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Trains, Tracks, Transition: Ambivalence in Northern Sotho Colonial Contact-Period Rock Art, the Makgabeng, South Africa

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Abstract

This article explores impacts of, and reactions to, colonial intrusion and migrancy on and among the Northern Sotho on the Makgabeng, South Africa. We reflect on the role rock art sites play as spaces in which the Northern Sotho articulated their agency responding to new colonial objects – wagons, trains, and trucks – and how these objects were re-signified and integrated into Northern Sotho iconography of initiation rock art. A close analysis of this rock art and a close reading of historical sources, as well as examination of ethnography on initiation and migrancy, offer an interpretation of trains, tracks, trucks, and wagons in the rock art repertoire of the Northern Sotho. We draw on Bhabha's concept of "ambivalence of mimicry" to suggest that the rock art depictions of these trains, wagons, and things associated with migrancy represent subtle resistance to colonial intrusion and negotiation of realities. These experiences were framed by the Northern Sotho within an emic context of initiation.

Naganwago

Sehlogo se se tsinkela ditlamorago le dikarabelo tša go tsenelela ga bokoloniale le go huduga gare ga Basotho ba Lebowa ba Makgabeng, Afrika Borwa. Re naganišiša ka tema yeo mafelo a bokgabo bja leswika a e e kgathago bjalo ka mafelo a wo go wona Basotho a Lebowa ba hlalošitšego boemedi bja bona bja go arabela dilo tše diswa tša bokoloniale – dikoloyana, ditimela, le dilori – le ka fao dilo tše di ilego tša swantšhwa gape le go kopanywa le seswantšho sa Sesotho sa Leboa sa bokgabo bja leswika go tša koma. Tshekatsheko ya kgauswi ya bokgabo bjo bja leswika le go bala kgauswi ga methopo ya histori, gammogo le go hlahloba thuto ya semorafe ka tša koma le go huduga, di fa hlathollo ya ditimela, diporo, dilori, le dikoloyana ka gare ga kgoboketšo ya tša bokgabo bja leswika ya Sesotho sa Lebowa. Re tšea kgopolo ya Bhabha ya "ambivalence of mimicry" (go ekiša mo go sa felelago) go šišinya gore diswantšho tša bokgabo bja leswika tša ditimela tše, dikoloyana le dilo tšeo di amanago le go huduga di emela kganetšo ye e sa lemogegego ya go tsenelela ga bokoloniale le ditherišano tša dilo tša kgonthe. Maitemogelo a a be a beakatšhitšwe ke Basotho ba Lebowa go ya ka seemo sa bona sa tša koma.

Keywords

trains – rock art – Northern Sotho – colonialism – ambivalence – South Africa

1 Introduction

Colonial encounters in southern Africa left traumatic, profound, dynamic impacts that varied depending on the reactions of those who encountered them. Such encounters did not necessarily erase cultural practices of the colonised. Sometimes people submitted to these encounters, accommodated them, and/or adapted to them; sometimes people actively engaged in (c)overt processes

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of resistance and negotiation, challenging the uncomfortable realities within which they were immersed (Frieman & May 2020). These responses were framed within emic social, cultural, economic, and political systems (e.g. Leggat & Renée 2004; Skinner 2021). Some *in situ* encounters, engagements, and reactions were portrayed in rock art through subject-matter that included colonial things; this rock art is variously labelled colonial contact rock art, contact rock art, colonial rock art, and colonial-period rock art (Goldhahn & May 2018; Frieman & May 2020). The term 'contact rock art' has also been used to refer to the archaeology of encounter, for example, between hunter-gatherers, herders, and Ntu language-speaking farmers (Smith & van Schalkwyk 2002; Eastwood 2003; Hall & Mazel 2005; Pinto 2014). Those encounters had varying impacts (see Pinto 2014). "Contact rock art" has also been used to refer to specific encounters between European farmers and the hunter-gatherers during the late 19th century (Hall & Mazel 2005).

In this paper we analyse aspects of Northern Sotho rock art as the materialisation of emic responses to colonial encounters and experiences. We suggest that colonial contact-period rock art references subject-matter of material culture, practices, or things introduced during the early colonial encounters that shifted local social and material relationships. These encounters are manifested in the rock art iconography of rural Makgabeng, Limpopo Province, South Africa (Fig. 1). Cognisant that social practice shifted due to migrancy and colonial capitalism, we suggest that colonial contact-period rock art expressed a form of resistance to colonial intrusion through processes of re-signifying and symbolising colonial things (e.g. Kelly & Area 2021). Re-signification implies giving a new or different meaning to that which was originally meant, and symbolisation means finding forms of expression for one's thoughts and desires by means of symbols. We use these terms to illustrate how the Northern Sotho articulated their agency through giving new meaning to elements, or changed and reinterpreted symbols, within their culture in order to reinforce their identity and as a manifestation of their reaction to colonial intrusion on the Makgabeng.

The Makgabeng Plateau extends over approximately 31 km from east to west and covers a surface area of approximately 332 km^2. Geologically the plateau forms

