

The cultural and symbolic significance of the African rhinoceros: a review of the traditional beliefs, perceptions and practices of agropastoralist societies in southern Africa

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ABSTRACT

A study of ethnobiological, archaeological, linguistic and historical ethnographic data shows that notions about the cultural and symbolic significance of the African rhinoceros were widely shared among southeastern Bantu speakers and had considerable time depth. African farming communities could draw upon the traits of both the more aggressive and solitary black rhino (*Diceros bicornis*) and the more sociable and territorial white rhino (*Ceratotherium simum*) in their conceptualisation of the qualities of leadership. The Mapungubwe gold rhino served as an emblem of sacred leadership in a class-based society. In less-stratified Sotho-Tswana society, the importance of this pachyderm was reflected in its appropriation as a leadership referent in chiefly praise poems, the use of rhino figurines as didactic tools during initiation schools, as well as a plethora of vernacular names and a complex folk taxonomy. Meat cut from the breast of the rhino was the preserve of a chief and a special club of rhino horn was widely employed as a marker of chiefly status. Rhino horns and bones also featured in rainmaking rituals. Monoliths adorning the central courts of nineteenth-century Tswana towns, as well as the walls or courts of Zimbabwe culture and Venda capitals, most probably signified rhino horns, thereby architecturally encapsulating the key qualities of power, danger and protection traditionally associated with African leadership.

KEY WORDS: African rhinoceros, archaeofauna, cultural and symbolic significance, farming communities, figurines, folk taxonomy, historical ethnography, leadership, monoliths, praise poems, southern Africa.

This study was prompted by the discovery of a clay figurine of a rhinoceros on the heavily eroded surface of Melora Saddle, an African farmer site located in Lapalala Wilderness on the Waterberg Plateau of South Africa's Limpopo Province. As is well known, the future survival of the African rhinoceros is currently greatly endangered by large-scale poaching that is driven by illegal international traffic in rhino horn. No fewer than 1004 rhinos were killed in South Africa in 2013 (Update, 17 January 2014). The insatiable demand for rhino horn in the East is underpinned by age-old beliefs in its presumed pharmacological properties, in particular as an antidote against poison, to treat fevers and as a cure for cancer and other illnesses (Berger 1994: 304; Hanson 2010: 555). Probing the nature and time depth of African beliefs, perceptions and practices concerning this majestic herbivore was therefore held to be of equal interest.

Anthropological research has revealed that African cosmology, social life and material culture are marked by rich symbolism (Kelly 1997: 362). Deep-rooted cultural symbols and principles are hard to fathom from archaeological evidence alone, hence the need to scrutinise zoological, linguistic, historical and ethnographic data as well. This review focuses on southern Africa's indigenous farming communities, the earliest representatives of which arrived south of the Zambezi River about 1800 years ago (Huffman 2007: xi). The historical descendants of these early agropastoralists today speak one of the southeastern Bantu languages, all of which are clustered in Zone S of the broader Eastern Bantu distribution area (Herbert & Bailey 2002: 52, 59–61). The main linguistic groupings to which reference will be made are Shona, Venda,

Sotho-Tswana and Ndebele. First, a description is given of the two rhino species found in southern Africa in which key taxonomic and behavioural aspects are highlighted. Such knowledge is critical for understanding the dynamics of past human–animal interrelationships. Secondly, the archaeological context of the few documented rhino figurines is examined in an attempt to shed light on the nature and longevity of cultural beliefs and rituals. Thirdly, an inventory of archaeofaunal data is presented, which sheds some light on the exploitation of the rhino by early African farmers. Fourthly, the accounts of early nineteenth-century travellers through the western interior of South Africa are perused for information on nomenclature, beliefs, uses and practices relating to the rhino. This source is augmented by general ethnographic and historical information on the cultural significance of the rhinoceros. Lastly, we explore the symbolic load and import of the rhino as reflected in the use of rhino horn clubs as emblems of political power, the frequent metaphoric allusions to the rhino and its horns in the praise poems of Tswana chiefs, and the function of monoliths as rhino/ leadership referents in indigenous vernacular architecture.

TAXONOMY AND BEHAVIOUR

The interrelationship between humans and animals has always been complex and informed by cultural norms, as well as the physical attributes and the real or perceived behaviour of animals. As Lévi-Strauss's (1962: 89) famous dictum, paraphrased as 'animals are good to think with', implies, animals have often been employed by humans as symbols or metaphors in attempts to conceptualise the social world and the variety of relationships between individuals or different segments of society. This entanglement encompasses the transference of animal behavioural traits to humans or vice versa, the adoption of animals as totems or identity markers, as well as the use of animals as mediatory constructs to communicate with the ancestors and the spirit world in general (Galaty 2014; Oetelaar 2014). In all these instances, understanding the symbolic or metaphorical allusions requires some knowledge of animal behaviour and anatomy—in this case of the two rhino species found in southern Africa.

