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Research Article

DRUMMING THINGS UP: A POSSIBLE DEPICTION OF A DRUM AT GROOTVLEI 158 (GOT 1), SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Hunter-gatherer rock art of South Africa is ubiquitous and has various themes including people, animals, therianthropes, and objects, such as musical instruments. Musical instruments or sound-producing instruments identified in South African rock art depictions so far include musical bows, flutes, rattles, and bullroarers. This article focuses on the possible depiction of a person playing a drum, from the farm Grootvlei 158 in the Cathcart district, Eastern Cape Province, South Africa. The depiction is not a new discovery, but little is known about the image. This article draws on a literature review and the SARADA repository, as well as other known drum depictions in rock art globally to consider whether this is a depiction of a drum. Ethnographic and historical sources have been consulted on the use of drums by southern African hunter-gatherers which suggest that drums were played for musical purposes, featured during rituals, and were used as a communication medium to relay messages or during ritual ceremonies.

Keywords: hunter gatherers, rock art, drum, musical instruments, Grootvlei.

INTRODUCTION

Music is a universal phenomenon with a long history (Morley 2003; Cross & Morley 2010). It manifests in various forms which may include vocal singing, dance, and instrument playing. Music serves several purposes that encompass dance, ritual, entertainment, personal and communal cohesion (Montagu 2017). Musical or sound-producing implements play an integral part in such contexts. Cross (2001: 29) argues that music hinges on social interactions and constructions. In this article, I use the terms musical instruments and sound-producing instruments concurrently because sometimes it is difficult to tell whether certain sound is considered musical or not in different contexts, hence the neutral term 'sound producing'. For instance, it is difficult to tell whether the whirring or buzzing sound produced by a bullroarer is musical or not (Kumbani *et al*. 2019). Remnants of musical or sound-producing instruments are found as excavated artefacts, figurines and in rock art as either paintings or engravings (Blench 2013). However, this is not a complete representation of music in the past because not all aspects of music leave evidence. Vocal singing, for example, while an important component of music, leaves no trace. On the other hand, physical music-related artefacts are rarely recovered from archaeological excavations because of poor preservation. Most musical instruments are made from easily degradable materials that do not survive in the archaeological record (Morley 2003, 2013; Blench 2013; Atema 2014; Kumbani 2020). Thus, musical instruments depicted in rock art are an important complementary source to the scarce music-related archaeological remains (Vogels 2012; Blench 2013; Díaz-Andreu & Mattioli 2019). In this article, I focus specifically on rock art from the site Grootvlei 158 (hereafter GOT 1), Cathcart district, Eastern Cape Province, South Africa (Fig. 1), which includes a depiction of a person possibly playing a drum.

A BACKGROUND TO THE USE OF DRUMS

Drumming can be defined as a percussion activity in which one hits a stretched membrane covering a hollow resonator to produce a rhythmic effect. This activity can be done using hands or sticks/mallets. Drums are Africa's most popular and widely used musical instruments (Spencer 1988). Generally, drums are used for entertainment, communication purposes, and other socio-religious practices (Gathogo 2008; Kirby 2013). Scher (2009: 22) mentions that drums and rattles feature in trance-related music. It has been demonstrated that persistent rhythmic drumming can send people into an altered state of consciousness. In most African societies, the drum plays the orchestral part that accompanies ritualistic dances and songs (Spencer 1988: 68). In Africa, drums are understood to have supernatural potency that can summon the gods to commune with people, thus they were frowned upon by early missionaries who regarded this as heathenism (Spencer 1988). Among certain African communities, some drums are sacred and are perceived as a symbol of royalty while others are only played during rituals (Nettl 1956: 104).

The use of drums is well documented in South Africa in the early Historic period. Early travellers into the southern African interior recorded the use of drums by San and Khoekhoen people and other cultural groups (Bollong *et al*. 1997). For instance, Carl Peter Thunberg witnessed a group of Khoekhoen playing a drum called a *sukoa*. This was a pot covered with sheepskin and tied using a leather thong. According to Thunberg (1775: 193), the drum produced a dull, heavy sound that had nothing pleasing in it to his ear. However, to his surprise, the participants were dancing with enthusiasm to this sound of the drum while jumping with both feet in rhythm to the drum. Some dancers were sweating profusely (Thunberg 1775), a possible indication that they were entering a trance state. From this observation, one can say that the drum was used both for entertainment and to possibly facilitate the entering of a trance state. The drum produced a rhythmic sound that would be augmented with foot stamping and singing. Thunberg's remark that a 'dull, heavy', to him 'unpleasant', sound was produced by the drum that was used by the Khoekhoen, was likely made from an etic and racist perspective that failed to acknowledge that Africans could make good music. As previously noted, what one person calls music or musical might be different from what the next person regards as music. It is therefore difficult to come up with a universal definition of what music is. As a way of circumventing the problem of defining music, Atema (2014: 26) suggests