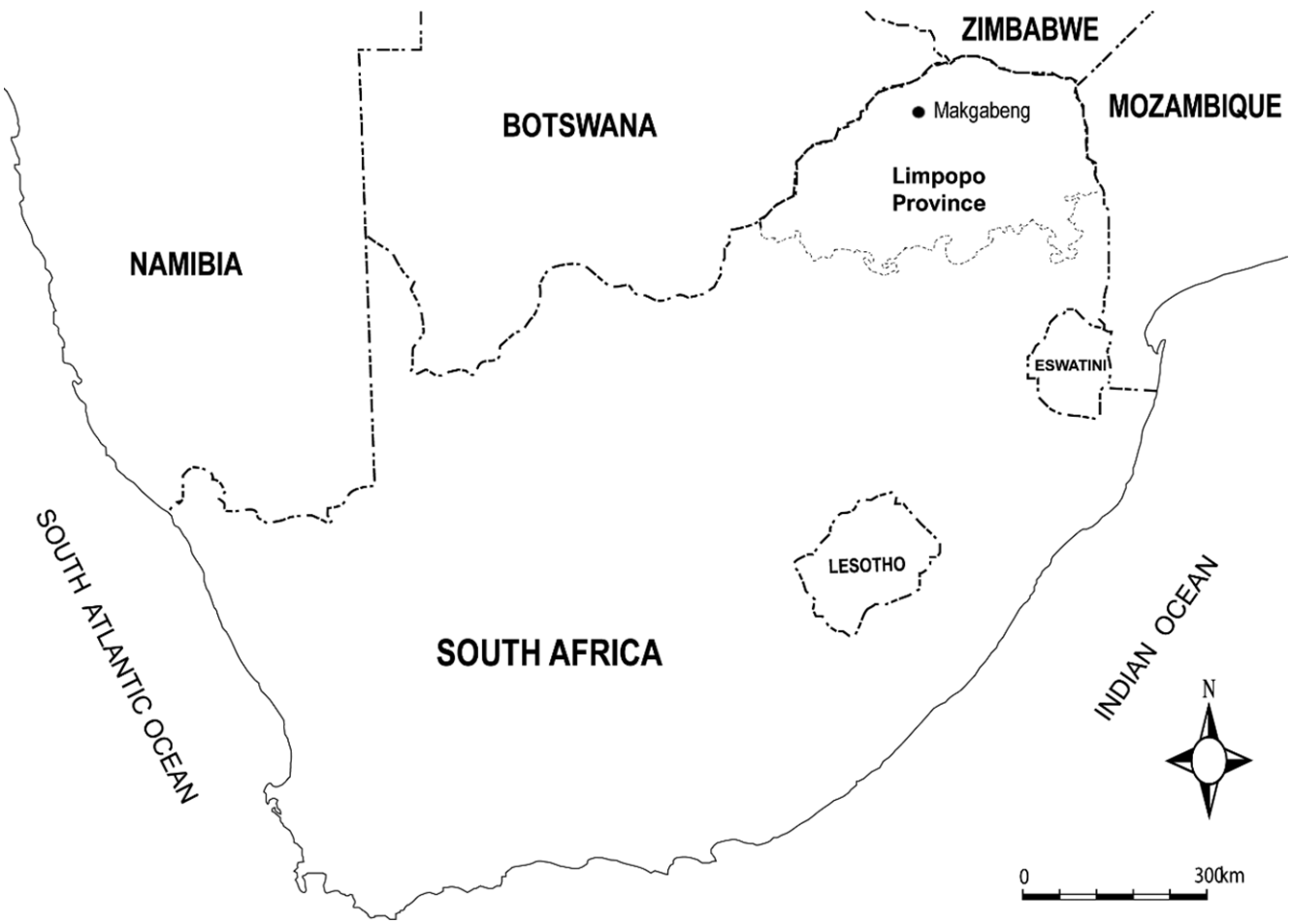

FIGURE 1 Map locating Makgabeng area in Limpopo Province, South Africa

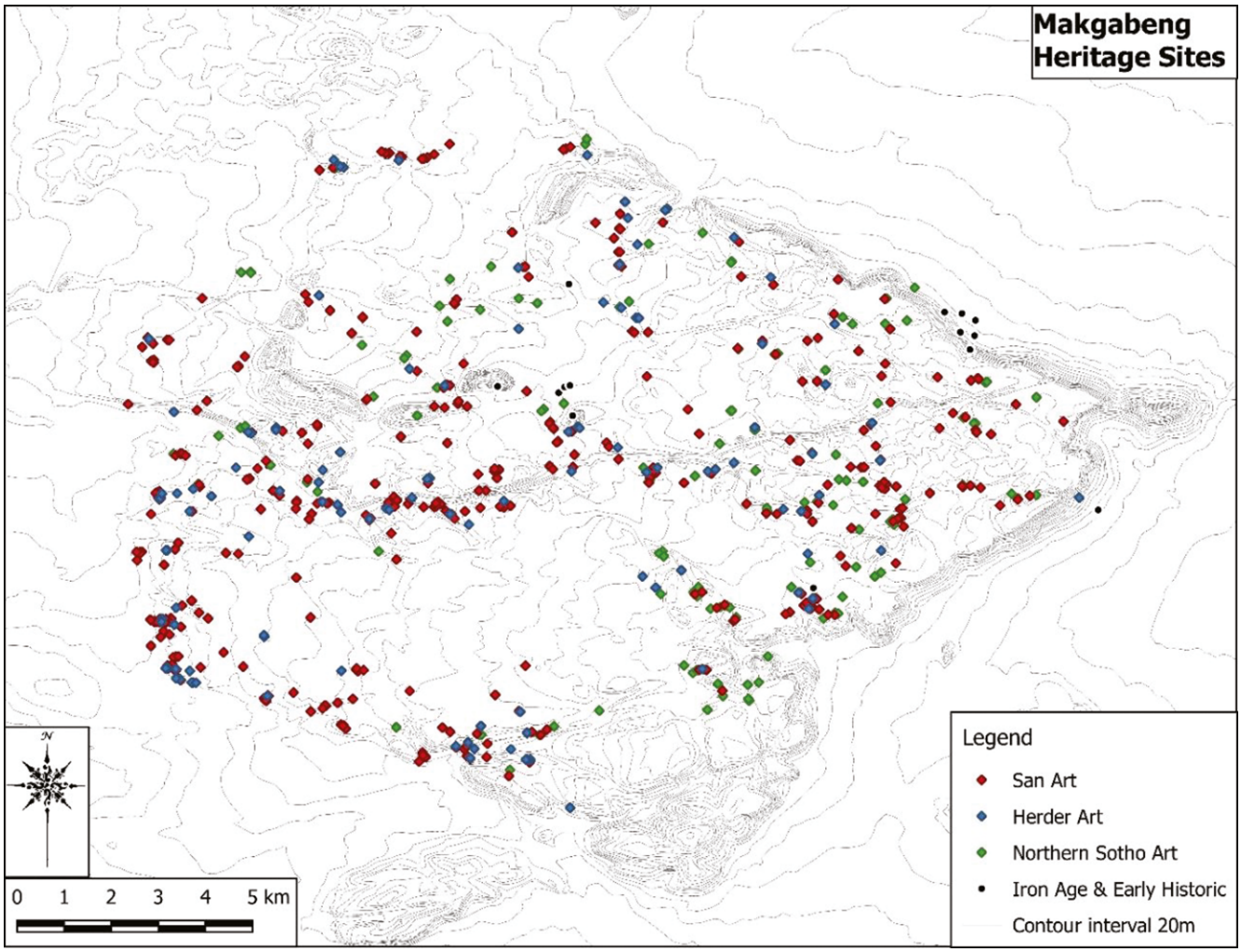

FIGURE 2 Map of rock art and related heritage sites in Makgabeng
IMAGE BY J. VAN SCHALKWYK

part of the Waterberg group sediments (Barker et al. 2006; Hahn 2017) which consist of fine-grained aeolian sandstones overlain by coarse sandstone conglomerates, through which numerous ephemeral streams have cut gorges, such as the Masebe, of varying depths (Bradfield et al. 2009). The vegetation of the Makgabeng is mainly characterised by mixed bushveld of the Savanna Biome (Low & Rebelo 1996) that grows in the deeper sandy soils, with scrub confined to the rocky areas (Hahn 2017: 325). Within this lush, rugged landscape are layered histories of contact amongst hunter-gatherers (San), herders (Khoe) and Ntu language-speaking farmers (Northern Sotho). Evidence for this contact includes over 1,000 rock art sites littered across the landscape, interspersed with related archaeo-historical sites (Fig. 2), including Late Stone Age sites (Bradfield et al. 2009) and sites from the Early Iron Age attributed to Ntu-language speaking farming communities (Van Schalkwyk 2000).

Hunter-gatherer rock art is fine-line brush painted mono/polychrome images of humans, animals, and items of hunter-gatherer material culture (Eastwood & van Schalkwyk 2003) (Fig. 3a). Khoekhoen herder rock art is finger-painted and hand-printed, consisting of finger dots and strokes, geometric motifs, and handprints (Smith & Ouzman 2004; Eastwood & Smith 2005) (Fig. 3b). Ntu language-speaking farmer rock art is associated with Northern Sotho and linked to initiation and early colonial contact (Smith & van Schalkwyk 2002; Namono & Eastwood 2005; Namono & van Schalkwyk 2020). These three traditions often occur within the same site and on the same panel (Eastwood 2002a, b, 2003, 2007; Eastwood et al. 2002; Eastwood & Tlouamma 2003a, b, 2004, 2005, 2006a, b; Namono & Eastwood 2005).

Presently, the Makgabeng landscape is predominantly occupied by a conglomerate of ethnic farming Sotho-Tswana speakers (Koni, Pedi, Moletše, Tlôkwa, Birwa,

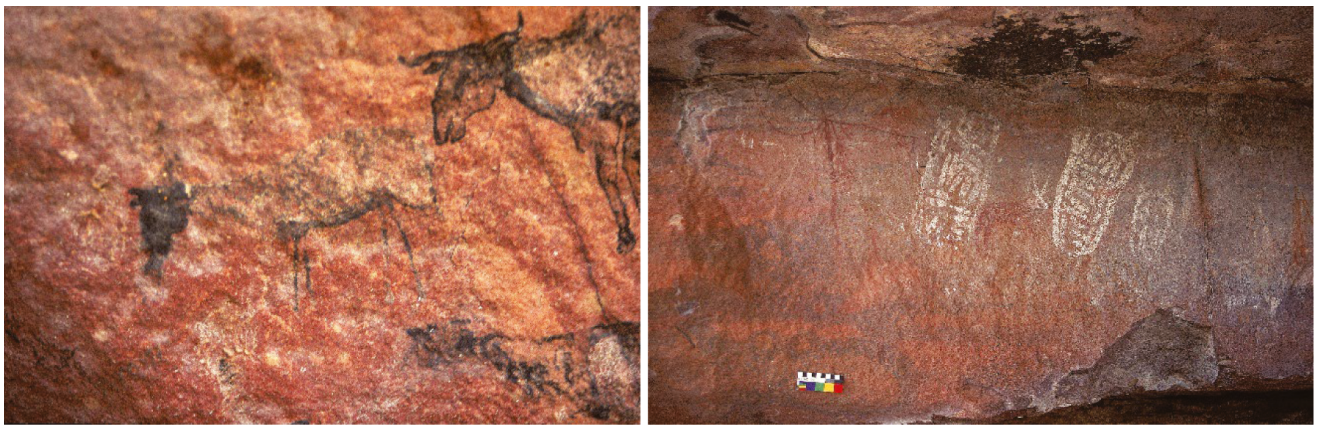

FIGURE 3 Examples in the Makgabeng of (a) hunter-gatherer rock art (RSA-BOE16-17) and (b) herder rock art superimposed on hunter-gatherer imagery (RSA-BOE13-30)
IMAGES BY ROCK ART RESEARCH INSTITUTE, UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, SOUTH AFRICA, WWW.SARADA.CO.ZA

Tšhadibe, Tlokwa, Tau Venda, Ralotang, Motlatlane and Madibana and Hananwa), all linguistically categorised as Northern Sotho (Krige 1937: 354; van Schalkwyk 1997: 155; Eastwood & van Schalkwyk 2003; Morton 2013). Many self-define as BaHananwa under kgoši Malebôhô. We use the terms Northern Sotho to refer to the people of the Makgabeng. The Northern Sotho had intermittent early contact with European travellers (Setumu 2009), hunters and traders (Delius 1983), and the mixed-race Buys people, or the maSetedi, who settled on the Blouberg and the western extreme of the Soutpansberg in the 1820s (Makhura 1997: 193–194; Morton 2009: 7). Longer colonial encounter in the Makgabeng area came with Berlin missionaries in the 1860s (Namono & van Schalkwyk 2020). European contact increased in 1836 when Voortrekkers from the Cape settled at Schoemansdal (1848–1867) in the nearby Soutpansberg mountain range.

