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Research Article

KHOMO PATSOA: A MULTI-TEMPORAL, MULTI-AUTHORED ROCK ART SITE IN THE SOUTHERN LESOTHO HIGHLANDS, SOUTHERN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

The rock art site at Khomo Patsoa, in south-eastern Lesotho, is notable for the heterogeneity of its image assemblage. Containing contributions from a range of authors, its images are executed in several distinct modes and at diverse moments in time. The site is further characterised by its striking interactions with the surrounding landscape, with aquatic features greatly influencing the composition of both individual images, particularly those of snakes, and of the site at large. The images consistently reference and depict symbolic forms of negotiation, mostly between communities of human and animal persons, although the artists extended the logics that they used to situate and relate communities of humans and non-humans relative to one another to (re)position themselves during historical moments of human/human intercultural contact. The lattermost of these imagistic negotiations comes in the form of scratched horses and ostriches, executed in a mode reminiscent of others in the Northern Cape. Far from being 'vandalism' or 'graffiti', these additions are historic signs of presence and demonstrations of identity, contributing their own signatures to a common context. The result is that the site's layered assemblage can be read intertextually, with latter additions contextualised by, and subsequently recontextualising, earlier ones. This permits the site to be viewed as an intentional palimpsest whose constituent images act as commentaries on one another, and with the contexts and perspectives of varying authors embedded within these images themselves.

Keywords: San rock art, Lesotho, intertextualism, relational ontologies, animism, scratched rock markings, 'graffiti', therianthropes, snakes, contact-era rock art.

INTRODUCTION

Southern African rock art research sometimes struggles to reconcile its relatively unitary theoretical approaches with the unruly plurality of histories (King 2019), authors (Ouzman 2005; Challis 2014, 2016; McGranaghan 2016), ontologies (Porr & Bell 2012; Skinner 2022b), and symbolisms (Green 2015; Hollmann 2015), represented in the art forms of the subcontinent (discussion in *inter alia* Smith 2010; Wessels 2010; McGranaghan *et al*. 2013; Skinner 2021; Challis 2022). Researchers have stressed the need to adapt existing methodologies (Dowson 2009) and expectations (Mitchell 2009) to incorporate recent developments in our understanding of the underlying relational ontologies (e.g. McGranaghan & Challis 2016). Others have motivated for a move to interpretation on a site-by-site basis (Lewis-Williams *et al*. 2021: 35–36), although there is a question as to the extent that site-specificity typically inflects analysis. No site stands alone, and images can best be read in terms of those comparable at other sites, but there comes a point where explanations approach singularity, particularly as they tend to follow a decades-long trajectory of relatively uniform application of social theory across the subcontinent's otherwise highly heterogeneous corpora (see Mullen 2018 for an example of critique; discussion in Smith 2010; Challis 2022).

A fine example of the heterogeneity of Maloti-Drakensberg art, and the challenges it poses to some modes of analysis, is the site at Khomo Patsoa, located in the southern Lesotho Highlands, southern Africa (Fig. 1). At a glance, its image assemblage could superficially be described as a 'traditional' southern San rock art site, with latter-day additions of horses and cattle, and even more latterly, scratched 'graffiti' in a modern or colonial-era style, each phase likely corresponding to changing moments of occupation. Recordings made by Patricia Vinnicombe and Patrick Carter in the 1950s, 60s and 70s could be considered emblematic of this perspective; their photographic recordings at this site (Vinnicombe's 'W21') emphasise the polychrome, fine-line eland and human figures that would later become diagnostic motifs (see *inter alia* Vinnicombe 1976; Lewis-Williams 1981), and a large panel replete with horses and cattle, representative of historical raider arts in the region (see Challis 2012, 2014; Sinclair Thomson 2020).

On closer examination, these scratched and painted sequences of images represent a flow of not always distinct contributions, gradually accumulated over the lifetime of the site. These in turn reflect the artists' changing notions of the place, the existing imagery and themselves. Moreover, they encompass motifs introduced from elsewhere in the subcontinent – horses and ostriches reminiscent of the Northern Cape's Strandberg corpus. Additive image-making contributes sequential layers of meaning to a panel, and frames both the new images and old in light of one another (Ragazzoli *et al*. 2018: 10; *cf*. Lewis-Williams 1998). At Khomo Patsoa, varied generations of artists arrived *in situ*, and set about making their own interpretations and biographies of the images present (*cf*. Navratilova 2023: 332–333). Through their own contributions to the common canvas, they injected their presence and perspectives into the texture of the site.

However, it is uncommon to frame analysis – particularly of the scratched additions – in this light. Whether later editions are assessed to be meaningful typically follows an implicit assessment of authenticity. Are those making these later changes ideologically contiguous with those who previously marked the site? The line between 'vandalism' and 'art', often unexamined, in turn falls to whether the image-maker was informed enough to contribute, or was in their ignorance only able to detract. This resembles wider issues affecting interpretation of contact-era rock art in southern Africa; latter-day images often have an apparent narrativity, and do not always manifest diagnostic