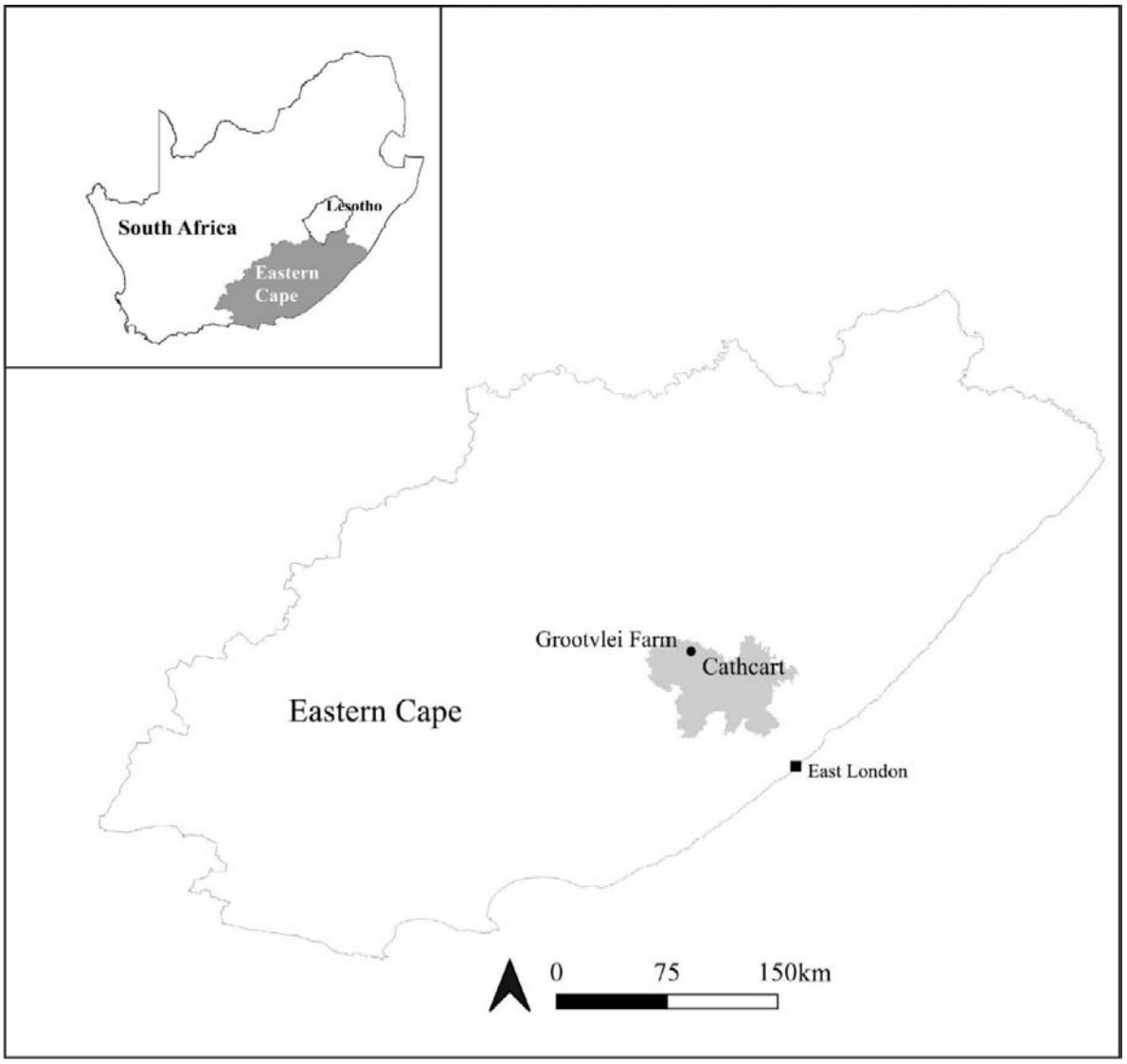

FIG. 1. *Map showing location of Grootvlei 158 (GOT 1), South Africa (Map by Faye Lander).*

that "music is in the ear of the beholder", a definition that acknowledges the different perspectives that people may have about what is musical.

