San rock art: evidence and argument

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Whether or not a 'trance-dance' akin to that of today's Kalahari San (Bushmen) was performed by southern /Xam San in the nineteenth century has long been the subject of intense debate. Here the authors point to parallels between nineteenth-century records of San life and beliefs and twentieth-century San ethnography from the Kalahari Desert in order to argue that this cultural practice was shared by these two geographically and chronologically distant groups. More significantly, it is suggested that these ethnographic parallels allow a clearer understanding of the religious and ritual practices depicted in the southern San rock art images.

Three years ago, we addressed, in general terms, a misapprehension that is entertained by some writers on southern African San rock art (Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2012). It is that the nineteenth-century southern /Xam San did not have a 'trance dance', as the present-day Kalahari San to the north do, and that, consequently, the beliefs associated therewith cannot be used to understand the highly specific southern San rock art imagery.

Today, most scholars who specialise in the study of San rock art accept that the making of the images was a ritual practice in its own right and that it signalled, or probably established, contact with the spirit realm. More precisely, researchers over the last 30 or more years, and in various parts of the subcontinent, have shown that the images were closely, *but not necessarily exclusively*, associated with a southern San brand of shamanism (e.g. Lewis-Williams 1981; Huffman 1983; Yates *et al*. 1985; Dowson 1992; Smits 1993; Deacon 1994; Walker 1996; Hollmann 2002; Blundell 2004; Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2004a; Mguni 2004; Smith & Ouzman 2004; Challis 2005; Deacon & Foster 2005; Eastwood & Eastwood 2006; Loubser 2006; Wright & Mazel 2007; Mazel 2009; Lewis-Williams & Challis 2011; Hampson 2013). Certain researchers argue that some distinctive San rock art, largely in the northern parts of the subcontinent, *also* deals with the initiation of girls at puberty into womanhood (Eastwood & Eastwood 2006; Hollmann 2013). Importantly, all of the scholars listed here have both independently weighed up the ethnographic evidence and they are familiar with the images.

In this context, much confusion has been caused by the use of the term 'shaman' to denote a San ritual specialist who establishes contact with the spirit realm. In attacking the word, some writers in southern Africa, and indeed beyond, have contrived to give the impression that they are demolishing the concept (Whitley 2006; Schaafsma 2013). As is well known, the word originated in Siberia, where it denotes a person who, among other activities, enters an altered state of consciousness to perform various tasks; usually, there is one influential shaman per group (e.g. Eliade 1964; Vitebsky 1995). Many shamans use hallucinogens (e.g. Eliade 1964; Vitebsky 1995). By contrast, amongst the San there are

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multiple ritual specialists, largely men but also women. Today, they induce a trance state by hyperventilation, rhythmic dancing and sounds, and intense concentration (e.g. Lee 1967, 1993; Marshall 1969; Biesele 1993). Mathias Guenther writes: "In the fashion of shamans all over the world, the [San] trance dancer, by means of altered states, enters the spirit world and obtains from it the wherewithal to restore the health of sick fellow humans" (Guenther 1999: 186; see also Guenther 1989). His and our use of the word does not imply that San practices are identical with Siberian, North American or other practices. Debate about the appropriateness of the word 'shaman' in the San context should not be allowed to divert attention from what the San actually do and believe.

Anne Solomon (2013) challenges the essentially shamanistic (if the word is to be accepted) nature of San rock art, but significantly fails to see the historical context of southern African research. The issue is confused by reference to Patricia Vinnicombe's supposed eschewing of Kalahari San ethnography. Vinnicombe's 1976 book, *People of the eland*, was a milestone in the development of San rock art research. Her changing views are important.

Unlike Solomon, she later came to accept the prominence of the trance dance in San thought and art. Referring to distinctive trance-dance postures, she wrote:

> *Although I recognised the recurrence of these postures in the painted record, their significance escaped me. One of my principal reactions therefore, when unfolding the images that had been stored in a tin trunk for so long* [her own copies made largely in the 1960s and 1970s], *was the inescapable realisation that many of them (though not necessarily all) undoubtedly relate to the trance experience as initially defined by Lewis-Williams. Aspects of* People of the eland *will definitely need re-thinking* (Vinnicombe 2001: 2).

Of her tracing of two 'part-human/part-animal figures', she wrote:

> *When these painted details were recorded in 1974, the specific associations with supernatural power, trancing and the spirit world were not yet clear. Thanks to later ethnographic deductions made by David Lewis-Williams, these formerly elusive links are now readily recognisable* (Vinnicombe 2001: 1).

As Vinnicombe implies, the 'religious', or 'shamanistic', explanation is not a vague, blanket hypothesis. Researchers have shown repeatedly that the multiple fit between the ethnographic hypothesis and the detailed and very specific rock art imagery is inescapable. Even without recourse to nineteenth-century records, the depictions of trance dances are evidence in themselves. Indeed, gainsayers, who are usually not themselves hands-on rock art researchers, have been unable to show any other fit that is anywhere as comprehensive or, more importantly, precisely explanatory. It is all very well to speak about myth: actually demonstrating the relationship between mythical narratives and specific images has never been done (for detailed accounts of how San myth works see, for instance, Biesele 1993; Lewis-Williams 1996, 1997, 2013).