In Africa the Rhinocerotioidea first appeared during the lower Miocene and at least one genus was present in southern Africa by the upper Miocene. The sub-Saharan black rhino, *Diceros bicornis*, is one of the oldest and most stable of the African megafauna and its direct forerunner has been recorded from the early Pliocene of Europe around four million years ago. The exclusively African white rhinoceros, the genus *Ceratotherium*, originated during the Plio-Pleistocene. *Ceratotherium simum*, which first appeared during Middle Pleistocene, is today represented by two living subspecies or species, the northern and southern white rhinoceros. Even though limited morphological differences have been documented between the two forms, taxonomic assessments suggest that they have been geographically and genetically isolated for as much as a million years (Prothero et al. 1989: 333, 336; Estes 1997: 228; Krummenacher & Zschokke 2007: 111; Dinerstein 2011: 144–81; IUCN Red List, version 2013.2). Based on recent genetic studies, it has therefore been proposed that the northern white (Nile) rhino should be elevated from its subspecies status (*Ceratotherium simum cottoni*) and classified as a separate species (*Ceratotherium cottoni*). In turn, it has been suggested that the southern variant should be classified as *Ceratotherium simum* instead of *Ceratotherium simum simum* (Groves et al. 2010; Rookmaaker & Antoine 2012). A recent reconstruction of the historical distribution

of the white and black rhino from AD 1500 onwards shows the latter to have been present in a continuous stretch from Burkina Faso in west-central Africa to Somalia in the east and down south to South Africa. In contrast, the historical range of the white rhino shows a disjuncture between its presence in central Africa and in the area south of the Zambezi River (Rookmaaker & Antoine 2012: 93–5, figs 1–3). While both the black and the white rhino did, therefore, in historical times occur in the areas settled by southeastern Bantu speakers, it is likely that second-millennium migrants from East Africa, such as Sotho-Tswana and Nguni speakers (Huffman 2007: 443), may have encountered the white rhino for the first time on the southward journey from their ancestral lands.

Despite their overall close resemblance, there are well-defined anatomical and behavioural differences between the white and the black rhino. First, it should be noted, though, that no satisfactory explanation exists for the origins of the colour appellations ‘white’ and ‘black’ since both species are grey in colour. The notion that the label ‘white’ is a corruption of the Afrikaans/Dutch word *wyd/wijd* (wide), presumably referring to the broad lips of the white rhino, has been convincingly disproved (Feely 2007). The white rhino, also known as the square-lipped rhinoceros, is a grazer and, at an average of 2040–2260 kg for males, has about double the weight of the black rhino. It has a big hump, a prominent belly, and its head is usually held close to the ground. In terms of social behaviour the white rhino is described as territorial and gregarious; for example, a crash of no fewer than fifteen white rhinos has been observed (Skinner & Chimimba 2005: 529). The white rhino is more docile than the black rhino, although experts caution that the white rhino should not be lightly approached as it, too, can be bad-tempered and dangerous (Walker & Walker 2012: 139–40).¹ The black rhino, also known as the hook-lipped or prehensile-lipped rhinoceros, is a browser and, though smaller, is far more aggressive than the white rhino, with a solitary rather than social disposition. Both species have two horns that are composed of a mass of keratin filaments. The horns, which lack a bony core, show considerable individual variation in size and shape. The anterior horn, which is located on the muzzle, is commonly much longer, especially in the case of the white rhino, and is used as the principal weapon of attack or defence. The function of the posterior horn is not evident although the black rhino sometimes uses it to break off branches when feeding. The horns are not attached to the skull and will regrow if deliberately dehorned or if they accidentally break off in nature (Estes 1997: 228; Walker & Walker 2012: 19–20, 143).

These anatomical and behavioural characteristics and differences would have been well known to southern Africa’s indigenous farming communities, whose hunting prowess and intimate knowledge of the natural environment are well documented (Hammond-Tooke 1993: 53–5). Our study of how the rhinoceros was viewed by African farmers is based on the premise that in such dynamic human–animal interactions “it should be recognized that we do not only *construct* our conceptualizations of animals according to *our culture*, we are also *affected* by them according to *their nature*” (Lindström 2012: 16).

RHINO FIGURINES

The Melora clay figurine is a rare find. The remains of only three other rhino figurines have been recovered from archaeological sites in South Africa, all dating to the Middle

Iron Age (c. AD 900–1300) and located in the Shashe-Limpopo Basin. They include a clay head fragment of a rhino figurine from Schroda, the leg of a possible rhino (or elephant) clay figurine uncovered at Castle Rock, and the famous gold rhinoceros from Mapungubwe Hilltop (Hanisch & Maumela 2002: 59; Tiley 2004: 26–7; Calabrese 2005: 182, 184).