Both the Khoekhoen and the San were described as making drums from clay pots covered with animal skins, fastened with a leather thong (Thunberg 1775: 193; Bleek & Lloyd 1911: 190; Bollong *et al*. 1997). Sometimes they would put water in the pot. The hide would be stretched tight to produce better sound quality. Among the San, the drum was played by females while the men danced. The dancers also wore leg rattles made of springbok ears (Bleek & Lloyd 1911: 190). Women would sit, clapping and singing, while the men were dancing. In addition to being used as drum resonators, these clay pots were also used as storage vessels (Bleek & Lloyd 1911). This custom of using a clay pot as a drum resonator was also practised by the Sotho who made their *moropas* of clay (Kirby 1934). According to Stow (1905), southern African hunter-gatherers were also known to take the shell of a large tortoise and to tie an animal skin with sinew around the opening to make a drum. Nowadays drums are mostly made of wood and, in some cases, metal resonators are used (Kirby 2013).

There is a dance called the "drum dance" that has been recorded among the Ju/'hoansi hunter-gatherers in Botswana. According to Lee (2003: 135–137), the drum dance was performed by women who would form a circle, clapping, singing and dancing. Men would play a long drum to accompany the dancing women. In the process, women healers would go into a trance and in some cases, hallucinogens from plants were prepared for the women to consume. Lee (2003) notes that the dance was a relatively recent introduction to the area at the time of his fieldwork but that it was used to help induce trance among women. The use of the drum during the drum dance can be seen as being both entertainment and having ceremonial value. Although in some contexts drumming may be a recent innovation, drumming has a long history in Africa and drums play vital roles in entertainment and ritual/religious practices. It is therefore not unlikely that they may well feature in rock art depictions.

THE GOT 1 ROCK ART SITE

Searching for musical instruments in the rock art of South Africa and southern Africa is an ongoing research project, which involves consulting published and unpublished materials on rock art with the goal of finding references to possible depictions of musical instruments. During this process, I came across a reference to and figure of a panel with a possible depiction of a drum at Oakdene, in the Cathcart district, in Lee & Woodhouse (1970: 111, fig. 173) with the caption, "a man beating a drum" (Fig. 2).

The painting is located at GOT 1, a rock art site on the farm

Grootvlei 158 in the Cathcart district, Eastern Cape Province, South Africa. The earliest recording of GOT 1 was by Neil Lee in the 1960s, and his collection was then donated to the Rock Art Research Institute (RARI) at the University of the Witwatersrand, in July 1995, according to South African Digital Archive (SARADA) records. The site comprises various panels with imagery, one of which is a possible depiction of a drum and drum player. The panel was originally published in Lee and Woodhouse (1970: 111), who highlighted this drum depiction (Fig. 2). The painting was drawn using black pigment and there are four slanting lines super-positioned over what appears to be a drum. Two of the lines are drawn on either side of the implement but it is not clear if these yellowish-red lines were drawn at the same time as the possible drum, and their meaning cannot be ascertained.

The painting in blackish pigment (Figs 2, 3 and 4) depicts a human figure, probably male, standing in a slightly bent posture. The individual's arms seem to be articulated as if in motion and they appear elongated. The tips of the hands are slightly bulging as if holding something, or as if the fists are clenched. Next to the individual is a conical shape with a narrow base and a wide, flat top. The conical shape, in dark blackish pigment, appears to have two red line extensions on either side. Below this conical shape is an animal resembling a turtle/tortoise or a frog-like shape. Variations of this image appear between the raised arm and outstretched leg, next to the torso of the human figure. There are smudges of similar dark pigment and below, further to the right of these smudges, are a number of dots that appear to taper away. Below the smudges are two elongated human figures which appear to be moving from the right to the left of the panel. On the same panel, there is another conical feature that closely resembles the possible drum (Figs 3 and 4), perhaps a storage vessel. The slight difference that can be noted is that the possible drum (Figs 3 and 4) is flat at the base whereas the other conical image is round at the bottom and is more bowl-like in appearance. This conical image is superimposed on an animal painted in yellow. Above the second conical implement, there is a huge animal.



