

Thaba Sione

Place of Rhinoceroses and Rock Art

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Abstract

Thaba Sione, a site of unusually complex rock engravings in the North West province of South Africa, is interpreted as an important San religious centre. I propose that a single engraved image class found at Thaba Sione constituted a cynosure which provided Thaba Sione with a conceptual focus and pre-eminence. I discuss the engraved cynosure in terms of three aspects of San shamanism, namely shamanic transformation, gender relations and rain-making. San shamanism is, however, an immensely broad, variable and pervasive phenomenon which requires caution and transparency in the use of theory and ethnography. Like rock paintings, the lesser-researched rock engravings promise new insights into facets of San belief and may be said to constitute the research field of the future.¹

1. I thank Geoff Blundell, Thomas Dowson and Anne Holliday who assisted me in the field. Paul Mkone, Jakob Macha and the residents of Thaba Sione were particularly helpful and supportive. Norman Owen-Smith provided information concerning rhinoceros behaviour. The Centre for Science Development, the National Museum, the University of the Witwatersrand and the Rock Art Research Unit of that University funded my research. I thank Paul den Hoed, Zoe Henderson, David Lewis-Williams and the Archaeology Discussion Group, University of the Witwatersrand for discussions on a draft of this article. I thank the referees for their comments, notably for alerting me to the unpublished account of the She-Rhinoceros.

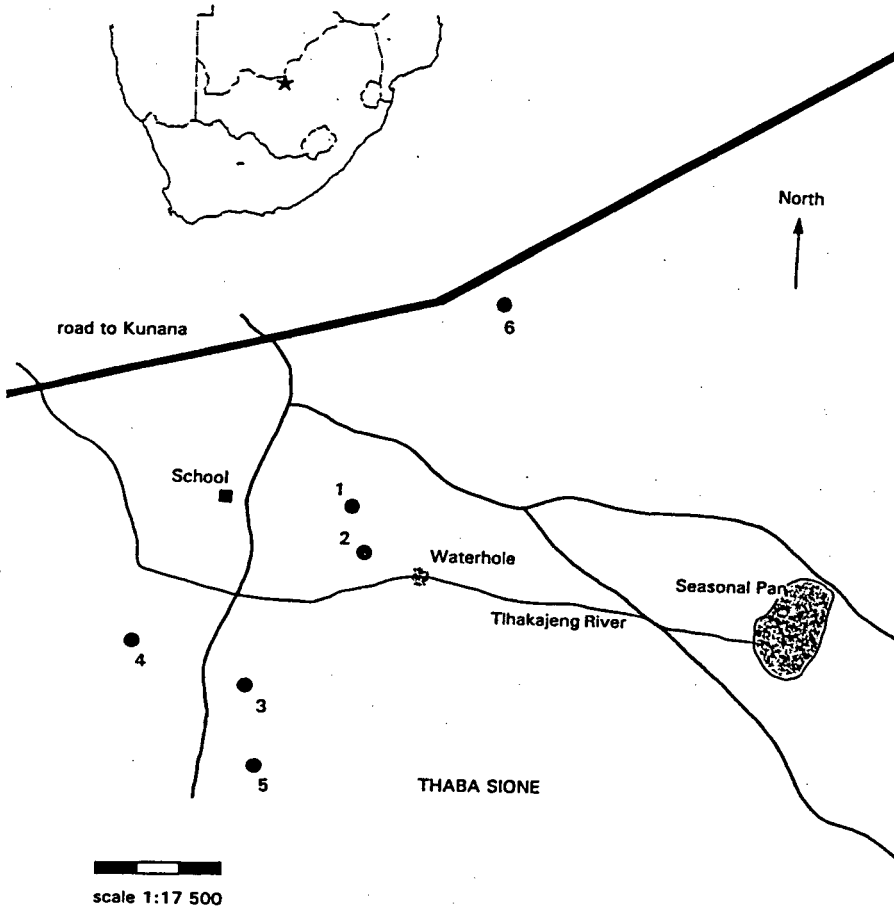


Figure 1. Location of sites and features.

The hill and engraving site of Thaba Sione constituted a hierophany at which certain San² communities of the central interior of South Africa explored and visually expressed the central truths of their religion. One such visual representation is a single engraved image class, consisting of five nuanced engravings,³ the iconography and placement of which make them a cynosure among the 554 other engravings and which provided Thaba Sione with a conceptual focus and pre-eminence. The engravings and site of Thaba Sione thus constitute a conceptual and physical space within which elements of San cognition and religion can be explored.

THE CONCEPTUAL SPACE

Cognitive archaeology has as its focus the concept-forming and world-structuring role of beliefs and ideologies held by archaeologically observed communities.⁴ In order to arrive at an understanding of past cognitive systems, it is of critical importance to analyse material culture, archaeological context and, where possible, relevant ethnography. The assumption that such an analysis will produce credible results is predicated on two interrelated assumptions.

Firstly, there is the uniformitarian assumption that processes operating in the present operated in the past and may be used to explain those past processes. In other words, the use of ethnographic analogy, though problematic, is central to most, if not all, archaeological enquiry.⁵

Secondly, many archaeologists assume that material culture has the potential to encode information that relates to the full spectrum of past, and

2. Attributing 'San' or 'Bushman' ethnicity to archaeologically observed foragers is problematic because the term implies a single indigenous group, thus masking considerable variability in belief, social organisation and so forth. Moreover, neither 'Bushman' nor 'San' are satisfactory terms in that they do not succeed in avoiding negative, sexist and undesirable political connotations. I retain the term 'San' but reject any negative connotations that 'San' may have. See also E.N. Wilmsen, *Land Filled with Flies: A Political Economy of the Kalahari* (Chicago, 1989); R. Gordon, *The Bushman Myth: The Making of a Namibian Underclass* (Boulder, 1992), 4-8; M. Biesele, *Women Like Meat: The Folklore and Foraging Ideology of the Kalahari Ju/'hoan* (Johannesburg, 1993), Author's Note.
3. Not all rock engravings are of San origin; some may be the product of non-San pastoralists and farmers (e.g., T.M.O'C. Maggs, 'Patterns and Perceptions of Stone-built Settlements in the Thukela Valley Late Iron Age', *Annals of the Natal Museum*, 29, 1988, 417-32). However, most engraved imagery and the contexts in which it occurs are considered to be of forager or San authorship.
4. C. Tilley, 'Interpretation and a Poetics of the Past', in C. Tilley (ed.), *Interpretative Archaeology* (Oxford, 1993), 4-10.
5. A. Wylie, 'The Reaction Against Analogy', *Advances in Archaeological Method and Theory*, 8, 1985, 63-111; A. Testart, 'Some Major Problems in the Social Anthropology of Hunter-gatherers', *Current Anthropology*, 27, 1988, 1-31; P.A. Roth, 'Ethnography without Tears', *Current Anthropology*, 30, 1989, 555-69; R. Auger, 'Ethnography: Storytelling or Science?', *Current Anthropology*, 36, 1995, 97-130.

even present, human activity.⁶ In practice, however, not all items of material culture are equally informative or tractable. Most excavated cultural remains are classified in utilitarian terms such as 'scraper', 'knife', 'foundations', 'hearth' and so on.⁷ linguistic terms which actually inhibit investigation into the non-utilitarian or cognitive concerns of forager communities. It is therefore necessary to turn to material culture that is theoretically informed. Southern African rock art imagery, together with its archaeological and ethnographic contexts, is currently the most appropriate item of material culture by which to construct interpretations of San cognition and religion.⁸

This adequacy, however, applies principally to rock paintings. Rock engravings are less well researched and although much quantitative rock engraving data exist for southern African rock engravings,⁹ little interpretative work has been conducted. It is, however, striking that a large proportion of southern African painted and engraved imagery contains a shared nucleus of highly distinctive features which has prompted researchers to state that many rock engravings were the product of a specific cognitive process: 'Whatever the differences may be, these shared details seem to

6. I. Hodder, 'Postprocessual Archaeology', *Advances in Archaeological Method and Theory*, 8, 1985, 5-6.; M. Shanks and C. Tilley, *Re-constructing Archaeology: Theory and Practice*, 2 edn (London, 1992), 137; I. Hodder, 'The Narrative and Rhetoric of Material Culture Sequences', *World Archaeology*, 25(2), 1993, 268-82.
7. A.J.B. Humphreys, 'Sociable Arrows', *The Digging Stick*, 1, 1984, 2-3; L. Wadley, 'The Fish in the Bored Stone: Symbolic Grave Goods in Stone Age Burials', Paper presented at the 9th biennial conference of the Southern African Association for Archaeologists, Johannesburg, 1988, 6-8.
8. See, for example, P. Vinnicombe, *People of the Eland: Rock Paintings of the Drakensberg Bushmen as a Reflection of their Life and Thought* (Pietermaritzburg, 1976), 347; J.D. Lewis-Williams, *Believing and Seeing: Symbolic Meanings in Southern San Rock Paintings* (London, 1981), 3-14; J.E. Parkington, 'Interpreting Paintings without Commentary', *Antiquity*, 63, 1989, 13-26; A. Solomon, 'Division of the Earth: Gender, Symbolism and the Archaeology of the Southern San', MA dissertation, University of Cape Town, 1989; Biesele, *Women Like Meat*, 194; T.A. Dowson, 'Reading Art, Writing History: Rock Art and Social Change in Southern Africa', *World Archaeology* 25(3), 1994, 332-45; M.G. Guenther, 'The Relationship of Bushman Art to Ritual and Folklore', in T.A. Dowson and J.D. Lewis-Williams (eds), *Contested Images: Diversity in Southern African Rock Art Research* (Johannesburg, 1994), 257-74; P. Skotnes, 'The Visual as a Site of Meaning: San Parietal Paintings and the Experience of Modern Art', in Dowson and Lewis-Williams (eds), *Contested Images*, 315-30.
9. S. Schönland, 'On Some Supposed Bushman Inscriptions and Rock Carvings found in Bechuanaland', *Transactions of the South African Philosophical Society*, 9, 1896, 19-20; L. Péringuey, 'On Rock Engravings of Animals and the Human Figure Found in South Africa', *Transactions of the South African Philosophical Society*, 18, 1909, 401-19; A.J.H. Goodwin, 'Vosberg: its Petroglyphs', *Annals of the South African Museum*, 24, 1936, 163-210; C. van Riet Lowe, 'Prehistoric Rock Engravings in the Vaal River Basin', *Transactions of the Royal Society of South Africa*, 24, 1937, 253-61; C. van Riet Lowe, 'Prehistoric Rock Engravings in the Krugersdorp-Rustenburg Area of the Transvaal', *South African Journal of Science*, 41, 1945, 329-44; C. van Riet Lowe, 'The Rock Engravings of Driekopseiland', *Actes du congrès panafricain de préhistoire*, Algiers, 1952, 769-72; C. van Riet Lowe, *The*