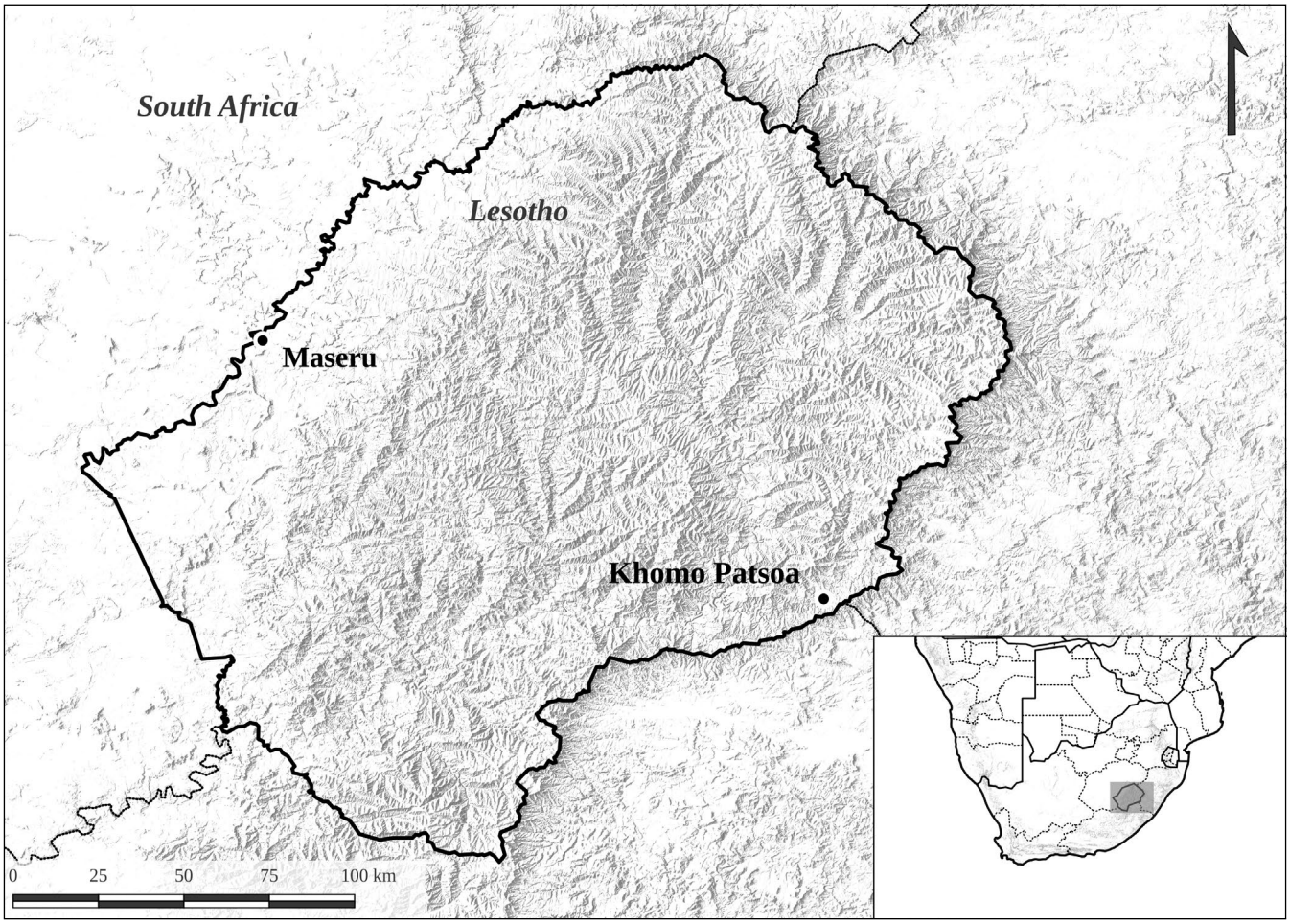


FIG. 1. *The location of Khomo Patsoa. Map by authors. Map data: USGS SRTM, Natural Earth.*

(ritual) features. As such, they generally do not cleanly avail themselves to conventional interpretation (Smith 2010: 353–354; Sinclair Thomson & Challis 2020; Challis & Skinner 2021: 2–3), reflecting the mixed and changing nature of the communities responsible for them (e.g. Challis 2016, 2018).

In this article, we present and discuss the art at Khomo Patsoa as a palimpsest of continuous symbolic expressions, undertaken by a range of diverse communities through changing times. While it is certainly tempting to break the image assemblage into discrete episodes, the chronology would remain superficial, going from 'traditional' (i.e. polychrome, shaded, naturalistic) images, to contact (i.e. containing domesticates), to late (scratched, surface-level, 'crude'). The images at the site resist this, as they are extensively superimposed and weathered to the point of transparency, combining many of them into *individual* palimpsests whose internal boundaries are, above all, ambiguous. This is our reason for avoiding a particular identitarian or sequentialist structure, but it is also a significant aspect of both the site and the communities responsible for the art – they are composites formed at the end of a long process of overlap, admixture and transformation.

Simultaneously, while the image contents and techniques vary just as much as the historical contexts, identities and ideologies of the communities involved, they express consistent concerns. In particular, that of identifying the self to (communities of) others, human and non-human (Skinner & Challis 2022), negotiating the presence and intentions of all involved (McGranaghan & Challis 2016), and leveraging the significance and properties of the landscape (Riley 2007; Skinner 2023) in order to do so (Challis & Skinner 2021).

The interactions between images can be seen as an intertextual exercise, with different image expressions acting as texts which cross-reference and comment upon one another, changing the fabric of the site through addition, annotation and reconfiguration. In the process, image-making itself replicated the logics which governed human/animal interactions more broadly; the landscape was inhabited by many categories of person, human or otherwise, with diverging perspectives and intents. The authors of the art at Khomo Patsoa composed the site accordingly, emphasising the need for mutual intelligibility, negotiated presence, and respect of one another's limitations. However, in this case, these principles were also enacted to establish favourable conditions for intercultural interactions between humans (*cf.* McGranaghan 2015).

KHOMO PATSOA

Khomo Patsoa (Fig. 2) is a large shelter, approximately 260 m wide at the dripline and roughly 10–12 m deep, albeit with significant deviations across its length. It sits high on the banks of the Tsoelike River, approximately 15–18 m higher than the waterline at time of recording (April 2023). The result is that the shelter clears annual flood limits by a large margin, and offers a long view of the river approaches that was likely advantageous at the more troubled moments of the site's occupational history. The overhang provides ample shelter from the elements, and several stonewall compartments augment this, all of a size sufficient to have housed numerous people, and both large and small stock.

The walling is a heterogeneous assemblage (*cf.* Mitchell 2010: 155), with visible variations in weathering. The central



FIG. 2. *Exterior view of Khomo Patsoa (right), and the Tsoelike River (left). Image by authors.*



FIG. 3. *The spring at the rear of Khomo Patsoa. Large painted snakes are visible in the foreground panel (red ochre, left). Image by authors.*

compartments are characterised by a preponderance of surface artefacts, ranging from prolific MSA and LSA scatters, with numerous backed and retouched tools readily visible, to glass and porcelain of varying provenance. Animals appear to have been largely kept in a distinct subset of enclosures near the back of the shelter (Fig. 2, at the leftmost side of the shelter), in the lee of a large rockfall, its floor overwhelmingly covered in ovine and caprine droppings. Depth of deposit is not known and would benefit from radar survey.

The shelter is notably framed by its surrounding physical features. The site is a steep climb from the riverbank, but this does not elevate it beyond an aquatic context; the river's acoustics are immediate and visceral, with the concave rock face concentrating the sound at various points in the shelter. The grey/light brown sandstone face is visibly permeated by water throughout, marked with evaporation shadows, algae blooms, and widespread perfusion by oxalate crusts and washes. Excavations at a nearby shelter – Ha Soloja – reported that during and after rainfall, the movements of water were audible behind the rock face (Brian Stewart, pers. comm. May 2023). Commensurate with this is the small spring emanating from the shelter's deepest point, limned with lichen and green algae, its flow slowly returning to the river (Fig. 3). The Tsoelike comes to a serpentine bend just below, and is characterised by a small number of deep cauldron pools, overhung by willows and tinted green.

Pools of this kind are known as *likoetsa* (sing. *koetsa*) in the idioms of contemporary, regional communities (Skinner 2022a: 229). These places are considered nodes of spiritual influence in local traditional medicine (Skinner 2022b), identifiable by where the waters "move like they are being stirred" from below (Skinner 2022a: 229; "~~snake~~ ripples … twirl the water"; LL.VIII.17.7473, deletion *original*), have the same dark green colour as is present in the river near Khomo Patsoa, and the surprising depth of the pools themselves. They are known to contain not only the powerful river snakes from whom power and influence may be drawn through negotiated cont(r)act, but also the hidden villages of ancestors (Skinner 2022a, b), with whom contemporary healers and spiritualists confer during initiation and ritual.