FIG. 2. *Enhanced close-up of Lee and Woodhouse photograph (adapted from Lee & Woodhouse 1970: 111, fig. 173).*

Figure 4 shows the apparently male figure as leaning towards the conical shape, at the upper left of the panel, with arms outstretched in a swinging motion. The figure appears to be wearing a loin cloth and there is an indication of genitals in the front and a hanging loin cloth at the back. The two figures below this, one of which appears to be male, seem to be holding bows slightly above the waist with outstretched arms and in a posture also indicative of swinging motion (Fig. 3). It is highly likely that these three figures are part of a ritual, such as a trance dance, and that the upper bent figure is playing an instrument, probably a drum.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Ethnographic sources were consulted on the uses of drums and to find out more about the contexts in which they were used. Music archaeology benefits from ethnographic sources



FIG. 3. *The extended panel of the drum player, two human figures and a conical motif. Copyright: reproduced with permission from Iziko Museums of Cape Town, Social History Collections Department, South Africa. www.sarada.co.za*



FIG. 4. *Panel at GOT 1 after enhancement using DStretch.*



FIG. 5. *Redrawing of GOT 1 panel using Adobe Illustrator software.*

since they help researchers to infer and make analogies about sound and music production in the past (Cross 2001; Blench 2013; Morley 2013). A comparative method draws on information from contemporary or recent past societies to understand the archaeological cultures from the deep past (Currie 2016; Charlin 2018). For instance, early traveller accounts by George Stow, Carl Peter Thunberg, and Anders Sparrman documented the way of life of the people in South Africa, such as the San, Khoekhoen, and Xhosa in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Aspects of music have also been recorded and, in addition, the use of drums is documented in their chronicles. Kirby's (1934) seminal work on musical instruments of the people of South Africa was consulted: principally, it gives a discussion on the use of drums by various cultural groups in South Africa. The book documents the use of drums in various contexts, ranging from entertainment, ritual performance, signalling, and for relaying messages (Kirby 2013: 41–61). As a basis for understanding the use of drums, all these ethnographic sources were consulted, and the information derived from them was used to shape my interpretation of the possible drum depiction at GOT 1.

SARADA, which is curated by RARI at the University of the Witwatersrand, has a rich collection of historical documents, photographs, redrawings, tracings and slides of rock art materials, which were consulted and employed in this research. The focus was to look for drum depictions in the rock art of southern Africa. Besides the few ethnographic photographs of people playing drums, GOT 1 seems to be the only likely instance in which a person playing a drum in southern African rock art has been recorded.

The colour pigments of rock art fade with time and this is a stumbling block for researchers (Hollman 2018). Unfortunately, the GOT 1 site is no exception, and the photographs from GOT 1 that are available on SARADA are not entirely clear. To enhance the image of the possible drum player, Adobe Photoshop, Adobe Illustrator and DStretch were used. These image-enhancement software applications allowed the faded paintings to be made clearer (Hollmann 2018; Quesada & Harman 2019). DStretch is a plugin of ImageJ, and it has become an essential tool in rock art research and documentation as far as image enhancement is concerned (Hollmann 2018: 159). Adobe Photoshop works very well for enhancing the contrast of the photographs. Adobe Illustrator was used to trace some of the motifs on the panel with a possible drum player.

A comparative approach was employed in which the GOT 1 drum painting was compared with other known drum depictions from other parts of the world. Aspects that were compared include the form of drums, decoration, as well as other associated images and features. Geographically, there are many different types of drums that are found in rock art across the globe (Díaz-Andreu & Mattioli 2019). Variations occur in shape, decoration and other associated features.

DISCUSSION

Drums are a common membranophone in South Africa and beyond. Archaeologically, however, no remnants of free-standing drums have been recovered in South Africa or in southern Africa. This is likely because of poor preservation. Materials like wood and skin that are used to make drums are easily degradable and may leave no trace. As a result of poor preservation, researchers must thus rely on other sources including figurines and rock art. There are no known music-related figurines from southern Africa, but the possible drum depiction at GOT 1 may be an example of a rock art depiction of the use of the instrument. However, it seems that drum depictions are not a common scene in the rock art of southern Africa and hence the GOT 1 depiction can be regarded as 'rare'.