Recognition of specific painted features as indicative of shamanistic belief, ritual and experience is only the start, the foundation, of our enquiry. It does not close off exploration of further meanings, as some critics mistakenly assume. Nor does the art simply and passively 'illustrate' those beliefs, rituals and experiences. For instance, there is strong evidence that

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people touched the images, possibly to draw potency from them (Lewis-Williams 1986; Yates & Manhire 1991: 8; Laue 2000: 49).

On the contrary, the images, taken together with the rituals and beliefs with which they were associated, have long been considered vehicles for social, gender, political and economic discourse (e.g. Lewis-Williams 1982, 1998, 2006; Dowson 1994; Stevenson 2000; Blundell 2004; Hays-Gilpin 2004: 168–85; Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2004a & b). The images were diversely active in San communities. Beyond that, we recognise that what Megan Biesele (1993: 83–85), in her perceptive discussion of Ju/'hoan folklore, calls 'metaphors of the trance dance' permeate San folklore and myth (e.g. Lewis-Williams 1996, 1997, 2013). The art was embedded in a complex of interrelated media and significances.

Clearly, it is impossible to rehearse here all of the evidence and arguments that numerous writers have published over the decades, so we highlight a fundamental point. Much of Solomon's writing is posited, as is her recent contribution (Solomon 2013), on her belief that the nineteenth-century southern /Xam San were very different in highly significant ways from those groups who continue to live in the Kalahari and who were intensively and famously studied in the second half of the twentieth century. Solomon suggests that one of us (JDL-W) has been 'unswerving' in his uncritical acceptance of this Kalahari material. On the contrary, he has more than once pointed out that he originally believed that interpretation of southern San rock art should be based exclusively on the southern nineteenth-century ethnography and should not have recourse to the Kalahari material (Lewis-Williams 1975: 414). Growing familiarity with both northern and southern San ethnography, however, led him to a more realistic, nuanced and empirically verifiable position: "It is therefore legitimate to cite the more recent Kalahari ethnography along with the nineteenth-century sources in specific conceptual areas *where commonalities can be demonstrated*" (Lewis-Williams 2013: 3; see also Lewis-Williams & Biesele 1978; Lewis-Williams 1981, 1992, 2006; Biesele 1996). The original emphasis in this quotation indicates an assessment that is very different from the one that Solomon imputes. Differences *are* recognised, but they do not cancel out the parallels.

The following observations, all by respected scholars, sum up the situation.

> [R]*eligion is far more uniform throughout Bushman and even Khoisan southern Africa than are material aspects of culture and society* (Barnard 2007: 96).
>
> *The trance dance is the central ritual of the Bushman religion and its defining institution* [. . .] *The fact that trance dances are described by all writers who have visited the Bushmen, even nineteenth-century ones, further attests to the ubiquity and antiquity of this key Bushman ritual* (Guenther 1999: 181).
>
> *The special status some might want to ascribe to the myth and lore of the* [nineteenth-century southern] */Xam Bushmen—for instance, Schapera (1930: 398) who deemed the southern Bushmen to 'stand apart from the rest'—is seen to dissolve and the fact that Bushman expressive and religious culture does indeed constitute one unit (Guenther 1989: 33–36) becomes the more apparent* (Guenther 1996: 98).

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> *There is much more in this* [nineteenth-century] */Xam fragment* [myth] *which can also be elucidated by reference to [twentieth-century Kalahari] Ju/'hoan oral tradition and ethnography, despite the intervening years, distances, and linguistic differences* (Biesele 1996: 145).

> *The painted slab recovered from an 1800-year-old deposit at Collingham Shelter, which shows a shaman with his arms behind his back, provides evidence that trance dancing has been practised in the Drakensberg for a long time* (Wright & Mazel 2007: 69).

We emphasise that the conclusions of Barnard, Guenther and Biesele come out of long, *first-hand* study of the San and, importantly, a good knowledge of San languages. The southern San did indeed practise trance dancing, although given the disintegrating small groups to which they were reduced in the mid and late nineteenth century, they probably performed them less frequently than the northern people still do. They probably relied increasingly on 'special curings' that involved only a small number of people but were founded on the same beliefs and experiences. Dreams, too, played a role in supernatural contact (Lewis-Williams 1987, 2013).

