2005) there has been far less interpretative work done on the imagery itself. Researchers like Lenssen-Erz (1989, 1992, 1994, 2000), Kinahan (1991, 1999) and Hollmann (2007) have made headway into understanding the meaning of some of the images, and have made some social interpretations for what may have been going on in the society of the Brandberg San. Yet there is still a significant lack of interpretative and social information available. Compared to the Drakensberg, the Brandberg offers an exciting new area — unconquered and unexplained — and much research still needs to be done there. This dissertation aims to contribute towards building a bridge between the recorded data and its interpretation

My research opens up new and exciting possibilities in terms of tying together the art and the social processes of the Brandberg through the conduit of animal bodies. This is a new and exploratory approach, but my interpretations have added something to what we know of the society inhabiting the area at about 2000 years ago. Its implications will span most other areas of rock art research in the Brandberg whether they focus on human imagery and the trance dance, or animal and conflationary images in the art. In this conclusion I summarise what I have argued in this dissertation.

Ethnographic analogy and its revision

Ethnographic studies form a key component in the study of San rock art in southern Africa. This dissertation has drawn extensively form ethnographic analogy in the interpretation of giraffe and giraffe-conflationary imagery in the Brandberg. The use of ethnography has therefore been one of the central concerns of this thesis.

In drawing on this ethnography I have had to grapple with the problems surrounding its uses such as the comparatively modern age of our ethnography, and the fact that there is no ethnography from the San who made the images in the Brandberg. I was, therefore, required to look at a wide range of ethnography in order to find an analogy which seemed to best explain the imagery. I looked at the less well used ethnography of the !Kun from Namibia, as well as that from their Khoe speaking hunter gatherer neighbours. I have shown that this ethnography is not only useful for rock art research, but that it is especially important to use when looking at rock art in Namibia. This is because most rock art research in southern Africa has focused on South African ethnography which seems to be highly applicable to the Drakensberg but cannot always explain nuances in the rock art of areas outside of this region.

I then had to consider the debates around ethnographic usage and in Chapter 2 looked primarily at the new debate around ethnography raised by Mitchell (2005a,2005b). One of his key points has been fulfilled in my own approach to ethnographic interpretation in that I do not privilege what Mitchell (2005b) terms as the 'holy trinity' of ethnography. I examined the altered approach to ethnography that Mitchell was suggesting. Although I do not disagree with Mitchell's suggestions, his formulation applies better to archaeology in southern Africa then it does to rock art. Whilst I accept his thesis in most respects, I

argue that it is not always applicable to rock art research since archaeology cannot tell us much about the ritual aspects of rock art. Second, rock art researchers do not rely only on his 'holy trinity' of ethnography in our research. Third, given the particular characteristics of San belief it is not always possible for a rock art researcher to gain much from looking at ethnographies from other parts of the globe. Rather, I suggest, in line with Mitchell, a new approach to ethnographic analysis for rock art research (Chapter 2).

First, I argue that as many San ethnographic resources as possible need to be consulted when attempting interpretation of a panel. Second, I think that differences in ethnographic records are just as significant as similarities. It is common for rock art researchers to concentrate on the commonalities of the diverse San ethnographies. I argue that concentrating equally on differences in these ethnographies could give us surprising new insights. Finally, I suggest that corporeal aspects of the ethnography need to be considered. Since I believe one of the best ways to understand how a population perceives the world around them is through their understanding of themselves through their own embodied reaction to an event. Referents to bodies and embodied experiences could add much to our understanding of the ethnography. Moreover, it is important to bear in mind that ethnographies, which often privilege the spoken word via interviews, may not always have picked up social nuances conveyed by the body.

My argument in this respect has a number of implications. First, it encourages the rock art researcher to be more aware of his or her use of ethnography for interpretation. It is frequently the case that the same ethnography is used repeatedly, and other ethnographies are not consulted. Moreover the ethnographies are often not derived from their original

sources, but are rather derived from other texts on rock art. Although it is not always possible to access the original sources, I have urged rock art researchers to do so where possible.

It is not surprising, given the area in which I have been working, that there is a need to reassess our use of ethnography, primarily because it becomes difficult to use /Xam or Maloti San ethnography when on analysis there are some important differences between these ethnographies and those of living northern San. Therefore, I show that there needs to be a judicious use of ethnographies which take into account the area in which the rock art researcher is working. This is because whilst there are broadly similar ritual approaches between all groups (sometimes completely the same), there are nuanced differences between their belief systems which appear to have been depicted in the rock art.