2 Framework

We draw on post-colonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha's concept of mimicry which illustrates the complex negotiation and transformation of cultural symbols in the context of colonialism (Bhabha 1994). Bhabha theorised encounters and reactions between coloniser and colonised, arguing that mimicry is a form of resistance, a way for the colonised to assert their presence and identity thus creating a complex relationship of ambivalence towards cultural authority (Bhabha 1994: 51). This ambivalence is a simultaneous attraction towards and repulsion from colonisers. Re-signification of cultural symbols may likewise imply levels of repulsion, as the colonised reshape colonial elements to suit their own cultural contexts, resisting colonial meanings and perceptions of them.

Ambivalence, according to Bhabha (1994), is also a negotiation of power between the coloniser and the colonised. The ambivalence of mimicry "becomes transformed into uncertainty, which fixes the colonial subject as a 'partial' presence" (Bhabha 1994: 122). In terms of negotiation, re-signification becomes a strategy where the colonised assert their agency by appropriating and reinterpreting colonial things to challenge the dominance of the coloniser's culture, shifting these things to the periphery. Mimicry may be overt or covert, where the colonised are unaware that they are undermining the authority of the coloniser. The colonised, whilst accepting colonial ways, retain a sense of belonging and identity which are paramount. Re-signification introduces complexity into cultural expression, reflecting the ambivalent contradictory relationship between the colonised and the coloniser that allows colonised to take colonial things and fit them to their own cultural context. These adapted symbols carry layered meanings, embodying both a form of compliance and resistance simultaneously.

Both coloniser and colonised thoughts, actions and reactions were/are active agents in framing colonised lived experiences and entanglements (Parker & Rathbone 2007). These entanglements are imbued with contestations, retaliations, appropriations, and struggle as they emerge from the active agency of people and things as processes of social relations (Parker & Rathbone 2007), transmitted through daily practices and encounters (Hodder 2012: 88–109, 2014: 19–20). The entangled network duality is useful when considering rock art and humans as 'secondary agents' whose agency emanates from their status as embodiments of actions. They are a conduit through which to realise specific intentions (Gell 1998; Gell & Hirsch 1999), as illustrated in the colonial contact-period rock art of the Northern Sotho.

Rock art sites are fixed-in-place (Chippindale & Nash 2004); they encourage considerations of landscape as a tool (Anschuetz et al. 2001) to provide context to social, cultural, and locational significances in alignment with other relevant sources (Smith & Blundell 2004). Aspect or exposure of a rock art site can have significant influences on visibility and durability of images depicted. Aspect may conceal or reveal rock art, depending on the intentions of the authors' placement of imagery within a site and the intended audience. Rock art landscapes are social practices within which shared cultural, political, and/or economic goals are constructed and symbolised. Rock art materialises these through visibility, marking and owning spaces, especially in the context of colonial disruptions. As a geographical context, landscape is a space where people live; as a socially constructed space, it is a template of peoples' culturally-specific expressions of their cosmos (Ljunge 2013). Rock art sites become places where social, cultural, and/or political processes of individual and collective remembrance activate a lived and enacted present past (Dean & Millar 2005: 14). This framing enables a reading of Northern Sotho colonial contact-period rock art as an enduring record of, and testimony to, generations. This reading reveals a humanised landscape where the past and future are co-present with the present, through processes of re-signification, memory, and identity (Ingold 2000: 189).

3 Dating the Rock Art

Northern Sotho rock art, like all the other rock art on the Makgabeng, has not yet been directly dated. However, it can be related to other excavated archaeological evidence and historical sources. In the Makgabeng area, it is probable that hunter-gatherer, herder, and early Northern Sotho rock art date to periods prior to large-scale settlements, probably four or more centuries ago, when small populations were settled on the plateau. Rock art sites now located close to Thabanantlhana village would have been considerably far from the community. Colonial contact-period rock art can be comparatively dated through image analysis. However, caution is warranted: an early period Northern Sotho rock art site photographed by the Reverend Noel Roberts in 1916, for example, does not show any deterioration of images at present, although imagery at many other sites now appears faded (Namono 2004: 56). Often it is assumed that older paintings are more faded than recent ones, but research in the Drakensberg indicates that more recent paintings deteriorate the fastest (Ward 1997: 88–90; Namono 2004: 56). Thus, rather than look to the state of preservation of sites for dating, colonial contact-period rock art can be relatively dated to when the subject matter is known to have been in the area, and/or was probably seen by returning migrants, or was brought in by new immigrants. These new things may have then resonated with those who made and consumed the rock art.

4 Northern Sotho Rock Art

4.1 *The Early Period*

Northern Sotho early period rock art, predominantly finger-painted and frequently located in large shelters in rocky remote areas, is often portrayed as filled silhouettes with exaggerated key features (Smith & van Schalkwyk 2002; Namono 2004: 20). Initially linked to Northern Sotho beliefs about initiation, ancestry, and rainmaking (Mitchell 2002: 342), it is now categorised into two themes. An earlier period associated with initiation (Hall & Smith 2000; van Schalkwyk & Smith 2004) includes depictions of figures and animals such as giraffes, lions, hyenas, baboons, aardvarks, crocodiles, elephants, rhinos, and zebras, and mainly references male concerns and masculinity (Moodley 2008). Images described as geometric, comprising U-shapes, T-shapes, H-shapes, and zigzags, meanders and complex amalgamations, dots, strokes, apron shapes, circular and rectangular images, and a spread-eagled design known as kôma, reference female initiation (Namono 2004; Namono & Eastwood 2005: 77, 84). Depictions of aardvarks, crocodiles, and kôma resonate for both genders and derive from a fluid Northern Sotho symbolization of initiation (Namono 2023).

4.2 *Colonial Contact-Period*

Northern Sotho colonial contact-period rock art is characterised by depictions of trains, tracks, wagons, trucks, motor vehicles, feral animals, persons in colonial dress, guns, and arms-on-hips postures, all juxtaposed with animal and geometric imagery. This rock art is argued to be linked to early nineteenth and twentieth century colonial contact and protest (Smith & van Schalkwyk 2002; van Schalkwyk & Smith 2004: 342–344). Some rock art chronicles the Maleboho War of 1894 (van Schalkwyk & Smith 2004: 341). Researchers suggest that this rock art was a means of coping with and overcoming the overbearing, ever-present difficulties of intrusion, as well as mocking the intruders (Smith & van Schalkwyk 2002: 252–253, van Schalkwyk & Smith 2004: 341–344). This Maleboho War in 1894 and its resultant trauma are presently retained in oral form, transferred as praise poems recited at important

community events such as the inauguration of chiefs or other cultural functions. Thus, rock art was a way for subaltern communities in the Makgabeng to empower themselves to produce their own history and to create and affirm their own identity (Joubert & van Schalkwyk 1999). Smith and van Schalkwyk (2002: 237) further contend that the depiction of 'the only exotic animal,' a camel in the Masebe gorge in the Makgabeng, was another form of pointed humour at trauma from various things including the Nguni raids, the ravishes of all cattle by rinderpest, and the expropriation of their land and extortion by the Transvaal government. While these arguments hold their ground, we contend that a closer examination of the relationships between Northern Sotho ritual, symbolism, and social-cultural contexts will show that all the rock art is linked to initiation.

4.3 *Early Understandings*

When Reverend Noel Roberts, one of the early missionaries to the Makgabeng, first encountered Northern Sotho rock art he reacted in a similar manner to others, as early literature indicates. His descriptions of it were vague, descriptive, and derogatory. He was more concerned about hunter-gatherer paintings that the Northern Sotho were argued to be destroying (see Roberts 1916: 572; Namono 2004: 21). Roberts, describing a series of tracks and trains, asserted that a local Sotho who contracted miners' phthisis returned, and painted, whilst living in the caves. For Roberts, when miners returned to their village they translated their experiences with the 'White Man's magic' through paintings, to an awe-struck audience (Roberts 1916: 573; Namono 2004: 22). This typical, colonial, naïve descriptive and simplistic interpretation captures perceived local experiences of colonialism. Roberts based his prejudiced explanations on his preconceived notions about the Northern Sotho (Namono 2004: 22).