It may be that drums were not used by LSA hunter-gatherers prior to contact with Khoekhoen or Bantu-speaking groups, although they may have used rock gongs (see discussion in Ouzman 2001). The drumming performance depicted at Grootvlei 158 could thus also be explained in terms of "contact rock art" (see, for example, Vinnicombe 1976: 9–22). Perhaps this painting, depicting a possible drummer, was made because of a musical performance observed from another cultural group, although, as has been noted earlier, the Bleek and Lloyd records include references to the use of pot drums by the San.

Drums are typically conical in shape, narrow at the bottom and wide at the top. It is important to note that the possible drum at the GOT 1 site is narrow at the bottom and wide at the top, making it highly probable that this motif is a drum. A narrow base and wide top are also common morphological features of wooden drums found in South Africa and beyond, although cylindrical-shaped drums also occur.

The depiction at GOT 1 could be a drummer playing the drum to provide rhythm during a musical or ritual performance. The player bends forward, allowing him to beat the drum, and the elongated, bulging hands suggest the use of clubs, sticks or mallets. The distance the clubs would have travelled from behind the head to the drum skin may indicate that the drum was played with power. This method perhaps allows one to play the drum loudly and slowly, unlike when one is seated and can beat the drum faster. The tempo of playing, such as slow and loud, may have been to send a particular message. There are various postures, as well as features, commonly associated with healing, medicine, or 'trance' dances, some of which are interpreted as trancing shamans, that have been identified in rock art generally. These include figures bending forward, nasal bleeding, the transformation of humans into anthropomorphic figures, rain animals, flywhisks, supporting one's weight on two sticks, and clapping (Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1989). The possible drummer at GOT 1 is bending slightly forward and it might be argued that this indicates the process of one who is going into a trance. In this case, the possible drum motif at GOT 1 could have been an ideal source of rhythm for ushering one into a trance, as noted by Lee (2003) with reference to the drum dance among the Ju/'hoansi. On the same panel, below the drum player, there are two elongated individuals, also bending slightly forward, possibly holding bows. They, too, might be associated with the possible drummer. These two individuals may have been dancing and perhaps transitioning into an altered state of consciousness (see Figs 4 and 5).

The big black animal motif below the possible drummer is probably a mystical animal. If associated with the 'drumming' figure, it may be a rain animal and the drummer, a rain shaman. Similar interpretations have been provided in connection with the depictions of musical bow players found in the Maclear district in the Eastern Cape of South Africa. The musical bows have been interpreted as instruments that were used by rain shamans (Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2004; Lewis-Williams & Challis 2010, 2011). It may, however, be the case that the drumming figure is not associated with the two bending individuals or the black animal motif, and that the depiction is more prosaic: that of a drummer playing a drum for either entertainment purposes or while relaying a message, since these are some of the roles that a drum is understood to perform ethnographically.

The age of the paintings at GOT 1 is not known but if it does

depict a drum resonator, the object may have been made from either wood or clay. Archaeologically, potsherds have been recovered from contexts dated to approximately the last 2000 years at sites associated with hunter-gatherers and pastoralists, prior to the arrival of agropastoralists (Louw 1960; Mazel 1992; Bollong *et al*. 1997; Sadr & Sampson 2006). In most cases, these potsherds are interpreted by archaeologists as having been used as cooking or storage vessels. As noted earlier, however, ethnographically, clay pots are also known to have also been used as drum resonators.