My main suggestion is in relation to these nuanced differences. I think that it has now become important for researchers to consider these differences in relation to what they are seeing in the rock art. Supporting the fundamental argument that rock art is concerned with religious cosmology and related ritual, this dissertation seeks to extend and nuance our understanding of symbols and motifs within this paradigm.

A second implication is in the manner in which ethnographies are read. If we look at ethnographies in order to uncover the embodied references made by the San themselves, I argue that we have a better chance of understanding how the San view their world and the ethnographies they are relating. It is implausible to suggest that the San peoples would have had the same approach to their bodies as westerners do. As there are many

references to physicality in the existing body of San ethnography it is useful to take note of those instances and use that information as a guide when interpreting rock art.

Divergent interpretation: a move away from previous arguments

Interpretation is possibly the pivotal concern of this dissertation. I focused specifically on giraffe-snake conflationary images and the varied images of giraffe found in the Brandberg. This question was the most difficult of this dissertation since ethnography suggested that the roles of these animals were not the same as those portrayed by the similar imagery in other parts of southern Africa. Ethnography alone was not sufficient to explain these images, although it was the most influential aspect in terms of my interpretation.

In Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 I disagreed with previous researchers such as Guenther (1984) and Kinahan (1999) regarding the roles of these two categories of imagery. Both had argued a rainmaking role for the snakes, and the giraffe. Upon examining the ethnography from northern San groups (and more importantly, the art itself) it became apparent that they did not believe in the active control of the rain, although they were not without their beliefs about rain. However, it appeared to me that they might pray for rain, and that the weather was affected by the birth and death of people and animals according to the *!now* they possessed.

Moreover, I was faced with a large quantity of research relating to snakes which argued that snakes were rain-animals (Schmidt 1979, 1997; Hoff 1997; Dowson 1998; Mallen 2004) and linked in some way to rainmaking rituals (Schmidt 1979; Hoff 1997; Dowson

1998; Mallen 2004). I had to consider this research in the context of where it was conducted and the ethnographic sources used. I concluded that in the south eastern mountains there is a significant possibility that rain and snakes were related. In other areas it appeared that much of the beliefs relating to snakes and rain/water appeared to be influenced from either Bantu-speaking groups, or a mix of Khoe, San , and Colonialist beliefs, although this was not explored in detail. This to me seemed to be too confused to represent what the San 2000 years ago in the Brandberg would have been thinking. Therefore I tried as much as possible to restrict my ethnographic usage to that collected from the San groups in the northern areas, particularly that of the !Kun boys from the Bleek & Lloyd collection (1911) who originated either in Angola or Namibia, as well as the Hai/om and the Damara groups of the area.

Therefore, I challenged the previous interpretations of snake-giraffe conflations and giraffe imagery as being depictions of rain-animals. I instead offered a new interpretation (Chapter 4 & 5).

I argued that snakes were complex representations of spirits-of-the-dead and illness. This is primarily since spirits-of-the-dead embody the illness they bring, a concept that has been argued for spirits-of-the-dead in the south eastern Mountains (Blundell 2004), and indeed from the fact that San groups do not distinguish the noun – illness – from the verb - to get sick (Low 2004). Thus, the images of snakes with giraffe patterning and giraffe heads suggested illness moving up the spine of the giraffe. Even though this movement of illness is not documented in the ethnography I made an argument that the depictions of spines or dorsal lines and snakes in the art suggested that the San in this area might have held such a belief. The snake body, being so similar in some respects to that of the

giraffe spine, was a natural metaphor for representing a giraffe neck/spine. Moreover, given the ethnographic suggestions that snakes were one of the manifestations of illness, and that in the actual physicality of the snakes it seems natural that the snake could encompass illness and spirits-of-the-dead. This approach was made possible not only through ethnography alone, but through an embodied approach to the understanding of the physical sensations shamans experience during trance. In addition, in line with the Douglas' (1963, 1970) theory of animals being representations of the social, I have argued that the giraffe is an ideal representation of the socially valorised physical states experienced during trance.