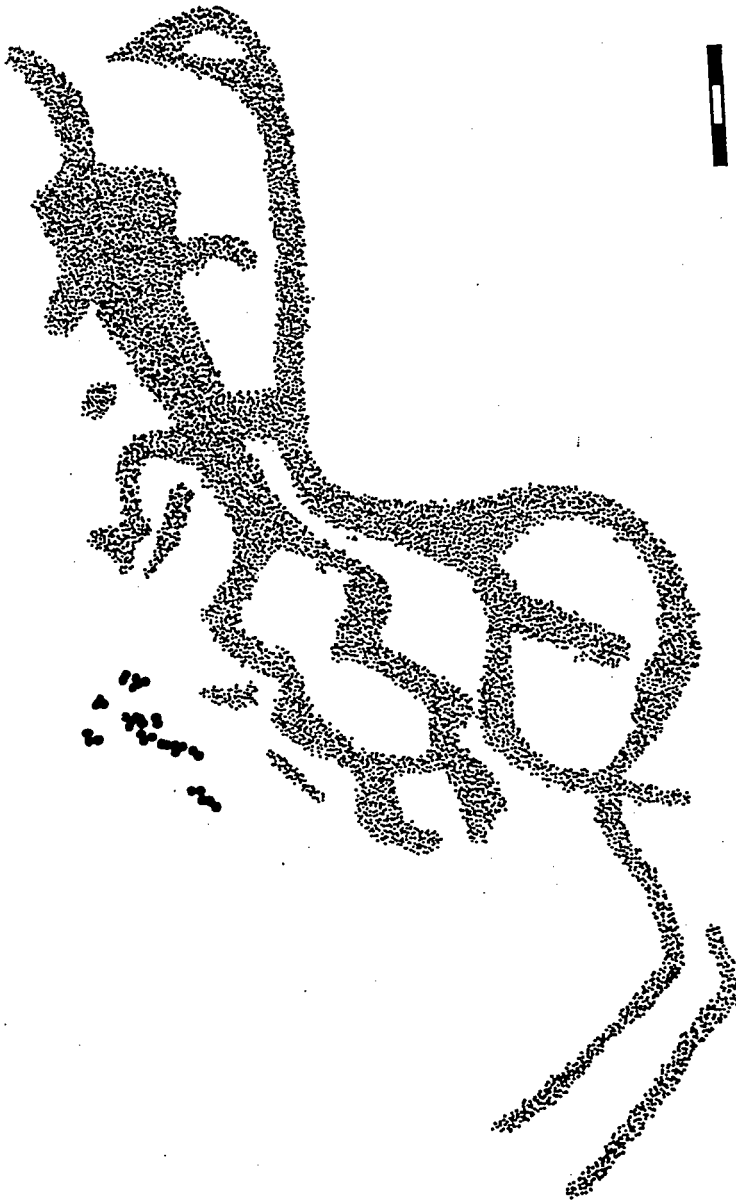


Figure 2. Engraved ostrich and human figure with zigzag legs indicative of somatic hallucination. Scale bar is 30 mm.

indicate that both art forms were the product of a single cognitive system.’¹⁰ This shared nucleus of features includes: a restricted range of animals depicted, geometric imagery, unusual body postures in human figures, complex ‘scenes’ and non-realistic features on animal and human depictions. These non-real features are often visually confusing. For example, certain human and animal figures are depicted with anatomically impossible detail such as the addition or absence of limbs, exaggerated size, conflation of animal and human characteristics and so on. These non-real features are, however, essential to an understanding of the various and highly complex San belief systems.¹¹

Because of the large number and detail of engraved non-real features, most researchers consider San rock engravings, like rock paintings, to have been influenced by shamanism (Figures 2 and 3).¹² Because of its ability to blend biological givens and forager social structures, an explanation centred on

Distribution of Prehistoric Rock Engravings and Paintings in South Africa, Archaeological Series VII (Pretoria, 1956); L.M. Slack, *Rock Engravings from Driekopseiland and other Sites South-west of Johannesburg* (London, 1962); J. Rudner and I. Rudner, ‘Rock Art of the Thirstland Areas’, *South African Archaeological Bulletin*, 23, 1968, 75-89; M. Wilman, *The Rock Engravings of Griqualand West and Bechuanaland, South Africa* (Cape Town, 1968); E.R. Scherz, *Felsbilder in Südwest-Afrika*, Teil I, (Cologne, 1970), Teil II, (Cologne, 1975), Teil III, (Cologne, 1986); K.W. Butzer, G.J. Fock, L. Scott and R. Stuckenrath, ‘Dating and Context of Rock Engravings in Southern Africa’, *Science* 203, 1979, 1201-14; G.J. Fock, *Felsbilder in Südafrika*. Teil I: Die Gravierungen auf Klipfontein, Kapprovins (Cologne, 1979), Teil II: Die Gravierungen auf Kinderdam und Kalahari (Cologne, 1984), Teil III: Die Felsbilder in Vaal-Oranje Becken (Cologne, 1989); A.I. Thackeray, J.F. Thackeray, P.B. Beaumont and J.C. Vogel, ‘Dated Rock Engravings from Wonderwerk Cave, South Africa’, *South African Journal of Science*, 214, 1981, 64-67; R. Steel, *Rock Engravings of the Magaliesberg Valley* (Johannesburg, 1988).

10. J.D. Lewis-Williams, *The Rock Art of Southern Africa*, (Cambridge, 1983), 31.

11. J.D. Lewis-Williams, *Reality and Non-reality in San Rock Art*, Twenty-fifth Raymond Dart Lecture (Johannesburg, 1988), 21.

12. Lewis-Williams, *The Rock Art of Southern Africa*, 31; J. Deacon, ‘“My Place is the Bitterpits”: The Home Territory of Bleek and Lloyd’s /Xam San Informants’, *African Studies*, 45, 1986, 135-55; J. Deacon, ‘The Power of a Place in Understanding Southern San Rock Engravings’, *World Archaeology*, 20, 1988, 129-40; J. Deacon, ‘Rock Engravings and the Folklore of Bleek and Lloyd’s /Xam San Informants’, in Dowson and Lewis-Williams (eds), *Contested Images*, 237-56; D. Morris, ‘Engraved in Place and Time: A Review of Variability of the Rock Art of the Northern Cape and Karoo’, *South African Archaeological Bulletin*, 43, 1988, 109-21; T.A. Dowson, *The Rock Engravings of Southern Africa*, (Johannesburg, 1992); see also R.J. Mason, *Prehistory of the Transvaal* (Johannesburg, 1969), 360-70; A. Campbell, J. Denbow and E.N. Wilmsen, ‘Paintings like Engravings: Rock Art at Tsodilo’, in Dowson and Lewis-Williams (eds), *Contested Images*, 131-58; for paintings see Lewis-Williams, *Believing and Seeing*; T.N. Huffman, ‘The Trance Hypothesis and the Rock Art of Zimbabwe’, *South African Archaeological Society Goodwin Series*, 4, 1983, 49-53; P. Garlake, *The Hunter’s Vision: The Prehistoric Art of Zimbabwe* (Avon, 1995); Parkington, ‘Interpreting Paintings Without Commentary’, 13-26; R. Yates and A. Manhire, ‘Shamanism and Rock Paintings: Aspects of the Use of Rock Art in the South-west Cape, South Africa’, *South African Archaeological Bulletin*, 46, 1991, 3-11; T.A. Dowson, and J.D. Lewis-Williams (eds), *Contested Images*.

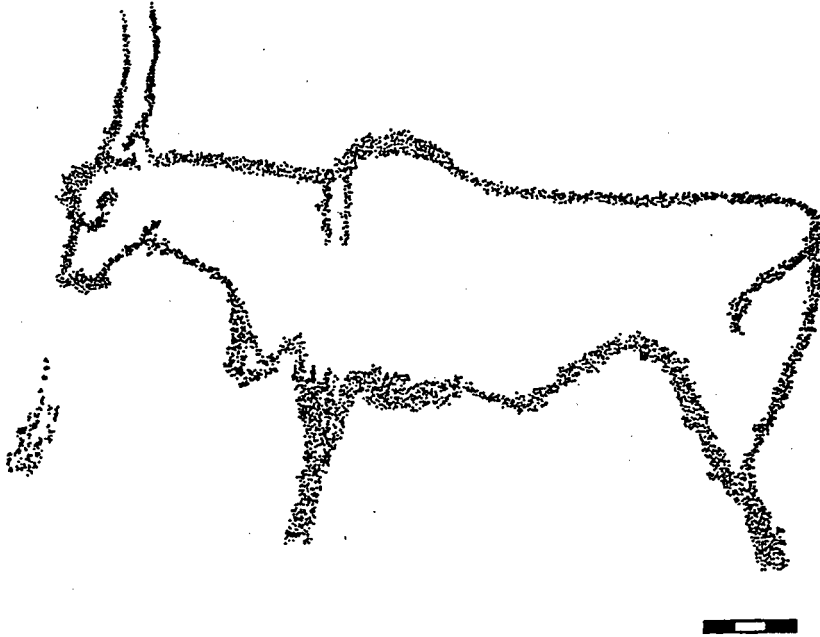


Figure 3. Engraved eland with nasal emission. Scale bar is 30 mm.

shamanism can provide a comprehensive account of the production and iconography of San engravings and paintings.