Harald Pager (1975: 36), like Roberts, suggested that when the Northern Sotho went to the cities and saw Europeans, they returned and painted to explain the amazing spectacle to those in the village (Namono 2004: 22). Similarly, Revil Mason (1962: 340) suggested that depictions of things associated with colonial contact served a journalistic function for Northern Sotho as they recorded European newcomers. Willcox (1984: 148), drawing on a Western aesthetic value system, described the paintings as crudely made. Northern Sotho rock art was colloquially termed 'late-whites,' comparatively late relative to the early hunter-gatherer rock art tradition. However, the paintings are neither 'late' nor only 'white;' many are predominantly painted in a roughly-ground, chalky-white paste, but several occur in red, orange, and black (Eastwood 2003; Eastwood & van Schalkwyk 2003; Namono 2004: 19). Adrian Boshier (1972: 206) was the first 'outsider' to move beyond derogatory, simplistic, and racist interpretations/descriptions of Northern Sotho rock art, having gone to an initiation school of the Koni. Boshier's initiation obtained for him secret knowledge to understand the Northern Sotho and the symbolic meanings of the paintings. Respectfully to the Northern Sotho, Boshier never published the meanings in keeping with secrecy of initiation. However, he attributed the rock art to Tlokwa, Koni, and the DiKolobê (or Lovedu) people (Boshier 1972: 207; Namono 2004: 22). Thus, early colonial documentation of Northern Sotho rock art ignored any symbolic associations, social and cultural complexity, and any understanding of the conventions and knowledge of the Northern Sotho cosmos (Namono 2004: 22).

4.4 *Current Understandings*

Current readings of the rock art align it to Northern Sotho history (Smith & van Schalkwyk 2002; van Schalkwyk & Smith 2004) and cosmologies (Eastwood 2003; Namono 2004, 2023; Namono & van Schalkwyk 2020). Although neither author of this paper has attended any initiation school in the Makgabeng, our long interaction and engagement with the peoples of this region, their heritage, and their landscape has enabled a nuanced reading and understanding of colonial contact-period rock art.

5 Methodology

Rock art site data was drawn from surveys conducted by the Rock Art Research Institute (RARI) at the University of the Witwatersrand and Edward Eastwood's rock art field research reports (1998–2002) of 17 farms in the Makgabeng area. Our dataset totals 663 recorded rock art sites. Based on Eastwood's descriptions of images at sites, we focused only on Northern Sotho imagery. Eleven categories of colonial imagery types were identified (Fig. 4). Whilst gendered images dominate the image types it is difficult to determine whether the Northern Sotho were depicting themselves in colonial clothing or others, or whether they were doing things that may be deemed to be of Western influence. Thus, for this paper, we focused only vehicular image types (with/without human figures inside or around them), and these include trains (and tracks), vehicles, wagons, and one example of a house and writing, all considered neutral categories.

Of all 663 sites, 48% have imagery attributed to San hunter-gatherers, 39% to Northern Sotho farmers and 13% to Khoe herders. Co-occurrences imply that image

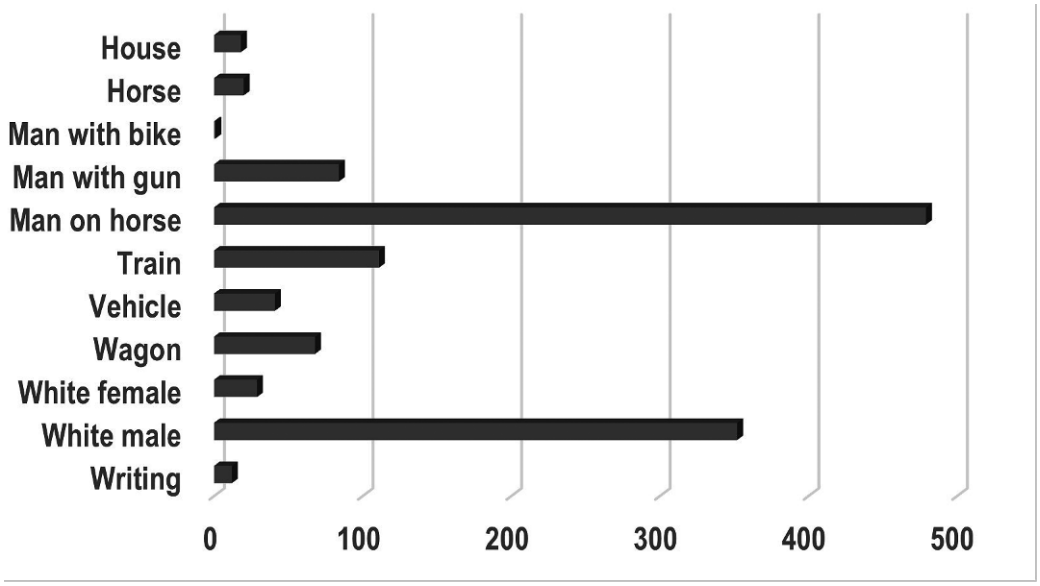

FIGURE 4 Colonial imagery type occurrence based on Eastwood's site report descriptions

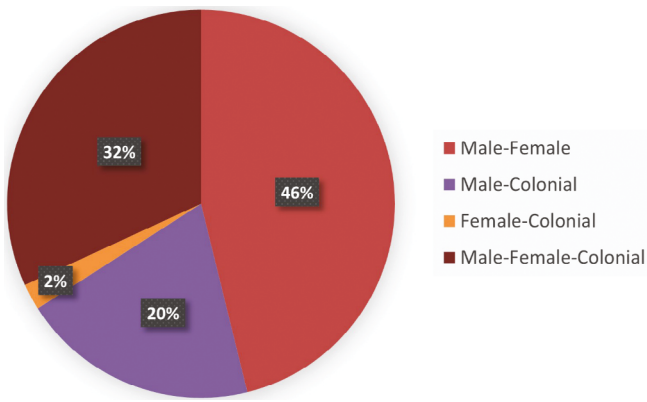

FIGURE 5 Co-occurrences at rock art sites associated with male/female initiation and colonial contact-period imagery

categories of these different traditions are depicted at the same site. Analysis indicated that 60% of sites were of San-Northern Sotho imagery, 6% of Northern Sotho-Khoe imagery, 16% were San-Khoe imagery and 18% of sites had Northern Sotho-San-Khoe imagery. This implies that 84% of these sites have mixed Northern Sotho and other imagery. Image juxtapositioning or superimpositioning were not included in the analysis; therefore, it was difficult to determine whether sites were used concurrently, indicating interaction, or whether sites that were used and abandoned by earlier inhabitants were re-used by incoming groups.

Only the Northern Sotho sites based on Eastwood's image descriptions were analysed and it was observed that at 46% of these sites, subject-matter is attributed to male and female initiation, while at 32% of these sites the subject-matter is the colonial contact-period imagery mixed with male and female initiation imagery. 20% of these sites have a co-occurrence of male initiation and colonial contact-period imagery and 2% of these sites only depict co-occurrence of female initiation and colonial contact-period imagery (Fig. 5). This implies that 54% of sites have a co-occurrence of initiation and colonial contact-period imagery, raising the possibility that colonial contact-period imagery at many sites is associated with initiation, which is a long-persistent and dominant ritual for the Northern Sotho. These academic categorisations of the rock art may not hold true for the Northen Sotho, given that during initiation symbols may be shared but their symbolism and meanings are known to each gender differently (see Namono 2023; Dederen & Mokakabye 2018a, b).

6 Colonial Contact-Period Rock Art

6.1 *Wagons, Trucks and Cars*

In Northern Sotho rock art, wagons and carriages are depicted in various ways, usually in profile (Fig. 6). The variants include the depiction shown in Fig. 6a, a redrawing of a horse-drawn wagon alongside two horse riders. The wagon is covered at the top and open on the sides. The front and back are closed off. It is not clear whether goods or people or both are being transported, but it is probable that people are drawn sitting in the wagon that has four wheels, pulled by horses or oxen used for carrying heavy loads. The two horse riders were probably painted when the wagon was painted, or during a later episode of painting either by the same person or someone else. Figure 6b probably depicts a *kakebeenwa/Kakebeen* wagon mainly used by the trekboers and later voortrekkers (Burman 1988), with huge wheels at the back and