Sound production is a vital component during entertainment and ritual ceremonies, and it takes various forms that may include singing, clapping, foot stamping, and instrument playing. Musical/sound-producing instruments recorded in the rock art of South Africa include musical bows (Lee & Woodhouse 1970; Lewis-Williams 1981b, Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2004a; Lewis-Williams & Challis 2011; Kumbani & Vogels 2022), flutes (Rust *et al*. 2022), rattles (Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1989) and bullroarers (Rusch & Wurz 2020). These instruments occur only in the form of paintings, and there are currently no known engraved depictions of musical instruments from South Africa. Some of the instruments that are depicted in the rock art have been recovered from archaeological excavations. For instance, a bullroarer has been recovered from the Later Stone Age contexts at the Matjes River site (Kumbani *et al*. 2019), and bone tubes that could have been used as flutes have been recovered from Matjes River and Nelson Bay caves (Kumbani 2020). Rock gongs are also prevalent in South Africa, although they cannot be dated to a specific period. However, no known drum remnants have been found in the archaeological record of South Africa or the southern African region. The occurrence of musical instruments in the rock art has not been linked with music performance *per se* but rather with trance dances and rituals by medicine men (Rust *et al*. 2022; Kumbani & Vogels 2022). South African hunter-gatherer rock art represents their spiritual beliefs (Lewis-Williams 1981a, 1995, 2003; Lewis-Williams & Dowson 2000; Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2004a, b). It is believed that rock art has spiritual potency called !gi: or //ke:n in /Xam language or n/om in the Kalahari Ju/'hoan language (Lewis-Williams 2003, 2006). This understanding derives from the use of 19th and 20th century San ethnography (Lewis-Williams 2003). For instance, after interacting with copies of San rock art and consulting with his /Xam informants, Wilhelm Bleek observed that there was a link between the rock art and the narratives he had recorded with his sister-in-law Lucy Lloyd (Lewis-Williams 1995). Bleek & Lloyd's (1911) seminal work has been a key source in understanding southern African hunter-gatherer rock art. However, I would argue that even though the context where musical or sound-producing instruments occur may be ritualistic, this does not erase the possibility that the same instrument(s) may be played for entertainment purposes. The rock painting at GOT 1 is 'rare' because there are no other drum depictions known from South Africa or southern Africa. On the other hand, there are no reported drums from archaeological excavations, hence this rock painting becomes a point of reference for the use of drums in the past. Such evidence is important in music archaeology studies.

Despite the rare scene of drum depictions in the rock art of southern Africa, drum depictions do occur in other parts of the world and here I provide a few examples. Drums occur, for instance, in Siberian rock art (Devlet 2001). The Siberian drums come in circular and oval shapes, and they are commonly, but not always, decorated (Devlet 2001). Drumsticks were used to play these drums. The drums in Siberia have been associated with the work of shamans and rituals, playing a vital role in leading people to enter an altered state of consciousness, and therefore they linked the shamans with the spirit world (Devlet 2001).

From further afield, drum depictions occur in India's Madhya Pradesh state (Dubey-Pathak & Clottes 2021: 124–125). They are found in more than a dozen districts of Madhya Pradesh state and it is asserted that the drums belong to the Neolithic and Historic periods. There are two types of drums that occur in the rock art of India, including a cylindrical drum and another type that has two separate roundish drums that are joined together using a stick. Such double drums are not known in South Africa or southern Africa. The two-drum players, adorned with headgear and playing the joined drums at Bhimbetka are in close association with a warrior on a horse with arrows (Dubey-Pathak & Clottes 2021). Perhaps, these were war drums given the context of the warrior and the drummers. At Chaturbujnath Nala, there is also a group of dancers with elaborated headgear who are dancing to the sound of the big drums that are being played (Dubey-Pathak & Clottes 2021).

In Scandinavia, there are engraved drum depictions in Alta in Norway (Helskog [1987] cited in Díaz-Andreu & Mattioli 2019). There are also highly likely anthropomorphs with drums at Skavbergert (Troms), in Russia on the Kola Peninsula, and in Finland. These drums have been linked with shamanism and the anthropomorphic figures have been interpreted as dancing shamans (Díaz-Andreu & Mattioli 2019). There seems to be a pattern as far as the drum depictions that are found in various parts of the world like Siberia, Asia and Scandinavia are concerned, and the common denominator is that the drums are associated with trance and shamanism. According to Neher (1962: 151), it is common for people to go into a trance during ceremonies where drums are played; it is further postulated that the transition of people into trance is because of the effects of the rhythmic drumming on the nervous system.

CONCLUSION

Depictions of drums and drum playing are not a common occurrence in the rock art of South Africa or southern Africa and hence the GOT 1 drum depiction can be considered a 'rare' image. The possible drummer could be playing the drum during a trance dance as indicated by his bending posture and that of the two individuals below him. The playing of a drum produces rhythm which is one of the important drivers of entertainment and for taking people into an altered state of consciousness. So, rhythm plays a double role as both a source of entertainment and by providing a continuous beat that may work to induce a trance state in people. I would argue that musical instruments always carry their entertainment effects even during ritual settings. Ethnographically and historically, a drum is understood to be a musical instrument that is played for entertainment purposes, has a close connection with ritual activities/ceremonies, and, in some cases, is used as a communication medium. Rock art is an important source of music/sound archaeology, and the scene of the possible drummer is an important reference to the use of drums in the past.

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