Most non-real features are, in fact, representations of visual, somatic, auditory, olfactory and tactile hallucinations sometimes experienced whilst in an altered state of consciousness. This altered state of consciousness was most often accessed by religious specialists or shamans. Shamans may be described as symbolically literate people who were able to assimilate and present their altered state experiences in terms of everyday experience. In other words, shamans operated in the real world of everyday experience or normal reality as well as operating in an extra-ordinary reality: the non-real spirit world in which the shaman experienced strange and inversive places, people and creatures. These two realities were woven together by the shamans in the form of oral accounts and painted and engraved representations. For this reason, 'real' and 'non-real' are analytical devices that facilitate and reflect our non-shamanistic construction of a Cartesian unitary self and binary perception of external realities. 'Real' objects and events are those experienced while in an ordinary, waking state of consciousness. 'Non-real' objects and events are those experienced while in altered or hallucinatory states of consciousness. These non-real visions and experiences function as metaphors that can individually or

simultaneously presence certain aspects of San shamanism. San life and thought was thus an apparently unproblematic co-existence of multiple realities.

Both real and non-real features found visual expression in the form of rock art imagery, but because the imagery was generated by an articulation of human biological givens and socially and historically situated circumstances which could occur at any – and many – times, its meaning is not necessarily determined by time.¹³ Hence dating rock engravings is not a prerequisite for interpretation. Shamanism was able to survive the impact of black and white colonialism until comparatively recently, though its emphasis certainly shifted¹⁴ and elements of forager and farmer beliefs were contiguous, and were assimilated, ignored and modified.

'San shamanism' is and was not, however, a monolithic category. Rather, it provided a polyvalent conceptual matrix for the fluid, ambiguous, idiosyncratic and personal beliefs of many San individuals and communities. Shamanism is a creative fund of beliefs that synergistically linked every single facet of forager life, including issues of gender,¹⁵ representation,¹⁶ power relations,¹⁷ trade,¹⁸ myth,¹⁹ economic relations²⁰ and so forth. As Yates and Manhire point out:

We can now appreciate that the type of shamanism practised by southern African hunter-gatherers entailed an all-encompassing world-view, the influences of which extended into every sphere of their existence.²¹

13. For a fuller discussion of dating see Goodwin, 'Vosberg', 163-210; Butzer *et al.*, 'Dating and Context of Rock Engravings, 1201-12; A.I. Thackeray, 'Dating the Rock Art of Southern Africa', *South African Archaeological Society Goodwin Series*, 4, 1983, 21-6; D. Morris and P. Beaumont, 'Portable Rock Engravings at Sprinbokooog and the Archaeological Contexts of Rock Art of the Upper Karoo', in Dowson and Lewis-Williams (eds), *Contested Images*, 11-28; D.S. Whitley and H.J. Annegarn, 'Cation-ratio Dating of Rock Engravings from Klipfontein, Northern Cape', in Dowson and Lewis-Williams (eds), *Contested Images*, 189-97.
14. M.G. Guenther, 'The Trance Dancer as an Agent of Social Change among the Farm Bushmen of the Ghanzi District', *Botswana Notes and Records*, 7, 1975, 161-66; Dowson, 'Reading Art, Writing History'.
15. A. Solomon, 'Division of the Earth'; A. Solomon, "'Mythic Women": A Study in Variability in San Rock Art and Narrative', in Dowson and Lewis-Williams (eds), *Contested Images*, 331-72; J. Stevenson, 'Shaman Images in San Rock Art: A Question of Gender', Paper presented at the 13th Biennial conference of the Southern African Association of Archaeologists, Pietermaritzburg, 1994.
16. Skotnes, 'The Visual as a Site of Meaning'.
17. Dowson, 'Reading Art, Writing History'.
18. S. Ouzman, 'The Fish, the Shaman and the Peregrination: San Rock Paintings of Mormyrid Fish as Social and Religious Metaphors', *Southern African Field Archaeology*, 4, 1995.
19. Deacon, 'Rock Engravings and the Folklore of Bleek and Lloyd's /Xam San Informants'; Guenther, 'The Relationship of Bushman Art to Ritual and Folklore'.
20. J.D. Lewis-Williams, 'The Economic and Social Context of Southern San Rock Art', *Current Anthropology*, 23, 1982, 429-49.
21. Yates and Manhire, 'Shamanism and Rock Paintings', 3.

There are, however, also significant differences in San shamanistic experience and representation, even among closely related groups. It is therefore necessary, where possible, to study the specific cultural context of San communities.

I therefore confine my discussion, unless otherwise stated, to two San macro-communities. First, the San of the central interior of South Africa for whom extensive ethnography exists, specifically for the now extinct /Xam.²² Secondly, I use ethnographies of the !Kung, or Ju/'hoan, who live to the north of Thaba Sione in Botswana and Namibia and who display remarkable contiguity with certain /Xam beliefs.²³ Ethnographic accounts contain numerous biases, such as the belief that informants provide information which is able easily to be assimilated and made sense of by Western perceptions. Many ethnographic accounts also create an illusion that they are objective and authentic.²⁴ In addition, the /Xam informants were a devastated remnant of a functioning society and their testimony was recorded by two women and a man who largely subscribed to a male-dominated Victorian world-view.

The Thaba Sione foragers were, however, probably similar to the /Xam and !Kung in terms of subsistence patterns, social organisation and material culture. In addition, a comparison of the Thaba Sione imagery and /Xam and !Kung ethnography indicates strong parallels in shamanistic belief.²⁵ I suggest that the Thaba Sione engravings hold additional and differential insights into San belief that cannot be reached from a consideration of rock paintings

22. See, for example, W.H.I. Bleek and L.C. Lloyd, *Specimens of Bushmen Folklore* (London, 1911); D.F. Bleek, 'Customs and Beliefs of the /Xam Bushman. Part IV: 'Omens, Wind-making, Clouds', *Bantu Studies* 6, 1932, 323-42; Part V: 'The Rain', *Bantu Studies*, 7, 1933a, 297-312; Part VI: 'Rain-making', *Bantu Studies*, 7, 1933b, 375-92; Part VII: 'Sorcerers', *Bantu Studies*, 9, 1935, 1-47; D.F. Bleek, *A Bushman Dictionary* (New Haven, 1956).
23. See, for example, L. Marshall, '!Kung Bushman Religious Beliefs', *Africa*, 32, 1962, 221-51; L. Marshall, *The !Kung of Nyae Nyae* (Cambridge, Mass, 1976); G.B. Silberbauer, *Bushman Survey* (Gaborones, 1965); R.B. Lee, *The !Kung: Men, Women and Work in a Foraging Society* (Cambridge, 1979); R.B. Lee, *The Dobe !Kung* (New York, 1984); M. Shostak, *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981); R. Katz, *Boiling Energy: Community Healing Among the Kalahari !Kung* (Cambridge, Mass, 1982); Gordon, *The Bushman Myth; Biesele, Women Like Meat*; but see Wilmsen, *Land Filled with Flies*; O. Gulbrandsen, 'On the Problem of Egalitarianism: The Kalahari San in Transition', in R. Gronhaug, G. Haaland and G. Henriksen (eds), *The Ecology of Choice and Symbol: Essays in Honour of Frederik Barth* (Bergen, 1991), 81-110; S. Kent, 'The Current Forager Controversy: Real Versus Ideal Views of Hunter-gatherers', *Man* (N.S.), 27, 1992, 45-70.
24. Wylie, 'The Reaction Against Analogy', 79-80; J. Clifford and G. Marcus, (eds), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley, 1986); G. Marcus and M. Fisher, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (Chicago, 1986).
25. See also M. Biesele, 'A Note on the Beliefs of Modern Bushman concerning the Tsodilo Hills', *Newsletter of the South West Africa Scientific Society*, 15, 1974, 1-3; J.D. Lewis-Williams, 'Ideological Continuities in Prehistoric Southern Africa: The Evidence of Rock Art', in C. Schrire (ed.), *Past and Present in Hunter-gatherer Studies* (Orlando, 1984), 225-52; Deacon, 'Rock Engravings and the Folklore', 355-56.

alone. San engravings are rich sources of meaning and can simultaneously presence a wealth of associations. I suggest that within this multivocality, each image or image-field has a dominant meaning which can sometimes be fathomed by examining the conceptual and physical space within which the image is located.