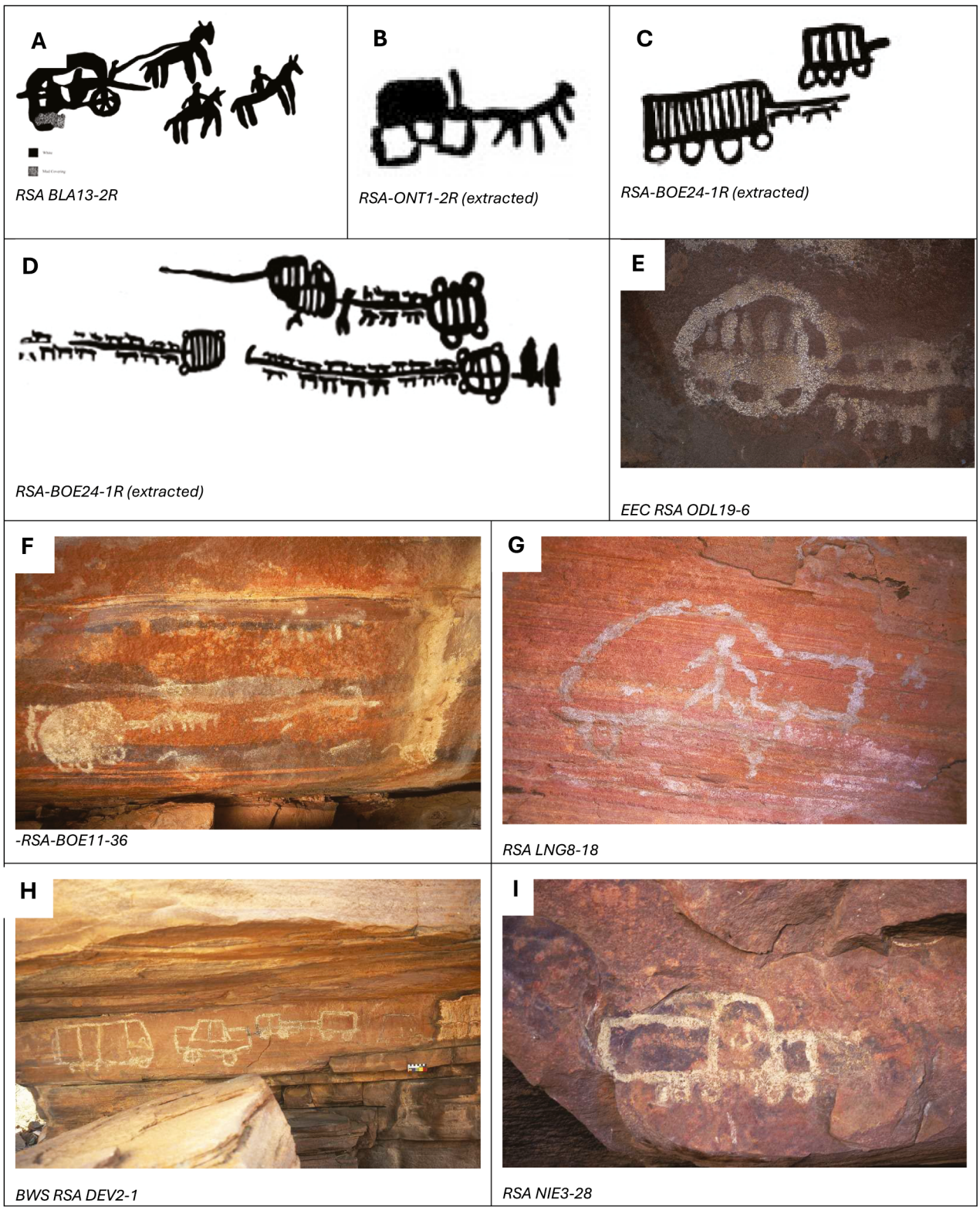

FIGURE 6 Variations of wagon depictions in the rock art
IMAGES BY ROCK ART RESEARCH INSTITUTE, UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, SOUTH AFRICA, WWW.SARADA.CO.ZA

slightly smaller ones at the front. As a defensive barrier, wagons were lashed together by thongs and chains in what was known as a laager (Joubert 1995: 130). The *kak-abeenwa* was replaced by the *bokwa*, a larger transport wagon with iron axles (Joubert 1995: 132). This wagon was used for long hauls and required large numbers of oxen such as those depicted in Fig. 6d, e. Wagons were hauled by two (Fig. 6c) or several animals (Fig. 6d, e). In Fig. 6f, the animal-drawn wagon is depicted near faded crocodilian, saurian, or other animal imagery. In all these depictions, attention to detail is given to the type of wagon, including its wheels, whether it is covered or not, and its haulage. In 1896, the rinderpest outbreak left many transport haulers and rural communities who used the *bokwa* stranded (van Onselen 1972), so mules and donkeys hauled wagons. However, during the Anglo-Boer war the military used *bokwa*, and in the process relegated ox-wagons to local and on-farm transport only (Joubert 1995: 133).

In Fig. 6a, b the animals seemingly have five 'legs.' The topmost animal in Fig. 6a has two distal extensions, which may be an interpretation resulting from tracing the image or it may indicate a tail or saddle. The extra appendage in Fig. 6b is a probable indication of the gender of the animal as male, or it may be the yoke or an extension of the rider's seat sagging at the side of the horse/mule. It is futile to identify the various types of wagons depicted in the rock art to a close match since wagon coachbuilders offered a large range of heavy and light wagons and vehicles. Horses were introduced to South Africa in 1652, initially to pull wagons and carts, but during the nineteenth century wagons were increasingly used to draw carriages, coaches, cultivators, and ploughs (Joubert 1995). Horses were initially confined to high altitude non-horse-sickness zones, limiting their versatility. Archival records of the Berlin mission station in Blouberg indicate that by 1908, there were mules and horses in the Makgabeng area (Berlin Mission Archive 1909–1938). Ox and horse-drawn wagons and carriages were mainly used in the Makgabeng by early traders (1830s), missionaries (1860s) and during the Maleboho War (1894). Thus, a probable date for the wagon paintings is from the 1830s to the early 1900s.

Figure 6g, h, i are depictions of motorised vehicles. Figure 6g is of a person standing in a probable saloon vehicle. This image differs from Fig. 6i, which has a long rectangular shape on one end with a shorter square shape on the other, probably a truck or bakkie with all four wheels indicated. Examples of these two images, Fig. 6g, i, are also depicted in Fig. 6h although a slightly larger vehicle like a bus or lorry is depicted to the left of the panel. Motor vehicles first came to South Africa in 1897 when a Benz 'Velo' was demonstrated to President Paul Kruger in Pretoria (Johnston 1975: 15–16). After the Anglo Boer War, motor cars and trucks quickly became a common site in larger cities such as Johannesburg and Pretoria (Johnston 1975) and gradually in other parts of the country including Polokwane. Archival records of the Berlin mission station in Blouberg indicate that in 1938, the Reverend Jäckel Martin had a vehicle, and in 1948 he bought a new one (Berlin Mission Archive 1908–1949). It is highly likely that the Makgabeng painters probably saw vehicles around 1897 or thereafter.

6.2 *Rail Tracks and Trains*

In Northern Sotho rock art, there are depictions of rail tracks and trains, some with people around (Fig. 7a, c–d) or inside (Fig. 7a–e) them. Some human figures are either standing with hands at their waists or wearing items of Western clothing such as shoes and hats (Fig. 7a, d).

Most of the train depictions have engines depicted as an animal-like creature with eyes, mouth, and nose (see Fig. 7b, e–f). This depiction is unlike the original train engines that moved people and goods across landscapes. A north train track route along the Pienaars River and Middelfontein (Modimolle region) to Pietersburg was established in the 1890s and farmers used the Modimolle (Nylstroom) – Vaalwater (1928) and Mookgophong (Naboomspruit) – Zebediela (1924/1928) track (Pirie 1993) until the early 1940s. In the more rural areas, the railway did not completely replace wagon transport; where no train tracks were developed wagons remained the main form of transport (Pirie 1993: 319). Traffic from Kimberley to what was then Rhodesia went from Pietersburg (Polokwane) to the north, passing between the Soutpansberg and Blouberg using the border crossing at Pont Drift. This route is clearly indicated on Jeppe's map of the Transvaal in 1899. This Pretoria to Potgietersrust (Mokopane) track was completed in 1898 and the Potgietersrus to Pietersburg (Polokwane) track was completed in 1899. It is highly probable, then, that large volumes of traffic passed to the east of Makgabeng. Thus, the Makgabeng community probably saw wagons when they went to the mines, or after the Hananwa war of 1894 when they were indentured as labourers on Boer farms in the Transvaal Republic (van Schalkwyk 1997: 156).

Colonial contact-period rock art authors probably saw trains and tracks during the construction of the Pretoria-Pietersburg (Polokwane) track or the railway track from Pretoria station to Pietersburg (Fig. 8) through Modimolle Nylstroom in the 1830 or later. In Figure 8, southern African men stand on a construction train for the Pietersburg track. One of the men's postures is 'akimbo,' a stance usually depicted in rock art and argued to be of



FIGURE 7 Variations in the depiction of trains
IMAGES A, C, D, F BY ROCK ART RESEARCH INSTITUTE, UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, SOUTH AFRICA, WWW.SARADA.CO.ZA; IMAGES B + E BY C. NAMONO

Europeans. In the rock art, figures in akimbo posture reference both Europeans and Northern Sotho. According to van Schalkwyk (2015), development of the rail track network in South Africa was in tandem with a process of globalization, a necessary result of the discovery of first the Griqualand West diamond fields and later the Witwatersrand Gold Fields. This involved a huge need for large volumes of cheap labour recruited from rural areas, where people were engaging with the impacts of colonisation. Rural-urban migration and encounters with colonial things impacted Northern Sotho lives and thoughts, within which social practices like initiation were deeply enmeshed.