Much like regional genetics (Daniels *et al.* 2023) and linguistics (Jimenez 2017), these idioms demonstrate tangible inheritances from the Maloti San communities largely responsible for the art (Skinner 2022c). Persistent folklore includes the water/rain/river metonymy, and its embodiment in specific aquatic animals (snakes, hippos, and mythic composites; Skinner & Challis 2022: 127–129), suggestive of a durable resonance between the snake images at the site, and its diverse aquatic and riverine features.

THE ROCK ART AT 'W21'

Khomo Patsoa is painted and engraved across much of its length, and even at a distance, fine-line figures in red ochre are apparent. The paintings are diverse even within a semantically bounded 'traditional' sample, presenting a varied range of subject matters and executed in several pigments. Shaded bi- and polychrome eland are numerous, and a smaller number of less identifiable antelope forms are also visible. Human figures appear alongside them in a variety of orientations and postures, with some clad in karosses, carrying tasselled bags, and accompanied by stylised fish. The majority of these are rendered in red and yellow pigments, with limited but salient use of a fugitive white pigment that survives primarily in negative space (see Fig. 4). Some human figures have undergone somatic distortions, of which attenuation and elongation are the predominant expressions.

The site makes limited direct reference to trance activities, with 'fragments of the dance' (*sensu* Lewis-Williams 1998: 87) constrained to one isolated panel, far from the rest of the assemblage. It has been executed in the same short-lived white



FIG. 4. *Detail of a panel at Khomo Patsoa, including distorted figures (left, centre), alongside shaded eland (right). Note the disproportionate weathering of the pale pigment in the enlarged central human figure, as compared to that of the nearby red and orange ochres. Image and DStretch enhancement by authors.*



FIG. 5. *'Fragments of the dance' visible at Khomo Patsoa. These images are significantly clearer under enhancement than under normal lighting, where they appear primarily as negative space within the darker weathering across the lower half of the panel. Note the bent-over figure with inverting arms/forelegs (top right). Image and DStretch enhancement by authors.*



FIG. 6. *Large snakes span the rock face adjoining the central spring (centre, right). They are surrounded by large aquatic animals and human-snake therianthropes (see Fig. 11 below, for detail). This panel is immediately adjacent to the spring (Fig. 2) near the deepest part of the shelter. Image and DStretch enhancement by authors.*

pigment as some of the kaross-clad figures (see Fig. 5), which has left much of the panel only visible in the negative. It incorporates clapping figures, bending-forward postures, and human-animal transformations, indicative of the relevance of shamanistic ritual to interpretation. Notable as well is that these figures are amongst only a few explicitly gendered at the site, their compositions predominantly indicating women (see discussion on gendered composition in Green 2023).

At the scale of Khomo Patsoa's total assemblage, this ritual depiction is an outlier. While conventional analysis would impart ritual context across the assemblage by virtue of the images sharing the 'veil' of the rock face (*sensu* Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1990), which delimits the realms of altered-state and conventional experience, we assess the differential emphasis to be a significant aspect of the site and the composition of symbols within it. We think there is value in assessing the site for its constituent features, particularly as they relate to the site's historical/spatial context, and its aquatic features described above. In this frame, the focus becomes less anthropocentric (*cf.* Ouzman 1996), recognising that while ritual was certainly relevant, the framing of the animal imageries point to interspecies relations being a significant concern of the artists at various moments in time (*cf.* McGranaghan & Challis 2016; Skinner & Challis 2022).

This is a phenomenon which we cover in more detail below, but for now it suffices to describe it. On one of the more prominent panels at the site, adjoining the central spring, numerous large snakes are depicted. The largest of these is approximately 2.4 m across (Fig. 6), and it is surrounded by human-snake (Fig. 7) therianthropes (that is, composite human-animal figures; see Jolly 2002; Guenther 2020a for discussion), kaross-clad figures, and numerous fish. The particular composite of human and snake is uncommon within the wider Maloti-Drakensberg corpus, although this is far from the only example of a common motif being replicated with atypical features (as is the case with the 'rain animal' at Rain Snake Shelter; see Challis *et al*. 2013; Skinner & Challis 2022).



FIG. 7. *Detail of snake therianthropes at the centre and right of the snake in Fig. 6. Their 'karosses' (left, far right) are shaded bicolour (red and white), resembling the dorsoventral (top/bottom) contrast colouration of some snake species. Both have heads that are contiguous with their karosses, suggestive of a blurred boundary between (worn) skin and organism. Images and DStretch enhancement by others.*



FIG. 8. *Digital tracing and photo of the engraved therianthrope at Khomo Patsoa. Images by authors.*

These are also not the only therianthropes at the site; there is reason to assess kaross-clad figures as an ontological analogue for more obvious human-animal composites. The wearing of hides is a literal and idiomatic 'getting into the skin' of an animal (Lewis-Williams 2015: 121 Guenther 2020b: 376; *cf.* Hewitt 2008: 66); it is to envelop one person in the matter (and matters) of another. More 'classic' (typology in Jolly 2002: 86) therianthropes are a semantic fusion (one person manifesting the features of another) that is logically equivalent to this, albeit a few stages further along the spectrum between the identities of human and non-human. This is the nature of the antelope-inflected therianthrope to the immediate left of the large snake panel, clad in a cloak and carrying a tasselled skin bag (Fig. 8), its transformation evinced by its emerging hooved feet (bottom). Whether it be the wearing of an animal 'shape' more or less euphemistically, the symbols of the therianthrope and kaross-wearer are composite, defined by their simultaneous expression of human and animal characteristics. Perhaps most notable, however, is that this 'classical' therianthrope is engraved.

We use the terms 'engraved' or 'engraving' here in a broad sense (see Morris 1988 for detail on different modes of engraving), to refer to images produced through reductive modes (incision or abrasion of the substrate). We use 'scratched' or 'scratching' more specifically to refer to the superficial and sometimes diffuse mode that is prevalent at Khomo Patsoa.

In Maloti-Drakensberg rock art research, engravings are not frequently examined, and there seems to be a certain narrow focus on more customary, painted modes. This issue becomes particularly pronounced in the case of images that, due to various analytical considerations (discussed in Skinner 2021), do not fit into the established 'San' categorisation that typically governs documentation, or which are inadvertently dismissed



FIG. 9. *A large central panel depicting horses, cattle, and human figures with whips and hats. The majority of cattle are on the left, facing left, while the majority of horses are on the right, facing right, as a central human figure wields a whip as if to separate them (Vinnicombe 1976: 58, 59). Scratched lettering and images overlay much of the painted imagery. A large, modern addition in commercial paint reads 'Mokhachane 7.11.54 A771 Sione' (bottom). Image and DStretch enhancement by authors.*

as 'vandalism'. This phenomenon is reflected in the gaps in the recording history of regional sites, and of Khomo Patsoa itself (as well as others, notably the Strandberg, in the Northern Cape; Skinner 2017; see also Challis 2018: 620), making it challenging to quantify the prevalence of such images. In any event, it is worth noting that we have yet to encounter another instance of an engraved therianthrope within the regional corpora.