THE PHYSICAL SPACE

Thaba Sione is a cluster of six rock engraving locales situated at S26° 20' 58" and E25° 25' 27" in what was previously Bophutatswana, in the North West province of South Africa (Figure 1). The largest of the six engraving sites, Thaba Sione 1 (Figure 1, number 1), comprises a low hill accented with many dolerite boulders and which rises to a height of 8,5 metres above the now arid surrounding plain (Figure 4). The seasonal Thlakajeng River which contains numerous waterholes runs 350 metres south-west of Thaba Sione 1 and is visible from the hilltop. The hill site is bounded by twenty-seven standing stones that have been rubbed smooth by rhinoceroses which, after wallowing in the mud of the Thlakajeng waterholes, would move to the standing stones to rub off mud and ectoparasites.²⁶ An extensive Later Stone Age lithic scatter indicates that the hill site was an important location for people who were engaged in foraging subsistence strategies. Sites 2 to 6 are located on flat or gently undulating ground and have between one and thirty-two engraved images. There are no other engraving sites nearby and the six Thaba Sione sites may be



Figure 4. The main site, Thaba Sione 1.

26. See R.S. Smithers, *The Mammals of the Southern African Subregion* (Pretoria, 1983), 560-64.

described as an engraving 'cluster' or 'complex' of which the hill site – site 1 – is my focus, principally on account of the 559 identifiable engraved images located on or close to the hill. These images include depictions of baboon, birds, buffalo, eland, elephant, felines, giraffe, human figures, lizard, ostrich, rhinoceros, warthog and zebra (e.g., Figures 2 and 3) and more recent depictions of chickens and crosses.²⁷ All the engravings are pecked, with no scraped or incised images present. Certain images have also been rubbed (e.g., Figure 5).



Figure 5a. Pecked and rubbed black rhinoceroses.

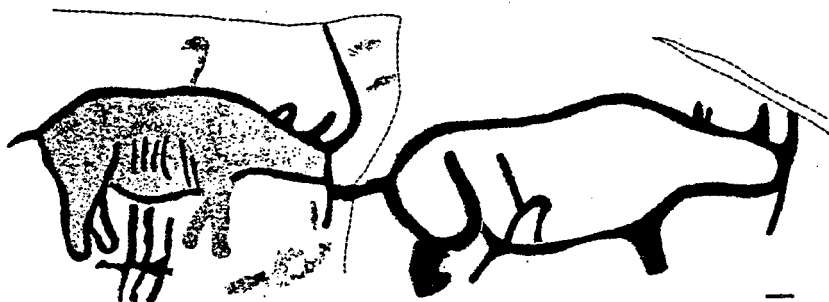


Figure 5b. Redrawing of Figure 5a. Scale bar is 30 mm.

27. Regarding techniques of representation, I have used ink redrawings based on field tracings and black and white photographs. Because of the patinated, non-contrasting nature of most of the Thaba Sione engravings photographs do not provide sufficient clarity and one cannot distinguish between natural and engraved marks. Redrawings are currently the most adequate technique of representation. Compare, for example, Figures 5a and b, 6a and b. Also, the antelope visible in Figure 6 barely registers on photographic film.

I focus my discussion on five of these engravings, what I term the engraved 'cynosure'. These five engravings represent rhinoceroses (Figures, 5, 6, 7, 9 and 11) and each engraving is nuanced by the addition of 'non-realistic' features. Though these five engravings are a numerically insignificant component of the Thaba Sione engraved complex, the placement and number of nuanced features on these five rhinoceros engravings far outweigh those on other images, thus signifying the pre-eminence of rhinoceroses at Thaba Sione. I now argue that on this engraved cynosure, information was expressed and negotiated which related to three aspects of San shamanism, namely shamanic transformation, gender relations and rain-making.

RHINOCEROS IMAGES AND SAN SHAMANISM

There is very little San ethnographic information specific to rhinoceroses. What does exist, however, indicates that rhinoceroses were of supernatural importance to certain San people. Commenting on a copy of a rock painting, a /Xam informant identified two animals surrounded by human figures in postures unequivocally associated with trance performance as rhinoceroses.²⁸ The /Xam informant thus did not think it unusual or out of place to have rhinoceroses depicted in a clearly shamanistic context.²⁹ Similarly, many of the rare rock paintings of rhinoceroses are depicted in clearly shamanistic contexts.³⁰ There are two other archaeological observations that support the supernatural importance of rhinoceroses in San religious thought.

First, one of the earliest dated examples of southern African rock art is a mobiliary rock painting of a black rhinoceros.³¹ Associated mobiliary paintings have clear shamanistic referents,³² and it would appear that rhinoceroses held an important place in San religious thought for an appreciable time. Secondly, and in contrast with the rock paintings, the numerical preponderance of rhinoceroses in southern African rock engravings is marked. Rhinoceroses are well represented, even dominant, at numerous engraving sites in the Free State, Gauteng, Northern Cape and North West provinces of South Africa³³ and at numerous Namibian sites.³⁴

28. G.W. Stow and D.F. Bleek, *Rock Paintings in South Africa* (London, 1930), explanation of plate 32.

29. See also H. Tongue, *Bushman Paintings* (London, 1909), plate 17; S. Schmidt, *Märchen aus Namibian* (Cologne, 1980); S. Schmidt, *Catalogue of the Khoisan Folktales of Southern Africa* (Hamburg, 1989).

30. For example, Stow and Bleek, *Rock Paintings in South Africa*, plates 9, 47 and 63; T. Johnson, H. Rabinowitz and P. Sieff, *Rock Paintings of the South-west Cape* (Cape Town, 1959), Figure 15.

31. W.E. Wendt, "'Art Mobilier' from the Apollo 11 Cave, South West Africa: Africa's Oldest Dated Works of Art", *South African Archaeological Bulletin*, 31, 1976, 5-11.

32. Lewis-Williams, 'Ideological Continuities', 245-46.

33. For example, Wilman, *The Rock Engravings*; Fock, *Felsbilder in Südafrika*, Teil I; Fock and Fock, *Felsbilder in Südafrika*, Teil II and III; Morris, 'Engraved in Place and Time'.

34. Scherz, *Felsbilder in Südwest-Afrika*, Teil I, II and III.



Figure 6a. Pecked white rhinoceros, two human figures and an antelope.

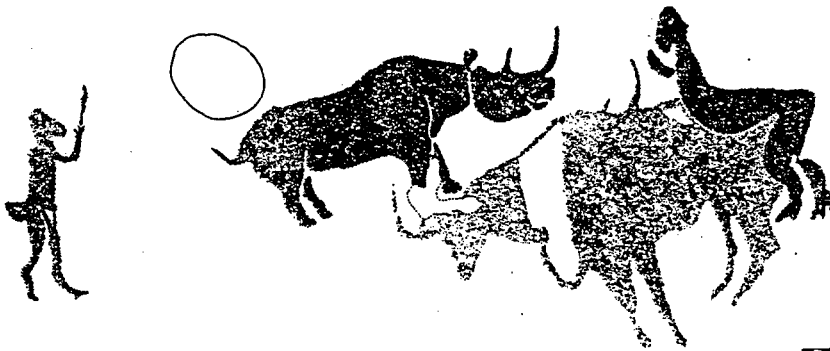


Figure 6b. Redrawing of Figure 6a. Scale bar is 30 mm.

At Thaba Sione rhinoceroses constitute the second largest category of identifiable imagery (62 images or 11,1 per cent) after human figures (72 images or 12,9 per cent). Given the geographically extensive distribution of rhinoceros engravings, I argue that the paucity of ethnographic information relating specifically to rhinoceroses indicates a lacuna in the ethnographic record rather than a real absence of San beliefs about rhinoceroses. I suggest these rhinoceros beliefs were recorded, not in a textual idiom by ethnographers, but in the form of certain rock engravings which I have used as a primary source of evidence.



Figure 7a. A rhinoceros therianthrope.

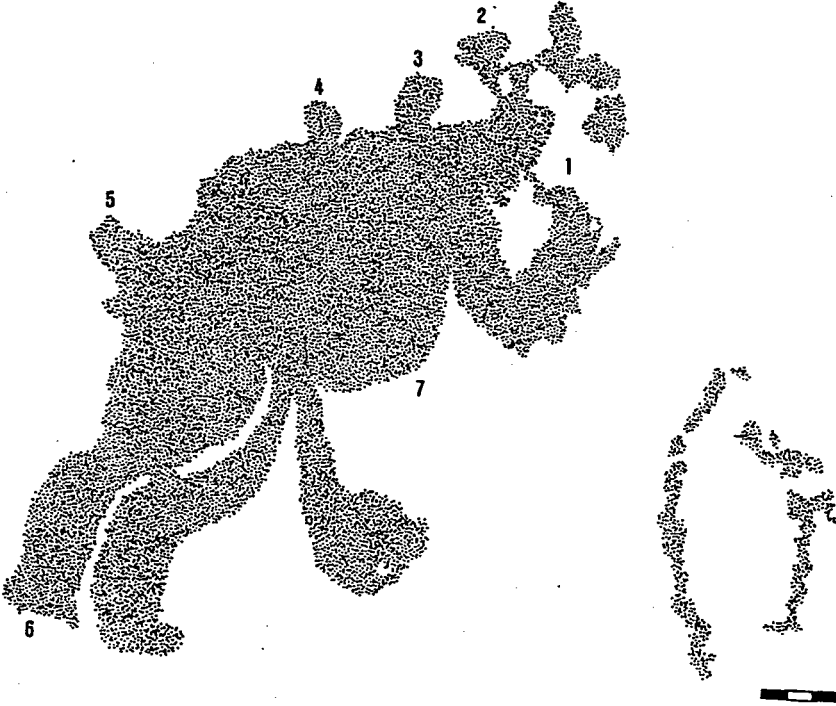


Figure 7b. Redrawing of Figure 7a. Scale bar is 30 mm.