7 Northern Sotho Initiation

Northern Sotho communal initiation ceremonies aim at instilling a sense of Northern Sotho identity. Early colonial times in southern Africa saw initiation branded heathen and abolished in favour of Christianity (Nkomazana & Setume 2016). However, some chiefs, such as among the Kgatla in Botswana and communities like the Northern Sotho, revived/retained the practice (Morton 2011, 2012; Nkomazana & Setume 2016; Namono & van Schalkwyk 2020: 54). In the Makgabeng-Blouberg area, the ongoing practice of initiation is a testament to its place in the context of socio-cultural and economic



FIGURE 8 Construction train for the Pietersburg track
IMAGE BY DITSONG NATIONAL MUSEUM OF CULTURAL HISTORY

colonial influences. Whilst there may be fewer young males and females initiated today or who openly identify with it due to its denigration, communal initiation rites for the Makgabeng community are held in neighbouring villages where instructors are located (Filix Mosebedi, pers. comm. April 2022).

Males' initiation was held in the Makgabeng in 2011. One of the authors (CN) attended the celebrations in July 2022 when eight initiated young men returned to the villages of Niewe Jerusalem and Thanabantlana of Makgabeng. As part of this open ceremony, guests were encouraged to welcome and meet the returnees, their mentors, and senior family in a separate hut. During this interaction, the significance of the ritual was interrogated. Although these communal rites are shrouded in secrecy, public knowledge emphasises their role in enabling young Northern Sotho embrace their potential as adults. Whilst these rites have changed due to global influences and health concerns, they remain alive and embedded within Northern Sotho social fabric. One of the ways initiations were kept alive in the past was by integrating colonial contact-period/Western material things within Northern Sotho initiation symbolisation (Smith & van Schalkwyk 2002; van Schalkwyk & Smith 2004; Namono & Van Schalkwyk 2020).

8 Migrant Labour

With increasing demand for local labour in South Africa's mines following the discovery of diamonds in the Northern Cape in the late 1860s and gold in the Transvaal in the mid-1880s, many of the men recruited from the Makgabeng-Blouberg area (Sonntag 1983) walked to their duty stations, probably following known trade routes (Delius 2014). By the 1860s, the migrant labour system was very important and was practiced over the next thirty years (Delius 1983: 62–64). Missionary records provide a first clear indication of large-scale migrant labour amongst the Pedi (Northern Sotho) during the 1860s; between 1861 and 1862, approximately three hundred of them walked to as far as the Cape (Delius 1983: 63, 1985: 296). By 1875, they would walk for up to two months as far as Kimberley looking for work after the diamond fields opened in 1869, particularly given that wages paid in the diamond mines were reputedly the highest (Franz 1939: 89; Delius 1983: 63, 66). Rev. Sonntag at the Leipzig mission station in Blouberg wrote in 1893 and 1894 that Mr. Norson, a recruitment agent, visited him to recruit workers for the gold mines (Sonntag 1983: 9, 19, 27). The missionaries' facilitation of the spread of capitalism and Western culture (Kirkaldy 2009) shifted the lifeways of the Northern Sotho in various ways.



FIGURE 9 Site with train filled with people
IMAGE BY C. NAMONO

We acknowledge that whilst the Northern Sotho cautiously engaged with the influx of foreigners to their land, their migration to work on the mines and farms had significant impacts on how they perceived themselves. For example, Sekibakiba Lekgoathi (2014) notes that migrants from Zebediela formed groups during the 1940s and 1950s not based on ethnicity but on a shared geographical place of origin and allegiance to chieftaincy back home. In a way, they recreated a semblance of a 'family unit.' It is probable that similar group formations and criteria occurred for migrants from the Makgabeng. It is within these networks that some of the new symbols depicted in the rock art were fomented. The advent of colonialism in the Makgabeng attempted to disrupt Northen Sotho values and social systems, replacing them with Western ones (Namono & van Schalkwyk 2020: 54). Migrant labour shifted the family unit, leaving women to embrace more roles in households in the absence of men (Kelly 2020). These experiences influenced how the inhabitants of the Makgabeng symbolised their world and re-signified their landscape.

9 A Re-signified Landscape

David Lewis-Williams has argued that although images are symbolic and many are polysemous, their context (the rock face) focuses the associations of the symbols (Lewis-Williams 1981, 1998, 2001). The locationality of sites, image placement, sharpness, and dimensions of images on the rock face influence visibility. In the Makgabeng, any recognition of subject-matter depends on the knowledge of an observer's familiarity of experiences. At some rock art sites considered in this paper, some images are in or on large, exposed shelters and surfaces, while others are in small, hard-to-reach places. At most of the sites, colonial contact-period imagery is juxtaposed with other images of earlier initiation rock art, as in Figure 9. It is probable that the rock art functioned through daily practices and encounters in the same way, but spoke to a broader audience that included colonisers.

Colonial contact-period rock art encapsulates an internal, culturally reflexive account of historical experiences either of returning migrants or local observation by those who stayed in the Makgabeng community. Comaroff (1982) argued that local community structures and contemporary predicaments were not purely the product of

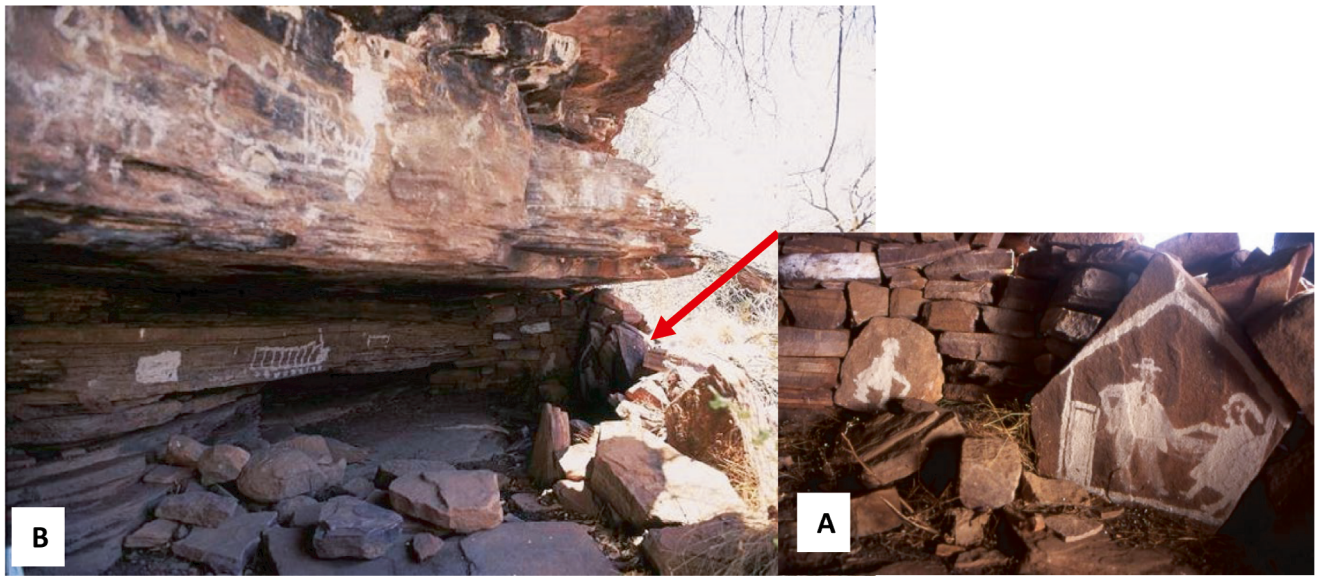

FIGURE 10 Site depicting vehicle juxtaposed with a crocodilian figure (RARI-RSA-TOO1-3). Inset: male and female in a house (RARI-RSA-TOO1-44)
IMAGE BY ROCK ART RESEARCH INSTITUTE, UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, SOUTH AFRICA, WWW.SARADA.CO.ZA

external historical forces such as colonial capitalism, and so, to deny communities any active role in the dialectics of their own history is to render them inert and vacuous. Depictions of things observed elsewhere in Pretoria, Johannesburg, or Kimberley, for example, and depicted in the rock art of the Makagbeng, brought faraway objects and experiences to a familiar place. At individual and societal levels, the Northern Sotho made sense of foreign things through narrative, metaphor, and rock art symbolisation. Sometimes, this visualisation was meant only for a specific group of people. For instance, in Fig. 10(a), a viewer of this site can only see the depiction of people in a house whilst sitting down inside the shelter facing outwards. In other words, only those inside looking out can see the images. The focal image of the site is the large panel that depicts a vehicle juxtaposed with a *kôma* image and surrounding figures (Fig. 10b).