I would like to reiterate my argument relating to the idea that snakes represent spirits-of-the-dead. Using a paradigm informed by a body studies approach, I can relate the slithering of the snake to another experience reported by shamans during the trance experience (Katz 1982). I have already demonstrated extensively in this dissertation that shamanic trance includes a number of highly visible physical components such sweating, bending over due to pain in the stomach, shivering, and shrieking as they approach the state of !kia. I have also extended the argument relating to the shivering of the body to the shaking of the spine. This is because shamans themselves have reported that they feel as if their spine quivers during the trance experience. The spine is the portal to the spirit world, along which the soul of the shaman travels taking illness with it to the spirit world. The illness is expelled through the *n//au* spot at the back of the neck in many cases. Thus I would argue that the spinal shivering experienced by shamans during trance can be related to the slithering of snakes. This movement is obvious especially in a desert environment such as the Namib where one could see the tracks made by snakes in the sand. Some are incredibly marked, such as in side-sliding snakes. However, all snake

tracks appear to be somewhat wavy and could mimic the quivering sensation felt by the shaman during trance. Thus, the shaman may have linked his own bodily sensations to the movement of the snake.

Aside from snakes being complex metaphors for the corporeal sensations experienced by shamans during trance, and spirits-of-the-dead, my interpretations of giraffe has been central to this thesis.

First, I argued that giraffe backlines were natural conduits to the spirit world given their obvious length and height. They were visibly a metaphor for the spine of the shaman since anatomically, that was the manner by which the shaman's soul and illness travelled to the spirit world. In addition it suggests the attenuation experienced by shamans during trance. Shamans were also believed to take on various animal forms, one of which could be the giraffe. Given all these associations, it is not surprising that the giraffe spine could be considered a portal to the spirit world.

Second, there are paintings of bifurcated and trifurcated giraffe backlines in the Brandberg. I argued that these, when coupled with the idea that the spine of the giraffe could be a portal to the spirit world, could represent threads of light or ropes to God (Chapter 5). That is primarily because they mimic threads of light painted in other areas of southern Africa. Moreover, they seem a natural extension to the idea of the backline being a portal to the spirit world.

Third, the grid patterning that occurs naturally on giraffe, and is often found on giraffe paintings in the Brandberg, and almost always on giraffe-snake conflations, is yet another

extension of the idea that giraffe represented portals to the spirit world. This is because, during the entoptic phase of trance, these grid patterns are frequently seen and have been reported by some shamans as being another manifestation of threads of light. Thus, I argued that with all these physical commonalities between giraffe and the corporeal and trance experiences of shamans it is likely that these grid patterns were another metaphor for movement to the spirit world through the conduit of the giraffe.

Fourth, I demonstrated the link between giraffe painted in profile with only their heads and backlines may be interpreted as snakes. Since I have already indicated that giraffe-snake conflations are representations of movement of illness up the spine of the giraffe into the spirit world, I believe that these images are related to the paintings of giraffe-conflationary images. I think that they are representations of the similarity between snakes in the spine of the giraffe and snakes themselves. They are not necessarily either snakes with giraffe heads, or giraffe themselves. They are complex metaphors for both.

Through my analysis of giraffe and snakes in this dissertation I have not only demonstrated that there are alternative interpretations of these images that are more in line with northern San ethnography, but that these are complex and highly corporeal images. Thus using both a corporeal reading of the ethnography and a paradigm informed by body studies when interpreting the rock art, it was possible to demonstrate a highly embodied set of images in the Brandberg. This is something that few researchers have explicitly done previously, although in terms of human figures and therianthropes it has always been understood that those images depicted what shamans were feeling during trance. More significantly, few San rock art researchers in southern Africa have identified spirits-of-the-dead in the rock art (see Ouzman & Loubser 2000; Blundell 2004; Turner

2006 for other examples). In addition few researchers (see Blundell 2004 for an example) have examined southern African San rock art from the paradigm of the body which has enabled me to come to significantly different conclusions to previous researchers who argued the snake and giraffe images were depictions of rain-animals.

New interpretations of Brandberg imagery

I began this dissertation intending to examine the meaning of giraffe and giraffe-snake conflationary images in the Brandberg. In ensuing chapters I then examined the various strands of evidence I could use to interpret these images, both from a hermeneutic and a social perspective.

I believe that the most pertinent implications in this dissertation lie in two specified areas. First, I used a slightly different ethnographic approach, in line with revived debates about ethnography. This allowed for a new hermeneutic understanding of the images. Second, I used a new paradigm in social theory in the form of body studies to examine the images. This added not only to my hermeneutic analysis of the art but also allowed a possibly more emic approach to understanding the rock art.