At Thaba Sione rhinoceros images are not only well-represented numerically, but engravings of rhinoceroses are nuanced by more non-real features, combinations and variations of engraving techniques, and occur in more complex 'scenes', than any other image class. Of the 62 engravings of rhinoceroses at Thaba Sione, approximately 65 per cent are of the white rhinoceros, *Ceratotherium simum* (e.g., Figure 6). This identification is based on three features: the animal's pronounced nuchal hump; its large front horn; and its square lip. The remaining 35 per cent of the depictions are of the smaller black rhinoceros, *Diceros bicornis* (e.g., Figure 9). This identification is based on two features: the hook lip that hangs from its upper jaw and its smaller nuchal hump. Both animals were historically endemic to the area around Thaba Sione, despite their slightly differing habitat preferences.³⁵

Rhinoceroses are large animals, the white rhinoceros weighing up to 2 300 kilograms.³⁶ Moreover, there is a layer of fat between the hide and the flesh of both species; on the white rhinoceros this can be up to, or can even exceed, a thickness of 50 millimetres.³⁷ Because many San people believed that fat contained a high concentration of supernatural potency, as, for example in eland,³⁸ it is likely that they believed rhinoceroses to have been especially potent animals. Some shamans probably drew on rhinoceros potency in order to perform their tasks such as healing, controlling game, out-of-body travel and so on, as many drew on eland potency. More specifically, rhinoceros imagery at Thaba Sione may have been involved in shamanic transformation, gender relations and rain-making, each of which I discuss in turn.

RHINOCEROS IMAGES AND SHAMANIC TRANSFORMATION

I now consider the engraved evidence of the first of the five cynosuric engravings at Thaba Sione which implicates rhinoceroses with shamanic transformation. The first cynosuric image is of a non-real bipedal figure which has both human and rhinoceros attributes (Figure 7). There are five reasons why this image should be regarded as a rhinoceros therianthrope and not a human figure.

Firstly, a shamanistic context is suggested by the fact that the figure has its hand to its nose (feature 1). During a medicine dance,³⁹ !Kung shamans sometimes experienced nasal haemorrhage, before or after which they

35. C.J. Skead, *Historical Mammal Incidence in the Cape Province*, Vol. 1 (Cape Town, 1980), 293.

36. Smithers, *The Mammals of the Southern African Subregion*, 559-61.

37. *Ibid.*, 559.

38. Lewis-Williams, *Believing and Seeing*, 6.

39. L. Marshall, 'The Medicine Dance of the !Kung Bushmen', *Africa*, 39, 1969, 347-81.

entered an altered state of consciousness in which they could assume the form and potency of supernaturally potent animals. Figures with a hand raised to the nose frequently appear in depictions of medicine dances.⁴⁰ Secondly, the projection at the end of the figure's head is very thick and probably depicts the front horn of a rhinoceros (feature 2). Similarly, the smaller horn as well as the ear of a rhinoceros may be represented as projections from the back of the figure (features 3 and 4). These projections are consonant with the ear and smaller horn of the other rhinoceros imagery at Thaba Sione (e.g., Figures 5 and 6).

A third point that indicates rhinoceros-like attributes is the short, thick projection further down the back of the figure that probably represents a tail (feature 5). This 'tail' is not long, like an antelope tail, but is short and thick like a rhinoceros's tail. Fourthly, the left leg of the figure is formally identical to the hind leg of a rhinoceros (feature 6). The right leg, on the other hand, terminates in a human foot, a feature that indicates that the figure is part-man, part-rhinoceros. Finally, the fat, pendulous body of the figure (feature 7) is formally consonant with depictions of rhinoceros bodies at Thaba Sione (e.g., Figures 5 and 9).

These five points and seven features suggest that the engraving probably represents a shaman in trance who has assumed, in part, rhinoceros form and potency. Support for this type of representation of shamanic transformation comes from the engraving site of Kinderdam, 80 kilometres west of Thaba Sione, where there is another example of a rhinoceros therianthrope.⁴¹ Depictions of rhinoceros transformations appear to have been part of a shamanistic belief system constructed by certain San communities of the central interior.

RHINOCEROS IMAGES AND GENDER RELATIONS

Another element of this belief system involves San constructions and representations of gender relations. San gender relations were and are very subtle and because of a lack of research⁴² the role of rock art imagery in constructing and negotiating gender relations is uncertain. It is true to say that much of ethnographically-observed San social life is replete with sexual metaphor.⁴³ Given that gender, like shamanism, was a fundamental and

40. Wilman, *The Rock Engravings*, plates 49, 51, 54; Dowson, *The Rock Engravings*, 72-73; Note: the small island of unengraved rock as well as the indentation in the engraved horn are visually confusing but are consistent with the visual appearance of most engravings and are most adequately explained as representing a rhinoceros horn.

41. Wilman, *The Rock Engravings*, plate 51; Fock and Fock, *Felsbilder in Südafrika*, Teil II; see also R. Camby, 'Rock Art in Namibia', *Pictogram*, 7(2), 1995, 15.

42. But see Solomon, 'Division of the Earth' and 'Mythic Women'; Stevenson, 'Shaman Images'.

43. Shostak, *Nisa*; Katz, *Boiling Energy*, 52, 61, 131, 175, 185-87; Solomon, 'Division of the Earth'; Biesele, *Women Like Meat*, 1-2.

pervasive structuring principle of San social life, evidence of San gender relations is likely to be represented in rock engravings. Painted and engraved sexual referents such as erect penises, exaggerated labia, breasts and copulation scenes indicate that the earthiness of the San is an old heritage and provides a good departure point for a gendered search through the Thaba Sione rock engravings. I now discuss three engravings at Thaba Sione, all of which have been nuanced by the addition of non-realistic features which relate to San shamanism and gender relations.

The first engraving is a non-cynosuric representation of a beaked human figure with its arms held back (Figure 8), an unusual posture that !Kung ethnography indicates is assumed when shamans ask the god for more supernatural potency in order to heal more effectively.⁴⁴ More enigmatic is the figure's large 'infibulated penis' which is clearly not real (see also Figure 7). A clue to the meaning of this exaggerated penis may lie in the !Kung belief that the god had a huge, horned penis which substantially contributed to his fearsome appearance.⁴⁵

Similarly, the god's spirit-world companions are sometimes called 'big penis' or 'elephant penis'⁴⁶ and it would appear that the penis was a referent or metaphor for a threatening supernatural persona. I now suggest that the physical context of the engraved penis on Figure 8 was a referent for differential access to spiritual resources.

The penis of Figure 8 has been placed to within 10 millimetres of a crack in the rock. It has been argued that cracks and irregularities in the rock surface were perceived as pathways to and from the San spirit world which was believed to reside behind the rock face.⁴⁷ I suggest that Figure 8 is about to 'enter' the spirit world and, in doing so, is making a statement about gender, expressed in asymmetrical and male-dominant terms, about active and forceful male entry into and control of, the spirit world and its resources. The crack may be a graphic expression of a perceived or wished-for passive female acquiescence and acknowledgement of the power of a masculine shamanistic ideology. This statement is supported by the !Kung belief that successful (male) shamans were sexually accomplished.⁴⁸

This interpretation should be qualified, however, in the light of the subtlety of San shamanism and life in general. For example, the fact that the !Kung word *n/um* can mean sorcery (shamanism), power, medicine and menstruation,⁴⁹ provides support for the claim that there was a dominant or

44. Lewis-Williams, *Believing and Seeing*, 88.

45. M. Biesele, "Old K"xau", in J. Halifax (ed.), *Shamanic Voices: A Survey of Visionary Narratives* (New York, 1991), 57-8.

46. Katz, *Boiling Energy*, 113.

47. J.D. Lewis-Williams and T.A. Dowson, 'Through the Veil: San Rock Paintings and the Rock Face', *South African Archaeological Bulletin*, 45, 1990, 5-16.

48. Katz, *Boiling Energy*, 186.

49. *Ibid.*, 92.

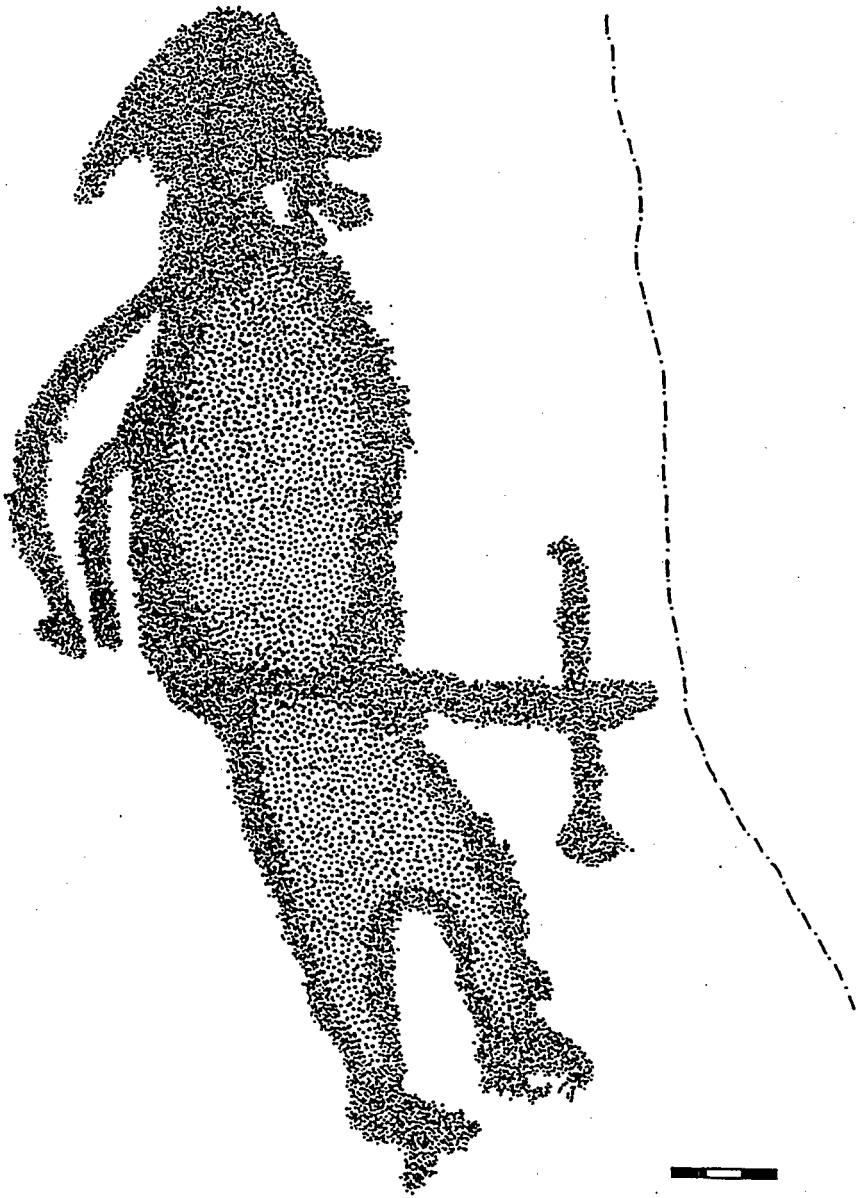


Figure 8. Beaked human figure in an arms-back posture with 'infibulated' penis associated with a crack. Scale bar is 30 mm.