Migrants travelled on wagons and trains on built tracks and may have used these modes of transportation working in the mines or on colonial-owned farms. From the Makgabeng they probably boarded the train at Pretoria station. Pretoria station left an indelible mark on migrants, captured in the washed-out painting of PRETORIA at a rock art site in Makgabeng (Fig. 11). Among the multitude of experiences migrants endure, loss of cultural norms and social support systems, and making sense of 'home,' are challenging ones. Migrants may also develop a special relationship with specific utilitarian objects, which eventually become memory objects, precipitating memories and emotional attachment through routine usage and performative action (Marschall 2019). It is probable that this was true for some migrants from Makgabeng journeying to and from Pretoria station. Upon return to the Makgabeng, 'Pretoria' evokes a sense of reconnection and or growth from the experience of travel.

Intentional placement of the word where water runs off is significant for the Northern Sotho, for whom water signifies connections, life, and purity, perhaps symbolically cleansing returnees. Returnees were re-incorporated into the community by undergoing ritual cleansing having been away from home for a long time (van Schalkwyk 1995: 228). Like initiated men, their accomplishment of endurance was completed and celebrated upon re-incorporation into the community. Those unable to return to work in the mines suffered physical and mental separation from the 'connections' of the journey (Berlin Mission Archive 1909–1938).

When missionaries and colonial rulers discouraged or sought to ban initiation, it became established practice among Northern Sotho youth who, upon reaching maturity, to travel to the Cape colony for one or more years seeking work in mines and on farms (Delius 1983: 63). By the mid-1920s, going off to work on the farms and in the mines became part of one's life cycle, like initiation: "a spell away from home was regarded as a form of initiation into manhood. Males from the mines and farms were preferred in marriage over those who had stayed because they have nothing to wear but loin cloths instead



FIGURE 11 Painting of the word/name PRETORIA (RSA-NIE3-43)
IMAGE BY ROCK ART RESEARCH INSTITUTE, UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, SOUTH AFRICA, WWW.SARADA.CO.ZA



FIGURE 12 Migrant miners returning by train to Mozambique in 1934. Note the goodies, cigarettes, gasoline lantern, Western clothes, and a sense of anxiety towards and anticipation of their joyous reception back home.
IMAGES BY DITSONG NATIONAL MUSEUM OF CULTURAL HISTORY

of western clothing" (Comaroff & Comaroff 1997: 250). Migrants experienced new ideas, engaged with new types of material culture, and were granted access to wealth. Many young migrants sought to accumulate bride-wealth to marry and achieve adulthood (Delius 2014: 319). They returned with cattle, blankets, and ammunition, such as depicted in Fig. 12. Before the arrival of the train, returnees walked with their guns and gifts and upon reaching home, they shouted and shot into the air to celebrate and announce their arrival (Delius 1983: 65).

Returnees were expected to pay tribute (*lotšha*) to the chief with presents (*dimpho*). Guns were especially prized gifts as they were used in the hunting economy and in the power struggles of the 1840s to 1880s

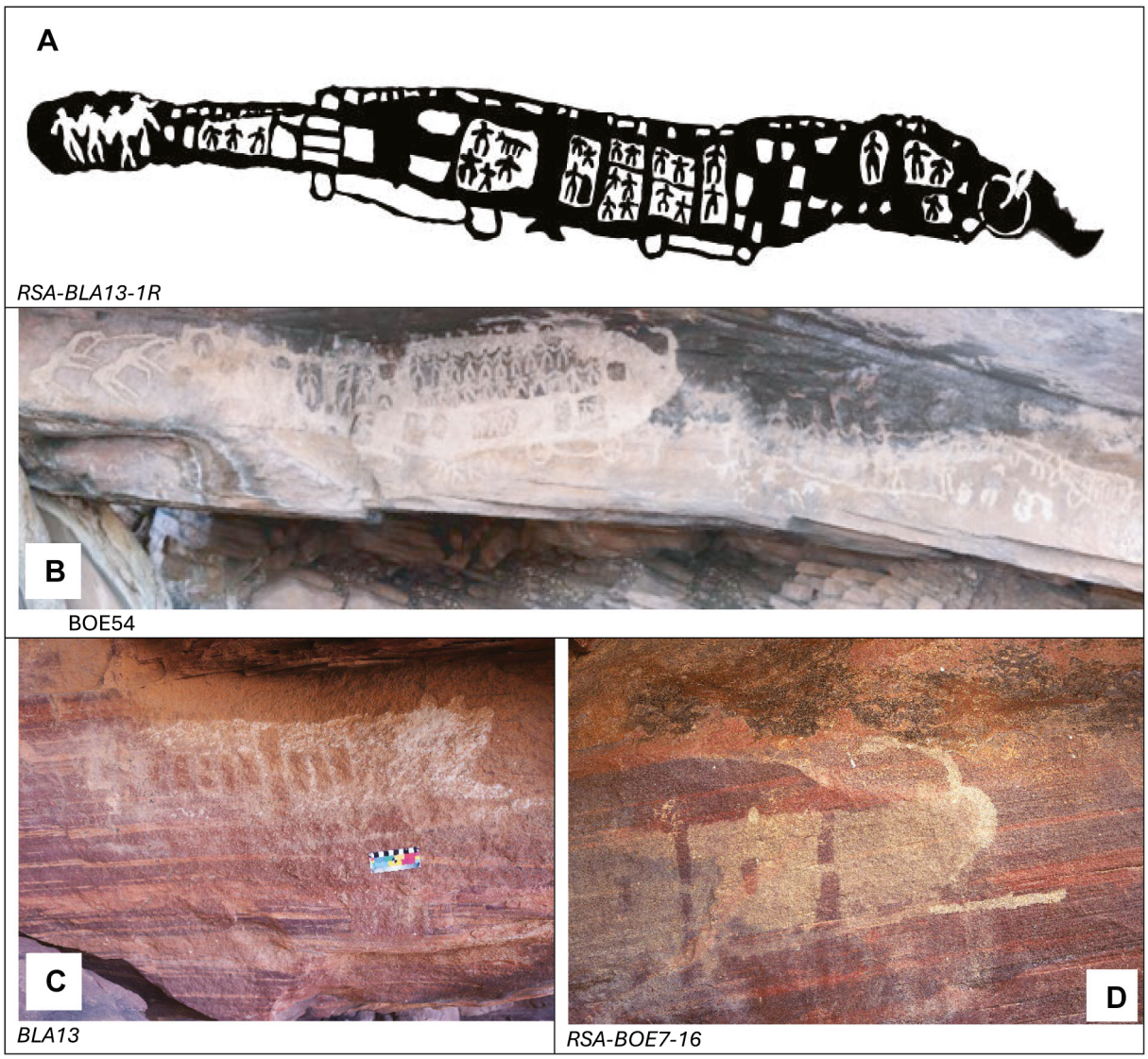

FIGURE 13 Variations of engines depicted in the Makgabeng
IMAGES A + D BY ROCK ART RESEARCH INSTITUTE, UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, SOUTH AFRICA, WWW.SARADA.CO.ZA. IMAGES B AND C BY C. NAMONO

(Baumbach 1875: 349–350, Delius 2014: 319). To *lotšha* the chief was reciprocal so that later permission would be granted to return to the cities. Reciprocity gradually led to resentment against the chief who, it was felt, did not earn it. As a result, although the railway and, later, motor transport reduced periods of absence from home by making it easier to return more frequently, many men chose not to return, or at least not frequently, and established homes in the city and even took new partners (van Schalkwyk 1995: 109–110). Over time, migrants ceased to *lotšha* the chief, thereby disempowering him. To counter this, the colonial government of the day required a prospective migrant to obtain permission from the local magistrate and instituted a permit system requiring a chief to issue such a migrant a written permit, at a small fee (van Schalkwyk 1995: 110). The rock paintings articulate how the Northern Sotho negotiated, resisted, or accepted these impositions.

10 Articulating Ambivalence

Northern Sotho cosmology and mythology provide useful insights to understanding whether colonial contact-period rock art resonates with earlier depictions linked to initiation and/or shifts of coloniser influence to the periphery. Northern Sotho depictions of trains in the Makgabeng indicate that painting replicas of real trains was not the intention. Rather, anthropomorphic/zoomorphic trains were painted to have eyes and mouths (Fig. 13), and were sometimes filled with people and animals. Trains with a long trail upwards from the nose or just



FIGURE 14 Truck with *kôma* image (RARI-RSA-TOO1-32; see main panel of Fig. 10)

a short horn nose are also depicted. In Fig. 13b, the train engine has an eye, mouth, and nose. Trains in Fig. 13a, c–d only have mouths, in Fig. 13b, d they have nodal nasal extensions that protrude above the head like a rhino horn. The trains in Fig. 13c–d have what look like ears. Given the similarity between Fig. 13a–b it is probable that the same author made them. These zoomorphic depictions of trains suggest that society may have perceived trains as mythical animals. Positionality of images in shelters was sometimes dramatic depending on the locations of sites. For example, the location of Fig. 13e is in the Masebe gorge, in a rock shelter that is difficult to access and that was used for initiation rites. However, a train engine and several carriages appear to be emerging from this shelter, when viewed from the path in the gorge. Such positioning of imagery captures the experience of the journey on the trains, thundering through tunnels and spaces like the gorge. Such an experience for first-time travellers would be like journeying away from the village to seclusion in an initiation school.