Scratched depictions overlay much of the assemblage, particularly in overtly contact-era panels (see Fig. 9). Prominent in the shelter's central panel is an array of large livestock, mostly horses and cattle, rendered in a simplified-yet-naturalistic mono- and bichrome, a mode reminiscent of imagery attributed to creolised, 19th century raider groups from the frontiers to the south and east of Khomo Patsoa (Mallen 2008; Challis 2012, 2014; Sinclair Thomson 2020; Challis & Sinclair Thomson 2022; *inter alia*). Minor additions of horses and sheep are spread across the length of the site. The presence of horses allows these images to be placed somewhere after ~1835, the earlier bounds of their introduction to the region (discussion in Smith 2010: 354). Much of the scratched imagery and lettering overlaying this likely postdate that period, although discrepancies in weathering complicate precise chronologies.

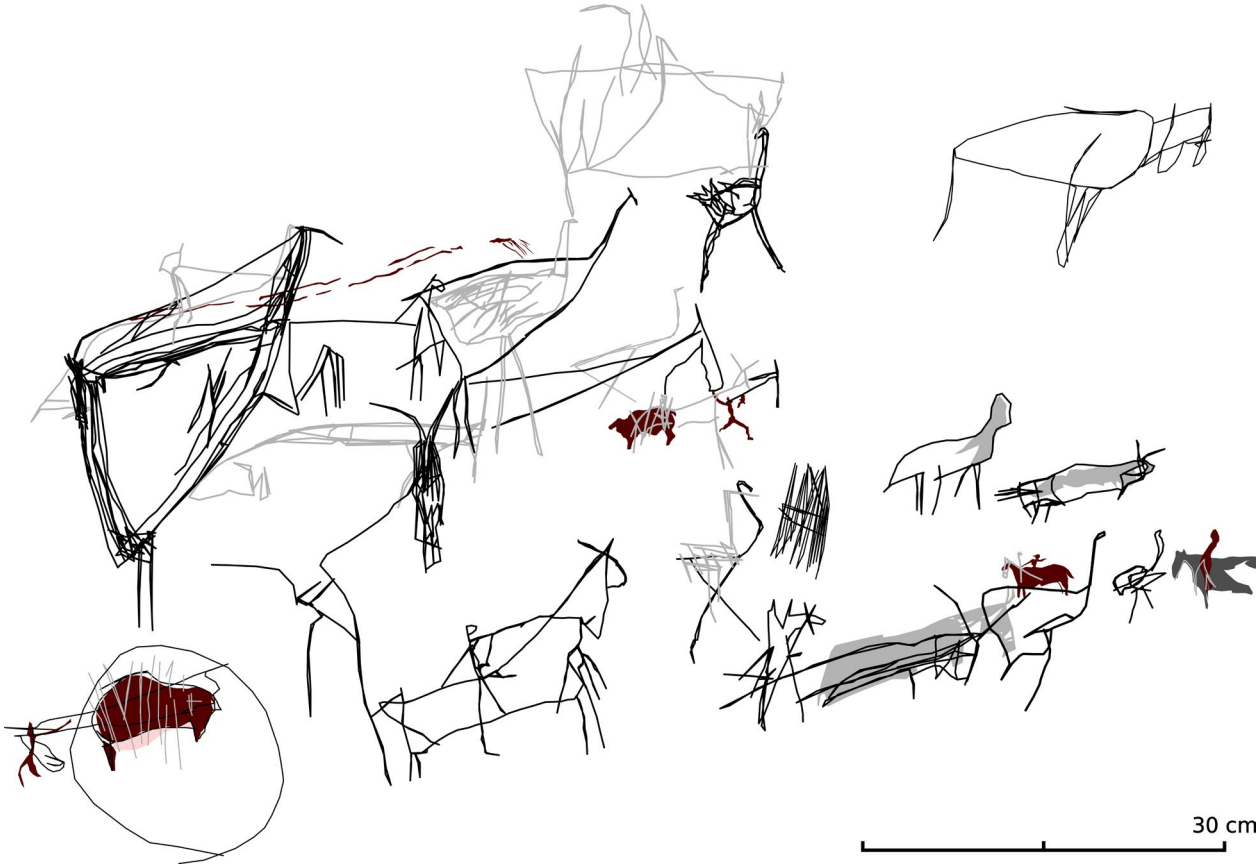


FIG. 10. *Stylised horses and ostriches, both depicted with and without riders, and with some horses being rendered most 'ostrichlike' (left) and vice versa (top left). Scratches in black and grey, paint in red, pale and dark grey. Digital reproduction by authors.*

Adopting a preservationist perspective, these latter modifications unfortunately contribute to the erosion of the underlying images. However, this should not deter us from analysing them as art or artefacts in their own right. Amongst its various capacities and functions, art is a record of presence (Skinner 2023), a distinct signature that points to the identity and intents of its authors.

There are a few large panels dominated by scratched images (see Fig. 10; Fig. 11, below), with contents suggestive of influences from the northern colonial frontier. As mentioned before, the presence of horses (along with a metaphorical equivalent in the depiction of ostrich riding), indicates origins in the nineteenth century at a minimum. The exaggerated physical forms of many of the figures resembles those attributed to the Korana of the northern interior (Ouzman 2005), and others identified in the |Xam heartland in the Northern Cape (McGranaghan 2016; particularly horses; see Skinner 2017). Ostriches are not endemic to the Maloti-Drakensberg (Stewart *et al*. 2020: 6460, Fig. 6), although ostrich eggshell (OES) beads have a well-established presence in the archaeological record, dating back to earlier periods (as early as MIS 3 [~33 ka]; Stewart *et al*. 2020: 6454).

The patterns of exchange that introduced OES from the western regions of the subcontinent have been modelled with reference to *hxaro* sharing networks in the Kalahari (e.g. Wiessner 1977). These exchange routes align with the same advantageous pathways along the Orange-Senqu River which historically facilitated access to the highlands (Stewart *et al*. 2016) now corroborated by strontium isotope provenancing (Stewart *et al*. 2020). These routes were later used by frontier societies seeking refuge from colonial violence in the montane borderlands (e.g. King & Challis 2017), and likely represent the initial paths through which ostriches were introduced as symbols at Khomo Patsoa (see discussion in Sinclair Thomson & Challis 2020; Sinclair Thomson 2022).