omnipresent feminine religious ideology in !Kung society. Similarly, in !Kung thought, women were believed to be able to enter altered states of consciousness more easily than men.⁵⁰

A more subtle fusion, even confusion, of gendered ideologies is represented by the second cynosuric engraving (Figure 5). The horns of two engraved black rhinoceroses have been deliberately lengthened and truncated in order to be associated with a crack and a step in the rock face respectively. These two engraved horns are thus not real but are closely associated with an entrance to the spirit world which the engraved rhinoceroses are either entering, leaving or guarding. On a more specific level, it is the horns that, like the penis, could 'enter' and exploit the spirit world. It is therefore likely that 'horns' were an inversive referent or metaphor for a feminine religious ideology. Support for this interpretation is provided by the /Xam account of the 'She-Rhinoceros and her Elder Daughter's Suitors',⁵¹ in which repeated mention is made of the long and short horns of the She-rhinoceros in an explicitly inversive, sexual context. In this account, the She-rhinoceros uses her long or 'real' horn to chase off her elder daughter !Khwa-khe's suitors, thus assuming an active threatening role as well as a protective one against the sexual overtures of the suitors.

The third cynosuric engraving at Thaba Sione also used nuanced horn imagery to make a statement about gender relations. An engraving of a black rhinoceros has numerous engraved non-real features including a horizontal horn-like projection (Figure 9). The projection is engraved in addition to the

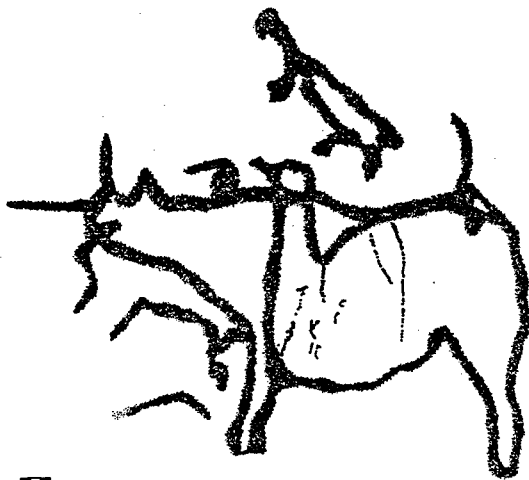


Figure 9. Pecked outline engraving of black rhinoceros with non-realistic features. Scale bar is 30 mm.

50. *Ibid.*, 167.

51. Jagger Library Archives, Cape Town (JL), W.H.I. Bleek and L.C. Lloyd, Unpublished Manuscript LVIII-5: 6449-7375.

two real horns and the three horns are thus 'non-real', though the extra horn appears to be based on a real deformity of the front horn that is known to occur amongst rhinoceroses.⁵² The deformity typically occurs amongst female rhinoceroses and is used for warding off attacking carnivores.⁵³ Because three horns are clearly non-real, they indicate a supernatural significance. I suggest that the image, like the rhinoceros therianthrope, also depicts a transformed shaman. Beneficent and protective, this shaman warded off the carnivore representations of powerful and malevolent shamans.⁵⁴ More specifically, the horn deformity may be making a statement concerning gender relations within San society, possibly attempting to emphasise the role of the female shaman as a large and potent guardian and protector. This message is, however, ambiguous because the horn projection is engraved on a black rhinoceros which is anti-social, unpredictable and violent.⁵⁵

It is uncertain whether the engravings of rhinoceroses with nuanced horns⁵⁶ (Figures 5 and 9) are supportive of feminine or masculine gender and power relations. These images probably contain elements of both ideologies; a construction which is consonant with many aspects of shamanistic practice within which boundaries were constantly being realigned and manipulated. Many transcendent experiences, like shamanism, are said to be extremely confusing and inersive, making the construction of discrete categories of self and external realities almost impossible. Whilst in an altered state of consciousness shamans undergo multiple ego divisions, apparently unproblematically.⁵⁷ The shaman was a category of person who moved between real and non-real worlds, beings and experiences. Keeping a distinct gender identity or allegiance in this bewildering context would be neither possible nor appropriate. Furthermore, certain shamans may have wished to keep their religious experiences shrouded from non-shamans and so entrench and even intensify their control of a spiritual resource.

52. R.N. Owen-Smith, *Megaherbivores: The Influence of Very Large Body Size on Ecology* (Cambridge, 1973), 129.

53. *Ibid.*, 129.

54. Bleek and Lloyd, *Specimens*, 187; Lewis-Williams, *Believing and Seeing*, 97; Bieseke, *Women Like Meat*, 111.

55. Smithers, *The Mammals of the Southern African Subregion*, 560.

56. For further examples of rock engravings and paintings of rhinoceroses with nuanced horns see H.C. Woodhouse, *When Animals were People: A-Z of Animals of Southern Africa as the Bushmen Saw and Thought them and as the Camera Sees them Today* (Cape Town, 1984), 55; Dowson, *The Rock Engravings*, 84-87.

57. I.M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion: A Study of Shamanism and Spirit Possession*, 2 edn (London, 1989), 45, 48-50; M. Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (London, 1989), 27, 31-32, 62; J. Halifax, *Shamanic Voices* (New York, 1991); see also Guenther, 'The Trance Dancer', 165-66; Bieseke, *Women Like Meat*, 70-74; A.B. Smith, 'Metaphors of Space: Rock Art and Territoriality. Southern Africa', in Dowson and Lewis-Williams (eds.), *Contested Images*, 373-84.

San gender relations, like many aspects of shamanism, appear to have been characterised by ambiguity and even tension.⁵⁸ These two cynosuric rhinoceros engravings (Figures 5 and 9) were, like shamans, neither male nor female, feminine or masculine. Rather, they were wilfully ambiguous constructions incorporating elements of both,⁵⁹ and each could have been differentially emphasised as the specific historical and social circumstance demanded. It is therefore worth while to regard at least some rock engravings and paintings as 'sites of struggle' in which power relations within San groups were asymmetrically and graphically represented.

RHINOCEROS IMAGES AND RAIN-MAKING

San rain-making was another area which was simultaneously shamanistic and gendered, and which was a potential site of struggle. Rain-making was an important shamanistic activity for many San groups.⁶⁰ The rain-making ritual provides a good example of the interplay of the real, apparent in an ordinary state of consciousness, and the non-real, apparent in an altered state of consciousness.

The rain-making ritual was, on the one hand, an actual event in which the whole San group was involved. The performative context was a medicine dance in which people sang, clapped, danced, talked and contributed to the texture and ambience of the occasion.⁶¹ On the other hand, the genesis, capture and slaughter of the rain-animal was an hallucination which was believed to occur in the spirit world and was thus an event in which only the rain-shamans could participate. The rain-shamans would pacify and capture the rain which was perceived in zoomorphic terms as an animal which the /Xam called *!khwa-ka xoro* or 'rain-animal',⁶² though they knew that rain was really *!khwa //ki* or 'rain-liquid'. The rain-animal was further perceived as either an irascible 'rain-bull' (*!khwa gwai*) characterised by thunder and lightning, and harmful to life, or as a more desirable 'rain-cow' (*!khwa /aiti*) which provided the soft, soaking rains that renewed the veld.⁶³ The shamans

58. R. Katz and M. Biesele, '!Kung Healing: The Symbolism of Sex Roles and Culture Change', in M. Biesele, R. Gordon and R.B. Lee (eds), *The Past and Future of !Kung Ethnography: Critical Reflections and Symbolic Perspectives. Essays in Honour of Lorna Marshall*, Quellen zur Khoisan-Forschung 4 (Hamburg, 1986), 195-230; Solomon, 'Mythic Women', 345-46.

59. Solomon, 'Mythic Women', 367.

60. J.M. Orpen, 'A Glimpse into the Mythology of the Maluti Bushmen', *Cape Monthly Magazine* (N.S.), 9(49), 1874, 1-13; Bleek, 'Omens, Wind-making', 'The Rain', 'Rain-making'.