Zoomorphic trains draw from a common myth in the Makgabeng and elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, of *Kholmolumo* (in Northern Sotho more specifically known as *Kgolo modumo*), a great cannibal monster that swallows the entire nation and all domestic animals, except one pregnant woman who manages to evade capture disguised as a stone. The woman bore a son, Senkatana, who was instantly a grown man, with spear and shield. Informed that all the people and animals were eaten by *Kholumolumo*. Senkatana pursued it and cut open its belly, freeing all people and animals (Coplan 1994: 40–41). For Coplan (1994), such narratives are used to represent the apartheid regime (*Kholumolumo*) and the liberators (Senkatana). Benjamin Smith (see Eastwood and Eastwood 2006: 38) suggests that the train is a metaphor for *Kholumolumo* that swallows up the young able-bodied men on the Makgabeng and disgorges them in the towns, also bringing colonial masters and missionaries to take land and impose new cultures on the Northern Sotho. Undoubtedly, travelling to work in the mines were transformative experiences like initiation (Coplan 1994: 124, Eastwood & Eastwood 2006: 39).

Anthropomorphic/zoomorphic trains also resonate with an oral tradition, *sefela* in Sesotho, of *Khanyapa* (we use the Northern Sotho reference, *Mamogašwa*), a mythical water snake, python, or monster who lurks in deep water pools luring cattle and people, and travels in the form of a tornado from one pool to another (Coplan 1994: 236). *Mamogašwa* is believed to appear to diviners, helping them in their work. *Mamogašwa* means cyclone or thunderstorm, "the iconic link, along with the sinuous length of the serpent, by which the steam train, with its thick black smoke, becomes *khanyapa* … carrying along its bundle of associations and belly full of migrants" (Coplan 1994: 237). *Mamogašwa* (known in this context as *motanyane* or *ngoan'amadiba*) emerges from the moist ditches to instruct initiates and is associated with fertility (*ibid*). In the mines, *Mamogašwa* is a mine fire (Coplan 1994: 238). *Mamogašwa* and the metaphor, train, in the context of Bhabha's ambivalence of mimicry is



FIGURE 15 Wagons, figures holding guns, and horses, interspersed with animals including baboons and *kôma* imagery associated with male initiation (RSA-BOE24-1R)
IMAGES BY ROCK ART RESEARCH INSTITUTE, UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, SOUTH AFRICA, WWW.SARADA.CO.ZA

where individuals or communities navigate between their own cultural heritage and the influences of the other. Re-signification serves this duality, allowing the Northern Sotho to take the train, track, or truck – coloniser symbols or cultural elements – and Northern Sotho-ise them.

Another very important figure during female initiation is *Khiudogane*, bird of *Muhale* (the royal founder ancestor), a ruling spirit of *byali* (a communal female initiation ceremony) (Dederen & Mokakabye 2018a: 99–101; 2018b: 7–8), believed to emerge from a pool on moonlight nights, leaving mists in its trail. It is sacred, conceived as mysterious and fearful, and is approached only through elaborate symbolism and guidance of ancestors (Krige & Krige 1999: 67; Dederen & Mokakabye 2018a, b). Sotho-Tswana female rites have a recurring association between water and fertility: whilst performing a rain dance, and for returnee female initiates, women perform a zig-zag dance, the *monyakoe* (Murray 1980: 66–67), like a snake. The triad water-women-fertility symbolism is extended to the mythical snake endowed with mystical power (Murray 1980: 66–67; Dederen & Mokakabye 2018b: 6–7). A train, with steam, thundering through the many gorges around the Makgabeng, evokes a symbolism relevant to the makers and consumers of rock art and their cosmos. Comparatively, this is evident with other rock art in other parts of South Africa where engravings have been linked to Khoe female initiation (Hollmann 2014: 2007).

In Figs. 14 and 15, re-signification occurs by integrating foreign things with Northern Sotho symbols, wherein the symbolism of the known 'rubs off' onto the foreign, making it acquire resonance with the Northern Sotho motif and becoming relevant in context of the old symbol. In Fig. 14, a truck with a probable driver is juxtaposed with a lizard-like motif, *kôma*. Above the truck and close to this group is an animal, also referred to as *kôma*, associated with male initiation. Similarly, in Fig. 15 there are depictions of wagons, horses, and men on horseback or standing with guns, interspersed with imagery with animals, *kôma*, and baboons, all associated with male initiation. These images, and similar colonial contact-period rock art in the Makgabeng, enable the integration of coloniser things as re-signified symbols that enable individuals or communities to engage in a process of hybridity, creating a cultural space that is neither solely coloniser nor colonised but a complex interplay of both. This process reflects the dual consciousness inherent in Bhabha's mimicry, where individuals negotiate their identities in a space marked by the coexistence and blending of multiple cultural influences. Initiation knowledge is secret, thus the 'true' meanings of the images associated with initiation remain with the initiated. Deeper meanings are learnt as one progresses through life.

11 Conclusion

In this paper we are attuned to questions of ambivalence wherein re-signification is a strategy for colonized communities to assert their agency by integrating and reinterpreting colonial things, thereby shifting those things to the periphery of colonial control and influence. Northern Sotho colonial contact-period rock art in the Makgabeng signifies cultural expressions that simultaneously capture the ambivalent, dual, and contradictory relationship between the colonised and the coloniser within a local cultural context. We consider that re-signified imagery

is layered with new meanings that embody a simultaneous form of compliance and resistance. Such understanding provides the tack to hinge the notion that colonial contact-period rock art illustrates the idea that colonial contact in the Makgabeng was not a simple watershed moment nor a temporary interruption in the lives of the Northern Sotho. Rather, fragments of it exist in attitudes towards colonial material culture. Across the Makgabeng landscape, we see integration of colonial materials, lifeways, and culture in the daily lives of the Northern Sotho; these changes are no longer 'new.'

Whilst today not all youth go to initiation school, processes of 'becoming' an adult are still important. Many youths in the Makgabeng today prefer to align themselves with a foreign Hip-Hop culture (Guins & Cruz 2005: 409) and are influenced by colonial material culture and Western values. They narrate their experiences on social media platforms rather than at rock art sites. For the Northern Sotho, a 'child' is defined by their responsibilities in a household, their abilities, and their social status rather than by chronological age. Defining a 'man' or 'woman' today in the Makgabeng includes what can be referred to as modern capitalism – a car, a brick house, a job in the city – as well as whether a person has gone to an initiation school. Thus, initiation and similar associated ordeals generate all kinds of emotions and experiences for participants, from fear, anxiety, to 'growth,' excitement, and empowerment. Those embarking on long journeys as migrants probably experienced these anxieties. Rock art depictions of trains and tracks were probably first integrated into initiation symbolism after early migrants returned home and narrated their challenges and anxieties, relieved and excited to be back to familiar surroundings. The meaning(s) of the new imagery remained secret knowledge. Ambivalence towards displaying secret knowledge is powerful in the sense that the true meanings and intuitive understandings of objects are privy to few. Yet, although secret knowledge is powerful and potent, by its very nature it places restrictions on individuals or groups in different ways. Secret knowledge associated with initiation, for example, may be socially or morally limiting, as sharing it could have consequences or be dangerous. The symbolism of the contact imagery in this paper shifts away from probable anxieties towards probable understanding(s). While we relate trains and tracks to concepts and belief systems of ritual and initiation, we incorporate the past-present and take cognisance of the fact that the images also have a historical narrative that we cannot escape nor deny to them.

Depictions of trains, tracks, trucks, wagons, and vehicles resonate with initiation symbolism. Whilst the makers of the rock art may have drawn on their individual experiences of new things, we have shown that societal values underpin the symbolism of, and relationships between, new and old images. Integration of contact images may be due to individual preferences of the instructors of the initiation schools. It is also probable that each time initiation schools were held new images were added. Both the making and using of the images was important. During initiation, narratives explain the symbolism. We have no doubt that since initiation is on-going, the symbolism of foreign images added to initiation iconography is fluid. From the rock art and Northern Sotho cosmology, it is clear that central themes resonate around fertility and regeneration as journeys that adults engage in. We are cognisant of negotiated or contested relationships past and present, between various people who settled in or transitioned through the Makgabeng landscape, socialising and humanising it. So, we conclude that the idea of re-signification, within the context of Bhabha's ambivalence of mimicry, captures the dual and contradictory nature of Northern Sotho responses to migrancy, trains, and transitional experiences away from home. Depictions of place names, trains, tracks, trucks, wagons, and vehicles show how their authors articulated their agency through rock art. Therefore, re-signification of trains, trucks, tracks, and wagons encapsulates the nuanced negotiations of power that characterize ambivalent and dynamic contexts.

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