Trying to move away from an essentially religious/ritual view, Solomon (2008) has argued that mythology played a larger role in the making of San rock art than what we could broadly call 'contact with the supernatural'. Her position, which she has never spelled out in any comprehensive detail, is impossible to accept. Writers have in fact pointed out that this old idea simply does not fit the images: the personnel of the two media largely differ (Deacon 1994, 2001; Guenther 1994; Hays-Gilpin 2004: 178). No convincing parallels between specific San myths and rock art can be, or indeed ever have been, demonstrated by Solomon or anyone else. The rain-animal that San shamans captured in the spirit realm to kill and thus make rain does appear in a myth in which it/he carries off a maiden (Bleek & Lloyd 1911: 193–99). Paintings, however, show not this action but rather people, some of whom often bleed from the nose as southern San shamans did, driving a rain-animal and attempting to kill it (Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2004a: 139–40, 143–45, fig. 7.4). Knowledge of the actual images again refutes Solomon's view.

The relationship between myth and rock art is more fundamental and, at the same time, elusive and subtle: both draw on a reservoir of metaphors, of which many researchers seem unaware (Lewis-Williams & Loubser 1986). The 'mythological' interpretation, supported by Solomon, remains a free-floating notion that does not connect mythological narratives with the imagery (Lewis-Williams 2006: 105–108). Familiarity with the images in, literally, hundreds of rockshelters, leads to a different conclusion. Some writers appear to deem rock art fieldwork on such a scale unnecessary; in its place, they depend on the comparatively few images that have appeared in other researchers' publications.

Responding to many writers' views of the frenzied dances that Thomas Arbousset and François Daumas (1846) and Joseph Orpen (1874) recorded in the Maloti mountains, Solomon (2013: 1211) claims that the "frenzied behaviour is not that of a Kalahari-style trance induced to heal". The dances described by the nineteenth-century writers, she says, were 'spirit possession' dances. There is no evidence for this. On the contrary, Guenther, who has much first-hand experience of the Kalahari Nharo San, comments: "Arbousset and Orpen, in the 1840s and the 1870s, described a nightlong 'circular' dance in which dancers

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collapse and cure by touching the sick with hands they have put under their armpits" (Guenther 1999: 181–82). He adds:

> *All this sounds very much like the trance dance as it is performed by contemporary Kalahari Bushmen (although the earlier dance contained additional elements evidently not found in the later versions, such as the use of charms and the equal participation and trance collapse of women)* (Guenther 1999: 182).

The differences are interesting, but they do not negate the demonstrable similarities. Guenther's insight cannot be lightly discounted. Indeed, numerous writers have noticed the parallels between the nineteenth-century descriptions and the Kalahari dances.

All ethnographers have shown that the Kalahari San healers, many of whom behave in an extremely frenzied fashion, try to control their level of trance so that, trembling, they can eventually move around and heal by the laying on of hands. Nevertheless, violent trance is a prominent characteristic of the dance. Yet Solomon writes: "Those who behaved wildly and bled nasally were not healers, but those who succumbed to the spirits" (Solomon 2013: 1211). Again, there is no evidence for this assertion. A few explicit quotations from Lorna Marshall's first-hand work will suffice to set the matter in context:

> *A medicine man begins with rapid, grasping grunts* [. . .] *The more violent the frenzied behaviour, or the deeper the withdrawal from consciousness, the stronger the* n/um [potency] *is believed to be, and the trance is more valued* [. . .] *He may stagger around and lurch into the fire, trample on the women, fall headlong into their circle, somersault over them, or crash full-length onto the ground and lie there, rigid as a stick* (Marshall 1969: 370, 373, 376).

Behaviour of this kind is described by all of the researchers who have witnessed San trance dances. It is impossible to deny what they have to say. Further, multiple parallels between the distinctly painted dancing and clapping postures and the postures characteristic of the Kalahari dances are clear. To take but one instance, in a discussion of trance dancing during the 1970s, a Ju/'hoan man, who had not seen copies of paintings of dancers in the distinctive and widely depicted arms-back position, rose and demonstrated that posture. He explained to Biesele and one of us (JDL-W) that Ju/'hoan shamans adopt this posture "when *n/um* is going into your body, when you are asking God for *n/um* [supernatural potency]" (Lewis-Williams 1981: 88). In addition, the images show animal transformations and other non-real manifestations (e.g. sickness being expelled from the *n//au* spot at the back of the neck) that Kalahari dancers describe as being visible to them but not to ordinary people. Solomon claims that nasal bleeding, often depicted, "more plausibly [. . .] signifies the imminence of actual 'death' (by lethal possession)" (Solomon 2013: 1211). Again, there is no ethnographic evidence for this belief.

Readers are urged to consult the original nineteenth- and twentieth-century ethnographic sources rather than other writers' recensions of them. Summaries of the complex evidence for a connection between, on the one hand, northern and southern San religious belief, ritual and experience and, on the other, the images of southern San rock art can be found in numerous books and articles (e.g. Lewis-Williams 2003; Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2004a; Lewis-Williams & Challis 2011). The time has come to move on from repetitive, personally directed debate and to embrace well-founded studies of the ethnography and, equally, of

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the images themselves. Only then shall we be able to appreciate the complexity and subtlety of the web of San thought and art.

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