61. Marshall, 'The Medicine Dance', 365.

62. Bleek, 'The Rain', 'Rain-making'.

63. Bleek, 'The Rain', 298, 308, 'Rain-making', 375, 378-82; Lewis-Williams, *Believing and Seeing*, 108-109; see also Marshall, '!Kung Bushman', 234.

had to confront, subdue, capture and fetter the rain-animal with a thong and bring it out of the waterhole which it was believed to inhabit.⁶⁴ To lead the rain-animal was an ambiguous experience, combining real and non-real, seen and unseen. For example, the /Xam word *ɬamma* can mean 'to lead out [the rain-animal]', 'work magic' and 'conjure',⁶⁵ terms which allude to the hallucinatory labours of the rain-shamans. These rain-shamans would lead or ride the rain-animal across the sky or take it to the top of a hill where they would slaughter it. The milk and blood of the rain-animal would mix to form rain which would either fall from the sky or flow from the hilltop on to the surrounding plain.⁶⁶ The non-real rain-making ritual was thus believed to cause real precipitation.

From rock-paintings identified by nineteenth century /Xam as rain-animals one can deduce that such an animal was thought to have a large body not unlike a hippopotamus, and was often horned.⁶⁷ It is also meaningful that one of the few ethnographic referents to rhinoceroses implicate them in rain-making. The previously mentioned She-rhinoceros's elder daughter is called !Kwa-khe, literally 'the Rain'⁶⁸ and is thus simultaneously rhinoceros and rain-animal. In theory, any large-bodied, composite herbivorous creature could represent a rain-animal. In practice, specific arguments must be made for each representation since the imagery, although polyvalent, does not support an unlimited range of interpretations. That rhinoceroses were, at times, associated with rain-making has ethnographic support, as the earlier-mentioned story of 'The She-rhinoceros and her Elder Daughter's Suitors' and the /Xam informants' comments on certain rock paintings indicates. Therefore, at least some San considered rhinoceroses appropriate embodiments of the rain-animal.

The Relationship between Rhinoceroses and Rain-animals

The argument I outline includes different levels of analysis. On the literal level, it would be incorrect to claim that the rhinoceros was a rain-animal. A real rhinoceros cannot, by definition, be the composite, hallucinatory, non-real rain-animal that exists only in the spirit world and can be seen only by shamans in altered states of consciousness.

On another level, however, certain physical and behavioural characteristics of rhinoceroses may have been seen by some San people of the central interior as closely paralleling the perceived appearance and behaviour of the hallucinatory rain-animal. I discuss two features of rhinoceros appearance (horns and fat) and three features of rhinoceros behaviour (sweating,

64. Lewis-Williams, *The Rock Art*, 49-50.

65. Bleek, *A Bushman Dictionary*.

66. Bleek, 'The Rain', 310.

67. G.W. Stow, *The Native Races of South Africa* (London, 1905), plate 41; Bleek and Lloyd, *Specimens*, illustration 31.

68. JL, 6449-7375.

association with water, and nocturnal habits) that may have influenced rain-shamans' construction of the appearance and behaviour of the rain-animal.

First, there is the feature of rhinoceros horns. Vinnicombe found the ethnographic reference to horns on a painted rain-animal 'somewhat confusing'.⁶⁹ This confusion may be resolved if we consider the painted evidence from a north-western Lesotho site at which the animal painted appears to have both rhinoceros (horns and prehensile upper lip) and hippopotamus (fat, pendulous body) features (Figure 10), a combination which accords well with rock paintings depicting rain-animals as composite creatures. Moreover, this depiction (Figure 10) is associated with a trail of twenty-one ovoid tracks



Figure 10. Rock painting of rhinoceros-like rain-animal and footprints. North-west Lesotho. Scale bar is 30 mm.

stretching across the rock surface; these recall the round imprint raindrops make in the sand and that are known as the rain-animal's 'footprints'.⁷⁰ In addition, the San used horn, sometimes rhinoceros horn, as rain-making medicine⁷¹ and to summon lightning.⁷² The second rhinoceros feature is fatness.

69. Vinnicombe, *People of the Eland*, 336.

70. E. Marshall-Thomas, *The Harmless People*, (London, 1969), 147.

71. Bleek and Lloyd, *Specimens*, 193; Bleek, 'Omens, Wind-making', 341.

72. Biesele, *Women Like Meat*, 109-10.

As I have shown, fat was important to San people both for the essential fatty acids and lipids it provided and for the supernatural potency with which it was believed to be imbued. Thus a large fat animal would be visually consonant with the large appearance of the rain-animal as depicted in rock paintings. The white rhinoceros is the third-largest mammal in southern Africa.

Behaviourally, a rhinoceros's tendency to sweat profusely when alarmed might have associated it with the rain animal. If a rhinoceros is chased or otherwise stressed, it very quickly breaks out in a profuse sweat that is noticeable from some distance; the sweat almost cascades from its body.⁷³ Certain San may have interpreted this behavioural feature as similar to that of the rain-animal spreading rain across the veld. The rain, quite literally, came from the body of the rhinoceros, as it was believed to do from the body of the rain-animal. Also relating to water is the association of both species of rhinoceros with water. There are two aspects to this. The first is thermoregulation: rhinoceroses often lie in waterholes for several hours at a stretch.⁷⁴ The second way in which rhinoceroses use waterholes is by wallowing in mud,⁷⁵ which they later rub off against trees and stones to get rid of ectoparasites. Rhinoceroses, like rain-animals, can be said to inhabit waterholes.

A further behavioural feature of rhinoceroses which associates them with rain-animals is the fact that their wallowing and drinking activities occur primarily at dusk and into the night.⁷⁶ Both black and white rhinoceroses are active by night, the former almost exclusively so, while the latter is active by day and night. In /Xam accounts of rain-making, shamans captured the rain-animal at night:

For it [the rain-animal] is not a thing that walks by day, but by night. Therefore the medicine men catch it at night when it is grazing; that is why they watch the time at which it goes to graze (Testimony of Dia!kwain).⁷⁷

None of the physical and behavioural features of rhinoceroses that I have cited conclusively proves that the rhinoceros was associated, in the minds of certain San people, with the rain-animal, but, taken together, the five points carry sufficient evidential weight to present a convincing argument that rhinoceroses are likely to have been associated with rain-animals. In addition, the irascible black rhinoceros may have been perceived as the 'angry' rain-bull while the more gregarious white rhinoceros may have been perceived as the more desirable rain-cow.

73. Smithers, *The Mammals of the Southern African Subregion*, 559.

74. Owen-Smith, *Megaherbivores*, 49.

75. *Ibid.*, 48-49.

76. Smithers, *The Mammals of the Southern African Subregion*, 560, 564.

77. Bleek, 'Rain-making', 379.

The third level of my argument concentrates on the ambiguous, shifting nature of San people's religion. During San medicine dances shamans shifted in and out of multiple states of consciousness, 'seeing' and experiencing hallucinatory imagery at the same time as they 'saw' and experienced real people, places and objects. These multiple states of consciousness became conflated into a single experience. Real rhinoceroses may have been seen, heard and smelt, roaming or drinking at one of the waterholes in the darkness beyond the dance fire. The shape and movement of these rhinoceroses may have strongly influenced the hallucinatory visions of the rain-shamans who later depicted the rain-animal, at least in some cases, as a rhinoceros. No longer was the rhinoceros only conceptually associated with the rain-animal: in the context of trance experience the rhinoceros was a rain-animal, and in that context the dissolution of the boundary between 'real' and 'non-real' was unproblematic. For the benefit of non-shamans, rhinoceros appearance and behaviour constituted an apt visual analogue to the normally unobservable appearance and behaviour of the rain-animal.

There is a precedent for real animals functioning as rain-animals: in the Eastern Cape Province there are a number of painted eland that look perfectly normal, but they are surrounded by fish and human figures, a context that indicates that these painted eland, despite their apparent normality, were associated with rain-making.⁷⁸ Thus, while visually an eland, in the context of those paintings the eland was also a rain-animal. Moreover, in the Bleek and Lloyd documents, /Han#kasso spoke of the time when '... the Rain was like an eland'.⁷⁹ Similarly, the rain could, at times, have been like a rhinoceros.

Depictions of Rhinoceroses as Rain-animals at Thaba Sione

I now argue that at least three engravings of rhinoceroses at Thaba Sione are representations of rain-animals.

The first example is the fourth cynosuric image cluster (Figure 6) which comprises a white rhinoceros, an earlier engraving of an antelope with rhinoceros-like horns protruding from its back, and two human figures. The human figure facing the rhinoceros is engraved on top of the earlier antelope engraving and is bending forward, while the other human figure is holding a stick and appears to be herding or chasing the rhinoceros from behind. The human figure on the right has clawed feet, bends forward and has a hand raised to its nose. These three features are widely accepted as diagnostic of San trance performance and indicate that this figure depicts a shaman in or about to enter an altered state of consciousness. The rhinoceros has its tail upright, its nuchal hump noticeably bunched and its head raised in a display of anxiety. The most likely cause of this anxiety is the two human figures

78. See also L. Lloyd, *A Short Account of Further Bushman Material Collected* (London, 1889), number 50; Tongue, *Bushman Paintings*, Figure 32.

79. In Lewis-Williams, *Believing and Seeing*, 106.

flanking it. The non-real clawed feet of the human figure on the right suggest that the threat to the rhinoceros does not originate in the world of the everyday, but in the spirit world. Evidence that the association between this human figure with clawed feet and the rhinoceros is not fortuitous is provided by the many engraved and painted examples of groups and individual human figures that are associated with rain-animals.⁸⁰

The association of the rhinoceros with two human figures is clearly one that would not normally occur. A hunter is unlikely to have bent forward with a hand raised to his nose when confronting a real rhinoceros, nor, of course, did hunters have clawed feet. This group therefore almost certainly depicts shamans leading and herding a rain-cow out of a waterhole.