DISCUSSION

LABELS, (MULTI)AUTHORSHIP AND IDENTITY

We are mindful that the labels we select, even in a descriptive record, carry implications for authorship, history, and relevant ethnography (discussion in Challis & Sinclair Thomson 2022). To say that art is 'San', for instance, carries the implication that the art is essentially shamanistic, and that the relevant identities and histories are at least isomorphic with those of the triad of Qing, |Xam and Kalahari sources typically used to understand the art (discussion in Skinner 2021; *cf*. McGranaghan 2017; see also McGranaghan *et al*. 2013: 146; Pargeter *et al*. 2016). At Khomo Patsoa, the complexity of the assemblage makes such a process a low-resolution affair. In many ways, and despite what detractors might say, the best indicator of the prevalence and relevance of ritual trance practices in the Maloti-Drakensberg is their depiction in art (McGranaghan 2017: 15). Yet we must also allow the converse; Khomo Patsoa's assemblage is not defined by diagnostic trance imagery, particularly when it is weighted relative to other, more pronounced motifs at the site. This is compounded by the engraved imagery, strikingly reminiscent of scratched art observed by McGranaghan (2016) and Skinner (2017) in the Strandberg of South Africa's Northern Cape. The Strandberg is located in the historic heartland of Bleek and Lloyd's |Xam informants – whose testimonies form part of the bedrock of shamanistic interpretation (King 2015: 411) – but is notable for both the relative absence of diagnostic ritual motifs (e.g.



FIG. 11. *Extensively amended panel at Khomo Patsoa. Figures in red indicate red ochre, broadly matching other 'traditional' content at the site. Orange indicates the presence of a rough, high-contrast pigment, similar to that associated with 'post-disconnect' images. Black and grey lines and patches indicate scratched additions, differentiated to give some indication of the significant variation in mode of execution (harder lines are darker), and to allow more clarity in the reproduction (see Fig. 12 below, for comparison). Note the reproduction of eland forms in three differing modes (top right); 'traditional' (red), 'poster' (orange), and engraved (black). Note also the painted apron (U-shapes; centre, left) motifs. Digital reproduction by authors, not to scale.*

Lewis-Williams 1998: 87), *and* for its alignment with |Xam ideologies (Skinner 2017: 153–155).

While the term 'traditional' could be applied to portions of the Strandberg assemblage, in the sense that its images embody fundamental concerns of the ethnography, it bears little resemblance to what the term typically evokes in Maloti-Drakensberg contexts. At once, its dominant motifs and modes of execution (highly simplified, scratched horses and ostriches) are comparable to those present at Khomo Patsoa, contributing to the general difficulty we encounter when trying to typologise this assemblage. There is an interesting point to be made on this – while it is typical to distinguish 'traditional' *vis a vis* 'contact' assemblages, the ambiguity that characterises these sites suggests that this distinction may be a better indication of the siloing of academic attention than of bona fide differences between specific lineages of practice.

There are few harder distinctions to be made. For example, while the colonial-era art in the Strandberg is sometimes recorded with the implication of European or modern origins (*cf.* Deacon 1988), and that at Khomo Patsoa has largely been omitted (as above) on the comparable basis that it is recent 'vandalism', the images contest their exclusion as inauthentic artefacts. For one, they bear a particular, non-European visual literacy (refer to McGranaghan 2016: 162–164, 175; King & McGranaghan 2020: 95–96), exhibiting a significant degree of stylisation – and an expedient rendering into symbol – that is reminiscent of imageries linked to creolised societies elsewhere in the interior (Ouzman 2005).

The engravings are perhaps an obvious example of the trouble posed by assigning authorship based on technique; just because they look different does not mean they point to an incoherent ideology (Skinner 2017, 2021; Challis 2018; Skinner & Challis 2022). The assemblage at Khomo Patsoa goes further. The scratched therianthrope is a standout example, notable for its bridging of (seemingly) latter-day technique and autochthonous ideology, although the painted parts of the assemblage also do their part to add nuance and complication to any assessment of a 'traditional' sample present at the site (see discussion in Blundell 2004; Jolly 2006; Mallen 2008; Smith 2010; Challis 2022). The site's prominent snakes are executed in pigments and techniques comparable to the eland and human figures on nearby panels, but as symbols, snakes at least partially reflect multicultural origins. Surveys place snake images at various longer-term hunter-gatherer/agropastoralist frontiers (e.g. Jolly 1996: 285, 1999: 262; discussion in Challis *et al*. 2013: 18–19), often in combination with mixed/acquired material culture (Mitchell 2009: 22; Skinner & Challis 2022: 108–110).

As mythic actors, snakes make prominent appearances in subcontinental, Ntu-speaking idioms (Whitelaw 2017: 105), and are particularly revered. By contrast, they generally do not enjoy equivalent stature in northern and southern San ethnographies (Skinner 2022b). However, their significance as mediators between the riverine surface and the deepwater, mystical subsurface resonates with the plural figure of *!khwa*, the rain/water. This phenomenon is perhaps best encapsulated by Qing's labelling of the 'rain bull' at Sehonghong as a 'snake(!)' (Orpen 1874: 10; *parentheses original*), reflecting his own position astride Maloti San and Phuthi histories (Challis *et al*. 2013; Skinner & Challis 2022). The ontological commonalities extend in both directions, with San rainmaking practices likely resonating in turn amongst agropastoralists (see Dowson 1998; Schoeman 2006, 2009; Challis 2012: 277; although *cf.* Whitelaw 2017: 106–109, 118–119).

Perhaps accordingly, snake motifs can be explained and contextualised using comparative ethnography, highlighting the interplay between contemporary knowledge systems held by Ntu-speaking traditional healers in the region (Skinner 2022a, b) *and* classic forager ethnographies (Skinner & Challis 2022). Snakes appear to reflect the phenomenon of a prominent figure in one group's ontology being taken up by another, reconfigured in order to produce a symbolic common ground and setting favourable terms for future interactions (Challis *et al*. 2013: 347; King 2018: 670), although we would consider this to be the case even before overt moments of intercultural contact. Archaeological (Fewlass *et al*. 2020), genetic (Daniels *et al*. 2023) and linguistic (Jimenez 2017) findings indicate that social transformation and admixture have characterised much of the region's history for the last two millennia – it is simply more detectable in the assemblage at Khomo Patsoa, with its images implicating the site in a range of human intra- and intercultural interactions.

This negotiation would have taken on new forms in later periods, as more communities arrived to take shelter in the mountains during the nineteenth century (Challis 2014; King & Challis 2017). Reflecting this, the site's extensive array of 'contact' images continue the trend of challenging categorisation. These are executed in a late, 'post-disconnect' mode (*sensu* Challis & Sinclair Thomson 2022: S99–101); that is, using chalky, impermanent pigments, in a 'flattened', stylised and monochromatic 'posterlike' fashion, that likely places them somewhere after

the disruption of subcontinental trade-routes that carried more durable pigments into the mountains in earlier eras (Challis & Sinclair Thomson 2022: S99–101; also Loubser & Laurens 1994: 102). At once, images in these pigments also conspicuously replicate 'traditional' images in several places at the site (see Fig. 11), duplicating the recognisable polychrome, brush-painted, fine-line eland and human figures, although executed in a technique equivalent to that of the contact-era images on the adjacent panels which contain horses, cattle and sheep. Scratched additions continue the trend, duplicating the painted motifs, 'completing' images which have lost features to damage or weathering, and annotating examples of the other modes present.