My hope is that this dissertation will impact upon future rock art research in the Brandberg, both from a social and hermeneutic perspective. Moreover, I hope that it will influence researchers to examine non-human imagery more closely in an attempt to possibly make social arguments for these images in other parts of southern Africa.

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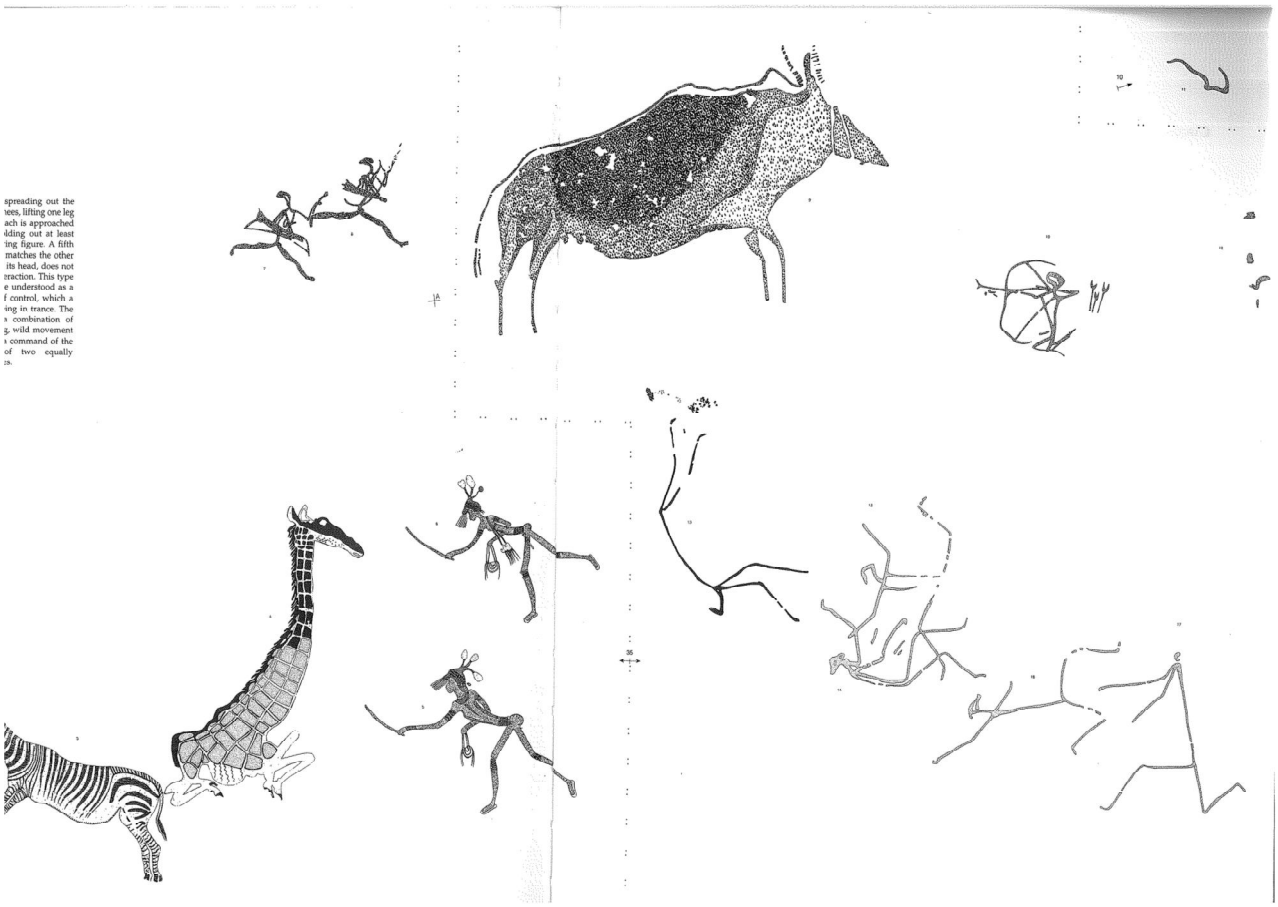

Fig. 69 Circus 28 showing similarities between Ga'seb 8 and the image of the men walking towards the giraffe