The second example of a white rhinoceros as a rain-cow is provided by the fifth cynosuric engraving (Figure 11) which is an image cluster that comprises an adult and a sub-adult white rhinoceros and an eland. The adult rhinoceros is depicted in a protective posture normally associated with female rhinoceroses. There are numerous lines and clouds of hammer marks in and around the adult rhinoceros image that have been produced by striking the rock with another object. Some of the hammer marks cluster very precisely within the folds of skin over the ribs of the adult rhinoceros. The significance of the ribs to rain-making may be explained by a report about how rain was made. /Han#kasso one of Bleek and Lloyd's /Xam informants told how:

the rain's medicine men seize and break the rain's ribs. Then they throw them along, when the wind lies over there (north), that wind is the rain wind, it lies over there.⁸¹

I argue that by hammering the rhinoceros image in precisely the position of its ribs, the shaman-artist was in a literal and in a conceptual sense 'breaking the rain's ribs'. Striking the rock and the images engraved on it may have been regarded by some shamans as killing, or exerting control over, the rain-animal. There are other rock engravings of rhinoceroses in the Free State, Gauteng, Northern Cape and North West provinces that display similar hammer marks which may be the residue of similar animal control rituals.

More significantly, the hammering of these images implies that certain engravings such as Figure 11 were not only depictions of San rain-making beliefs but were active constituents of certain rain-making rituals.⁸² Like 'real' and 'non-real', the engraved image could, at times, have been both representation of and participant in certain San ritual events. Such ritual

80. Vinnicombe, *People of the Eland*, 337-41; Deacon, 'The Power of a Place', 133.

81. Bleek, 'Rain-making', 387.

82. E.J. Dunn, *The Bushman* (London, 1931), 46; P. Vinnicombe, 'Myth, Motive and Selection in Southern African Rock Art', *Africa*, 42(3), 1972, 201; J.D. Lewis-Williams, 'Led by the Nose: Observations on the Supposed use of Southern African Rock Art in Rain-Making Rituals', *African Studies*, 36, 1977, 155-59.

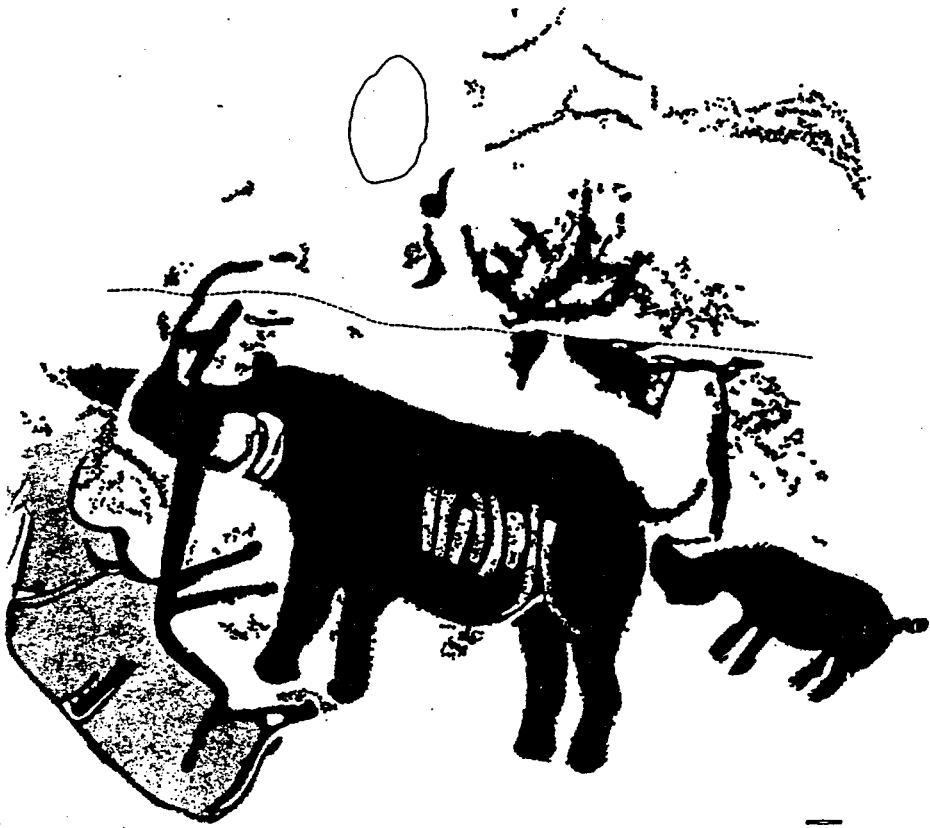


Figure 11. Hammer marks indicating the 'breaking of the rain's ribs' on a pecked and rubbed engraving of a white rhinoceros. Scale bar is 30 mm.

events, like rain-making, were thus occasions during which ordinary reality was both suspended and re-ordered. Leading on from this insight it may be productive to consider the physical location of engravings as governed, not only by criteria relating to visual impact, but also by criteria that locate certain engravings in physical settings capable of incorporating image, belief and the actual ritual event. Upon visual inspection, many rock engraving sites appear to consist of a visually confusing, extensive body of images, apparently randomly scattered about. I suggest that the distribution of imagery, while visually confusing, belies a definite, planned structure that incorporates iconography, physical setting and relation to other images and sites.

An example of a physical setting that incorporates iconography, belief and ritual event, specifically rain-making, is provided by the engraved cynosure

that occupies the highest point on Thaba Sione hill (Figure 5). The iconography of this cynosuric image, particularly the juxtaposition of the two engraved black rhinoceroses' horns with a crack and a step in the rock, may be taken as an indication that these are not real rhinoceroses but that they are inhabitants of the spirit world, as were rain-animals. In addition, the hindmost rhinoceros image is depicted as being connected to the tail of the foremost rhinoceros engraving by a short line from its snout which recalls the thong with which rain-shamans tied and led the rain-animal.⁸³

That this engraving was meant to be considered pre-eminent is suggested by the rubbing of the engraving. The outlines of the engraved rhinoceroses have a visually striking sheen, so much so that this engraving is the most visible at the site; even from the base of the hill. The only other rubbed engravings are also of cynosuric images (Figures 9 and 11). The position of Figure 5 on the hilltop appears to have been a conscious device which relates to rhinoceroses being the pre-eminent focus of the Thaba Sione engraved complex.

The most convincing evidence that this engraving (Figure 5) is a representation of two rain-animals is its physical location. Images on higher ground, especially hills or mountains, occupy a position between the upper and lower realms of the San universe. The rain-animal was a creature which moved from the lower realm (water hole) to the upper realm (sky). However, its presence in the middle world of ordinary experience was largely limited to the oral accounts and visual representations of the rain-shamans.⁸⁴ Thaba Sione offers an instance where the non-real rain-animal enjoyed a real visual presence. This visual presence was based on the natural behaviour of the rain-animal analogue, the rhinoceros, and the hilltop cynosure.

In the past, rhinoceroses regularly moved from waterholes in the nearby Thlakajeng River to the twenty-seven standing stones at the base of Thaba Sione against which they rubbed their bodies to rid themselves of ectoparasites. Given the number and smoothness of the stones rhinoceroses must have visited the hill over a period of many years, probably centuries. The movement of the rhinoceroses from waterhole to hill may have been interpreted and presented by opportunistic rain-shamans as visible expression of their control over, and ownership of, a spirit world resource. This construction of events would be consistent with /Xam accounts that mention the rain-shamans' ownership of the rain-animal:

they rode the rain, because the thongs with which they held it were like the horse's reins, they bound the rain. Thus they rode the rain, because they owned it (Testimony of /Han#kasso).⁸⁵

83. Lewis-Williams, *Believing and Seeing*, 105.

84. Deacon, 'The Power of a Place', 137-38.

85. Bleek, 'The Rain', 305.

The Thaba Sione rain-shamans' ability successfully to 'lead' the dangerous rain-animal between topographically significant locations (waterhole and hill) and to cause the desired rain to fall, would have placed other members of society in their debt. To reinforce their ideological and physical hold over both rain-animal and broader society, the rain-shamans nuanced at least three engravings of rhinoceroses as rain-animals (Figures 5, 6 and 11) by the addition of non-realistic features. Certain of these nuanced features, such as the hammered ribs and rubbed outlines (Figures 5 and 11) may also have been used in public ceremonies where the rain shamans could visibly 'kill' or otherwise incorporate the rain-animal into certain ritual events. The Thaba Sione rain-making ritual was thus an event that operated on multiple levels and involved multiple realities.

CONCLUSION

Thaba Sione was thus considerably more than a stage upon which San religious and political beliefs were played out: hill, river, rhinoceroses, engravings, shamans and audience(s) combined in a synergistic fashion to produce complex religious statements that supported, challenged and modified elements of San shamanism. My access to these shamanistic beliefs was made possible by my analysis of an engraved cynosure, composed of five nuanced engravings of rhinoceroses, which very precisely defined Thaba Sione as a place at which rhinoceros potency was a pre-eminent focus.

There is one final, more speculative line of evidence for the pre-eminence of rhinoceroses at Thaba Sione. Since the early 1930s Thaba Sione has been a Tswana town that takes its name from the hill. At least three Batswana interest groups consisting of the Chief, the Zionist Christian Church and traditional healers use the hill and the engravings in various rain-making rituals.⁸⁶ In particular the rhinoceros engravings, Figures 5, 6 and 11 are used as important rain-making objects. Following from the original San use, there may have been a syncretic merging of disparate belief systems at Thaba Sione. Recent and contemporary Tswana ritual officiants, it might be speculated, still feel the irresistible tug of an immensely ancient and powerful place.

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86. For a fuller discussion see S. Ouzman, 'Spiritual and Political Uses of a Rock Engraving Site by San and Tswana-Speakers', *South African Archaeological Bulletin*, 50, 1995, 55-67.

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