As above, the scratched images add ostriches to the assemblage, hinting at influences from the central arid lowlands of the subcontinent, and the rock art of the Northern Cape particularly (Skinner 2017). Additionally, painted aprons have been added in several places (e.g. Fig. 11, centre, left; Fig. 12, bottom left), with a notable addition being made to a pre-existing painted human figure in the centre. The aprons were produced in a range of pigments, as indicated by wide variances in colouration and resilience, and likely not all at once. Aprons have been used elsewhere to explore expression of Khoe-spectrum identities in engraved rock art (Smith & Ouzman 2004; particularly in the Gestoptefontein-Driekul Complex; Morris 2012: 177–181; Hollmann 2014). Aprons are integral material culture of Khoe-San initiation practices, emphasised in rock art after the arrival of pastoralism in the subcontinent, and likely following pastoralist/forager contact (e.g. Eastwood & Eastwood 2006). The concentration of apron motifs in the central interior and adjacent Maloti lowlands adds weight to the inference that such ideas were travelling up the Senqu from the west, and inflecting notional identity in the highlands.

Contemporary communities in the Maloti-Drakensberg are extensively hybridised (see Daniels *et al*. 2023), and this is not a recent phenomenon (Mitchell 2009), just as these symbols imply. Such a mixed state is thus likely applicable to the artists of much of the Khomo Patsoa assemblage as well. In creolised settings, expression of selective aspects of identity acts to assert particular notions of heritage or lineage (Challis 2018), and in this frame, the apron-motifs solidify an inflection, assessment or assertion of just such a lineage (Morris 2012: 184–185).

Just below the figure with the apron, an incomplete/damaged painted eland is amended with a scratched, angular horse's head (Fig. 11, lower centre). The known date-range of the arrival of horses allows the image to be placed chronologically (as above; Challis 2008), but the amendment of an eland to a horse places the artists into a closer relationship in defiance of temporal distance, bringing an earlier time into focus with a reference to the salient actors of the then-present (Skinner 2017). In this respect, the symbolism of the snakes – where a figure that holds significance in the perspectives and histories of outsiders (farmers and pastoralists) is adopted by insiders (hunter-gatherers) to bridge differences – recurs in the depictions of horses and ostriches, if at a later stage. The arrival of new communities in the region, particularly during challenging times, would probably have compelled negotiations between firstcomer and newcomer identities. As the artists contextualised themselves and their identities with reference to their frontier origins, placing themselves alongside symbols indicating social precedent and intent to be understood (Challis & Skinner 2021). This parallels the distribution of OES in the subcontinent, particularly beyond the endemic range of ostriches. As a social technology, OES exchange seems to have been "explicitly developed to gloss and downplay cultural differences" (Stewart *et al*. 2020: 6461), and this trade in common, consistent and socially important material culture intended to bridge diverse communities.

LANDSCAPE, COMPOSITION, AND SYMBOLIC INTERACTION

Negotiation appears to have been a long-term concern of image-making practice at Khomo Patsoa, but it is also worth considering what makes the place so apt for achieving it. It is not straightforward to 'immerse' oneself in a landscape and from there differentiate what would have been significant about it to the artists (following Smith & Blundell 2004). However, one can bring to light the relevant physical characteristics of the site by looking at their effect on the composition of symbols within it.

To explore this notion of composition, we consider first the different kinds of therianthrope that mark Khomo Patsoa – in particular, those that do not immediately seem to be human-animal hybrids. The kaross-clad figures (as above) can be read as compound symbols, as the wearing of skins – "getting into a [leather bag]" – envelops a human in the exterior features of an animal, the metaphorical and practical act of "getting into the animal" (Lewis-Williams 2015: 121; text in parenthesis from Guenther 2020b: 376). This symbol is moulded by a 'constitutive logic' (*sensu* Skinner 2017: 184, 2022c: 170; *cf.* McGranaghan 2014). In the course of normal life, an entity's external features (physiology, behaviour) directly indicate their internal ones (identity, personality). In the art, the process is inverted; the features added to the symbol of a (human or non-human) person are constructed as the exterior features of an agent, intentionally compounded to signal or imply their interior state (see application in Skinner & Challis 2022).

While not directly therianthropic, the implications of a kaross-clad figure are similar to human-animal composites and transformations; as an artefact, the skin retains a degree of identity and agency of the animal from which it was taken (Guenther 2020b: 376; *cf.* Hewitt 2008: 66). To enclose oneself in such a way is to intimately connect human and non-human agencies, capitalising on an enhanced immersion in the life-way of another in order to better understand – and thus better negotiate with – populations of such others (McGranaghan & Challis 2016; Skinner & Challis 2022). The presence of fish around the snakes (in the panel in Fig. 6, above; see Fig. 12) is significant for similar reasons.

Fish appear as "unstable or 'wild'" agencies (Wates 2022: 49), reflecting seasonal appearances that sometimes fluctuated significantly. As a result, they were in need of careful husbanding just as other seasonal or scarce resources were (see McGranaghan 2015). As a result, their appearance in art can be "aligned with the pictorial trope of 'taming'" (Wates 2022: 49, 52–55), often appearing associated with elaborate therianthropes (or here, with the kaross-clad symbolic composites with similar significance). That is, they occur alongside human forms which demonstrate through their ambiguous features a capacity for interspecies engagement.

Snakes resemble fish for their capriciousness. In both historical (see McGranaghan 2014; e.g. Orpen 1874) and contemporary, descendent idioms (see Skinner 2022a, b; discussion in Skinner & Challis 2022: 122–125) power and antagonism significantly overlap. Magic/potency is itself a dangerous capacity (Skinner 2017), but being possessed of power in ways others can understand (Challis & Skinner 2021) is one among the ways an agent would signal that it is dangerous. In turn, by giving an image dangerous features, it is implied that the depicted agency has powerful capacities (as above). Snakes are elsewhere routinely



FIG. 12. *Detail of the three-mode elands and central human figure in Fig. 11, above, for comparison.*

depicted with tusks and hair (Phuthing 11 and Belmont are illustrative examples; McGranaghan & Challis 2016; Skinner 2022c; Skinner & Challis 2022), each a marker of antisocial agency (see 'bestial' characteristics in McGranaghan 2014: 674–675). Much like lions and other predatory entities, snakes carry innately antisocial connotations (Orpen 1874: 5), but their composition as such is not limited to their depicted qualities.

The symbols' placement influences their composition. Just as an agent's exterior characteristics hint at interior ones (Skinner & Challis 2022), a place's disposition (i.e. its interior state, its character) can be read through its physical expressions (i.e. its inhabitants, its topography). This principle operates in a general sense with respect to resources; a place is defined by what it "is known to accumulate on the turn of seasons, expressing resources as a factor of the flora and fauna it hosts and attracts", its underlying personality reflected in what comes about at its 'surface' (Skinner 2023: 468). In the same way, a place mutually defines its inhabitants (Skinner & Challis 2022: 126–131). For example, to be 'human' is to occupy the range of habits, territory, and physicalities that define humans to other classes of agent (Challis & Skinner 2021: 1099–1100). For a place to be known by its snakes is to imply that it is powerful, while snakes are powerful for being the inhabitants of dangerous, powerful places.

Snakes are part of what defined this place, and the nature of the place was part of what defined its inhabitant snakes. The site's aquatic features resonate with this. Puff adders (B. arietans) were connected to rainfall (Bleek 1956: 653; see Mallen 2005) owing to their *|kai:nja* (yellow, green, 'shining'; Bleek 1956; LL.II.18.1657) colouration, mimicking the luminous qualities of rainbows following a storm (Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2004: 211). Qing's famous identification of the 'rain bull' at Sehonghong as a 'snake(!)' (Orpen 1874: 10) points to a direct idiomatic connection – snakes were *!khwa-ka* (belonging to the rain; lit. 'rain's/of-the-rain'; Orpen 1874: 10–11; Skinner & Challis 2022: 127), overlapping the metonymic complex of rain-water-river referred to by *!khwa* more generally. Indeed, the running of the fish and the aggregation of the eland would arguably have been influenced by *!khwa-ka-ǂgi:tən*, the rainmaking specialists, and likely coherent beliefs from at least ~3 ka in the Neoglacial (Stewart & Challis 2023). The connection of the images at Khomo Patsoa to a spring – that is, water flowing from a space behind the rock face – to the waters which audibly move behind the surface during and following rainfall, and to the river just below whose sounds resonate in the space, are striking spatial contextualisations of the snakes as agencies. The images then place snakes (and snake therianthropes) amongst fish, making the connection symbolic as well as practical.

The rock face is sometimes assessed first as the 'veil' (*sensu* Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1990) behind which can be found the cosmological stratum of trance experience, which then places images within a trance/ritual context. At Khomo Patsoa, the locus seems less anthropocentric. The site engages in the mutual composition of snakes and place – in particular, as a powerful place inhabited by powerful entities, all requiring careful approach and negotiation (Challis & Skinner 2021; see also Guenther 2020a: 122; *pace* Lewis-Williams 1996, 2015). Despite their characteristic power and caprice, snakes were known also for their capacity for shedding skin, changing who and what they are through a shift of physicalities (e.g. Orpen 1874: 5; see Skinner & Challis 2022: 122, footnote 12), and the idiom assesses this to be a show of capacity for change of personality, just as humans' uptake of skins as karosses does (*cf.* Lewis-Williams 2015: 151, 2016: 56–57; above). By taking on the exterior properties of another, one signals that one's interior properties align accordingly (Skinner & Challis 2022: 121–123; *cf.* McGranaghan & Challis 2016).

This allows us to read the snake-headed therianthropes at the site (Fig. 13; also Fig. 7). The shapes of their bodies are visually similar to that of kaross-clad figures elsewhere in the site (see Fig. 4), and in other sites (see Guenther 2020a: 111–113), with a long, often squared-off torso, enclosed arms, and legs revealed from the knee. The 'skin cloak' of the kaross is contiguous with the snake's head, with the coat and the (snake) skin being one and the same, suggestive of an ontological equivalence. This recalls Qing's likening of the snakelike shedding of skin to a transition between categories of person (Orpen 1874: 5; Skinner & Challis 2022: 122, footnote 12). This is certainly not divorced from ritual experiences – therianthropic transformations are a cornerstone of shamanistic interpretation (e.g. Jolly 2002; Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2008; Guenther 2020a, chapter 4) – but this figure manifests a striking example of a human person shifting their physiologies and dispositions to a symbolic middle ground with that of a snake, demonstrating their disposition (interior state) through their physiology (exterior state), mitigating snakes' innate antagonism by reaching a state of ontological alignment with them (discussion in Skinner & Challis 2022).

The body of a therianthrope is a (pseudo)mythic fusion (after Guenther 2020a: 101–102). It materially resembles the ambulatory and shifting nature of personal identity in the ethnography (McGranaghan 2015), particularly as these aspects are depicted in San folklore with its uncertain frame and hazy causalities. To take on the features of a particular category of person is to embody them, while the process of embodying a particular category of person will cause the corresponding features to manifest. This applies to places as well – the character



FIG. 13. *Detail of a 'snake-headed', kaross-clad therianthrope (right), overlaying the large snake visible in Fig. 6. Note the large fish (red, centre, right; pale, upper centre, left), as well as smaller examples attending the therianthrope on the right. Digital reproduction by authors.*

of a place is defined by its inhabitants, but it is by inhabiting a particular place that certain persons take on their particular characters, in turn (Skinner 2017, 2022c). As a place of both dangerous, powerful entities, as well as one marked by the negotiations that have been undertaken by its defining inhabitants, Khomo Patsoa identifies itself as a locus of interspecies/intercultural interactions. Its exterior characteristics exhibit at various points, and in ideologically contiguous ways, that the artists have framed themselves as interlocutors between human and non-human populations over a long term.

Subsequent additions and reconfigurations simply continue the site's history of intercultural mediation, now extending the logics applicable to human/animal relations to human/human ones. Just as snakes are, as agent-symbols, composed in paradoxical states of both dangerousness and negotiated pliancy (above), they represent categories of human others – autochthonous foragers and incoming agropastoralists – reaching mediated common ground through the former's adoption and manipulation of a significant symbol in the latter's ontology (Challis *et al*. 2013). Indeed, while snakes would later become a "central component of Maloti San ritual practice" (Challis *et al*. 2013: 347), this appears to be the product of sustained admixture and reconfiguration typical of large areas of the Maloti-Drakensberg (King & McGranaghan 2020: 94) for some time (King 2019: 44–46; also Mitchell 2009). By demonstrating a desire to be "thoroughly comprehensible" (McGranaghan & Challis 2016: 596), the artists incorporated aspects of others into themselves and their practice, whether those others were human or not. Fundamentally, the images act as a setting of precedent – favourable, understanding relations are demonstrated, and able to be referenced in subsequent negotiations.

However, 'reference' is not the only tool available to latter-day inhabitants of a landscape. Art is a marker of presence with a heightened conceptual reach and durability (Skinner 2023), disclosing the past presence of social others, and demonstrating the work and influence of those others in texturing and shaping a landscape in its present extents. This confers significance on the act of appending new images to old, illustrated by what those latter additions are doing.

INTERTEXTUALISM

These layered additions signal many kinds of presence across time, made by varying authors, although with overlapping lineages and understandings. Throughout, artists have made the decision to superimpose their contributions over those of others before them – while Khomo Patsoa is marked across much of its breadth, there are plenty of open spaces between otherwise quite densely painted and engraved concentrations of images. A typical view of superposition is as a form of additive syntax (following Lewis-Williams 1974, 2010), with a broad assumption that the repeated additions were made within the same frame of reference. Assessed as the same (ritual) system repeating (e.g. Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2009: 55), rather than different (or at least divergent) systems interacting, superpositioning becomes a 'projection' of images, adding depth and perspective to better resemble the subjective experience of a trance hallucination.

Khomo Patsoa complicates such an inference. The later scratched additions engage the earlier painted ones, and even painted images confer and interact. Rather than overpainting to enhance and project, superimposition re-invokes earlier symbols while simultaneously reframing them. They are now no longer the original image but rather, a new image of composite origins, containing both an earlier meaning and how that meaning was read at a later stage. This site has a long life history, and in that time has been observed from perspectives which themselves changed to reflect shifting historical contexts. While the artists did not always belong to a common time, by sharing common space they redefined their own successive contributions to the fabric of the site (Ragazzoli *et al*. 2018: 10).

The strange mix of convergence and variation is encapsulated in the large panel in Figs 11 and 12. In the 'original' panel, there is a red ochre eland (centre, right), which was then

latterly copied, just below, in a monochrome orange, flattened and posterlike (top, right), in a technique reminiscent of images that can be circumstantially dated to the contact period. Several scratched reproductions overlay both painted images, amending or accentuating various features, and ultimately coalescing into a third eland (lower centre, right), in line with the first two. The same animal is repeated several times over, its specific properties changing but the form remaining the same. As a coherent whole, these three animals resemble nodes of richly 'populated' rock art panels, replete with lines of eland, as are common elsewhere (e.g. Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2009: 52–54, Fig. 4). The implied perspective and visual literacy are consistent across these modes of execution (*cf.* McGranaghan 2016: 162–165), but their techniques reflect the constraints of different historic moments.

Yet, by engaging directly with the arts of others, subsequent artists invoked a form of continuity through common practice. Elements of past populations were drawn into a closer social and temporal frame with the communities making later additions. Rather than those precursors being asocial and anonymous, perhaps disconnected by changing circumstance or culture, the earlier inhabitants of the landscape had their activities rendered intelligible through replication.

There was likely notable diversity in the identities of those involved, but this is where the repeated indications of identity come in. Marking the place with expressions of one's own identity – be it an apron, an association with a particular animal, or reference to commonly understood symbolism – situates one's presence within the context of the site's history. This can be extended to less obvious signs of who someone is; identity is composed, at least in part, by its implied point of origin. Being *from* a particular place is being *of* it, as with the mutual composition of persons and places above, and is thus integral to how one relates to others. However, without a map, or symbolic precedent able to fill equivalent functions to a fixed cartesian axis (Skinner 2023), the spatial elements of identity take the same shape as the normal course of defining a place; a place is *who* it is on the basis of its inhabitants, and vice versa (Skinner & Challis 2022). Thus, reference is made to a place by its inhabitants; to say that one was from the Northern Cape, perhaps one might reference coming from where horses or ostriches were salient inhabitants (Skinner 2017). The flow of time and presence is continuous in this way, with newer arrivals 'slotting themselves in' with reference to their origins, amending the record of who (human or non-human) had been present before, and signalling desire to broker their own presence.

We would also note the ambiguity of deposition across the site. Pigment weathering has left many layers transparent, rendering individual images into palimpsests whose internal boundaries are uncertain. In this way, the images reflect both their authorships and the site as a whole; all are composed of diverse contributions which cannot always be easily distinguished. When viewed from without, the interactions are in this way nonlinear, and lack the clear depositional hierarchy that often structures archaeological data. Connections arise *between* and *within* texts – overlapping different records of presence – which together function to mediate these varied contributions to the common texture of the place.

CONCLUSION

Khomo Patsoa is a meeting point between various actors, human and non-human, and spans various identities within even those categories. Its authorship is diverse, representing a range of temporal contexts, at a minimum representing identities composed during several eras of contact – and indeed, times in which contact has meant different things.

Some of the most outwardly accessible forms of negotiation are captured in the therianthropes. Referencing interpersonal negotiations, and the need to position oneself 'in the skin' of another to fully appreciate their perspectives, these images reproduce the process of ontological (ex)change that comes about from immersing oneself in the identity of another. This principle extends readily into other symbolic compositions; snakes reference a symbol that was prominent in one group of people finding a novel life and significance in that of another, taken on in the process of negotiation between communities of persons who happened, in this case, to be human. This contextual transit is transformational to the symbol, meshed as it was with Maloti San beliefs about aquatic animals, river spaces, and the nature of power in the universe. Core, again, is the implied transformative negotiation. Societies already prone to constructive, "fundamentally incorporative" (King 2018: 670; *cf.* Ouzman 2005) and "symbiotic" (King & McGranaghan 2020: 94) relations with both human and non-human actors (McGranaghan 2015), simply extended their understandings of how agents relate. They applied these understandings of the wider world to their interactions with new, hitherto unfamiliar, human communities, now in need of negotiation.

The core processes that shape human-animal interactions, well-documented in the ethnography (McGranaghan & Challis 2016), extend here into human intercultural interactions, supporting the wider observation that a nature/culture dualism has never adequately represented San worldviews (Dowson 2009; King & McGranaghan 2020; Challis & Skinner 2021). With this lens, the layered, temporally disparate additions to the art at Khomo Patsoa do not appear as vandalism, but rather the lattermost points of common processes, distinct not for being inauthentic, but rather for playing out at a relatively recent juncture. They act with intertextual capacities, the newer additions referencing and interfacing with the older, the annotations acting as commentary from diverse perspectives, and the reproductions situating the artists in relation to those who had come before them.

While it may look chaotic, the variances in the art at the site reflect the plurality of peoples and histories observed in genetic (Daniels *et al*. 2023) and historical records (King 2019; Challis 2022) of the region. This is clearest when a given site's idiosyncrasies are embraced, and its features and contents assessed for their relations *in situ*. We are as reliant as any others on the wealth of existing scholarship, particularly with respect to the governing metaphysics of certain symbols and practices, but believe as well that Khomo Patsoa is a powerful example of the diversity of meanings and expressions still awaiting exploration. This further motivates for a view of Maloti-Drakensberg artistic corpora not primarily through the lens of social theory (following Smith 2010), but also as a 'blurred' practice (*sensu* Silliman 2009: 17), whose "boundaries [are] more permeable, its methods more negotiable" (Silliman 2009: 17) than many of its precedents, recognising that there are many extant perspectives of the art – some embedded in the images themselves.

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