Besides the fragments of the reassembled gold rhinoceros (Fig. 1), the funerary remains from the royal cemetery on Mapungubwe Hilltop included a gold ‘sceptre’, a golden bowl, numerous gold and glass beads, as well as other decorative ornaments and artefacts (Tiley 2004; Meyer 2011). The exhibit in the Mapungubwe Museum at the University of Pretoria also contains two finials that may have been part of additional ‘sceptres’. Recently reconstructed gold figurines resemble a bovine, a feline (leopard) and a possible elephant (Tiley-Nel 2009). The archaeological consensus is that the human burials and grave goods are associated with the rulers of southern Africa’s first state complex, which flourished from about AD 1220 to 1300 (Huffman 1996: 188–9).

Lately though, it has been suggested that the gold figurines possibly date to an eighteenth- or nineteenth-century Venda occupation and were attached to the edge of a round wooden divining bowl (Duffey 2012: 175–87). The slightly curved figurines all have outward-flared legs or feet with small pin holes, suggesting that they were sculpted over a wooden core and appended to a flat surface. The ascription of the gold burials to a more recent occupation clearly contradicts the contextual archaeological data, as well as the widely accepted dating of the burials and the settlement chronology of Mapungubwe Hill (Woodborne et al. 2009). The proposition that the figurines represent ‘sib images’, assumedly corresponding with the *mutupo* (name of clan or totem group) of the Venda or Shona, is also unconvincing. Neither the Venda nor the Shona honour the rhinoceros as a totem animal or clan symbol (Ralushai 1977: 205–10; Van Waarden 2012: 51). A perhaps more plausible explanation for the particular form of the figurines is that they were mounted on ceremonial staffs made of wood or other perishable substances that formed part of the royal insignia of the rulers of Mapungubwe.



Fig.1. Mapungubwe’s gold rhino (Mapungubwe Collection, University of Pretoria, 2009).

It is not possible to assign the gold figurine to the black or white rhino species based solely on its form, posture or features. The figurine has only one horn and its snout is incomplete. According to rhino conservationist Clive Walker, the “characteristically lowered head, powerful shoulders and fat belly” of the Mapungubwe figurine is reminiscent of the white rhino (Walker & Walker 2012: 14; see also Van Waarden 2012: 51). The raised tail could possibly be interpreted as portraying the characteristic dominance or threat display of the black rhino (Estes 1997: 230–1). The tail of the black rhino is also held erect when it charges at humans but the head is held more horizontally and only lowered to the ground shortly before impact (Walker 1996: 128, pers. comm., April 2014). In the case of the white rhino, the head is held in a lowered position and the tail is usually curled over the rump in a threat display (Clive Walker pers. comm., April 2014). However, white rhino have been observed charging with tails erect (Prof. Kobus Bothma pers. comm., May 2014) and rhino expert Peter Hitchins (pers. comm., May 2014) cautions that “the position of the tail and the movement of the ears and position of the ears” vary according to particular circumstances. Animal figurines unearthed from southern African Iron Age sites are not meant to be exact representations. Like the rock paintings of animals associated with southern Africa’s indigenous farming communities, in particular those created by Northern Sotho speakers of the Makgabeng Plateau, they are usually stylised representations (Namono & Eastwood 2005: 82).

The inference that the gold rhino from the royal cemetery on Mapungubwe Hilltop was probably a symbol of leadership is based on the archaeological context and the ethnographically inferred symbolic significance of the black rhino among Shona and Venda speakers (Huffman 2005: 48). Since Mapungubwe was the capital of an early Shona state, Shona ethnography in particular has been combed to explain the cultural significance of the gold rhino. A key reference in this regard has been a sixteenth-century Portuguese account by Friar João Dos Santos of the ceremonial *pembera* dance of the Shona leader, which was reflective of the movements of the black rhino, known as *chipembere* (plural: *zvipembere*) in Shona. During the *rukoto* ceremony, which lasted several days each September, the king of the Mutapa state in northern Zimbabwe and important subjects would act out a ritual fight, denoted as ‘*pemberar*’, to determine who were the most valiant and accomplished (Theal 1901: 196–7, referenced by Huffman 1996: 189). The ferociousness of the fighting has, in turn, been linked to the aggressive behaviour of the black rhino, which is known to destroy a bush or termite mound in a show of anger and aggression or when wounded (Skinner & Chimimba 2005: 535). Based on such early accounts of Shona political leadership and the context of the royal graves on the hilltop, the Mapungubwe figurine has therefore been associated with a black rhino and sacred leadership symbolism in a class-based society. It has been argued that behavioural attributes of the black rhino, such as its “dangerous behaviour, unpredictability, power and solitary life”, were shared by the leaders of Mapungubwe and Great Zimbabwe (Huffman 2007: 58).

The link between the Shona name for the black rhino, *chipembere*, and the *pembera* dance is substantiated by early twentieth-century accounts which suggest that it was known to Shona speakers as ‘The Dancer’ on account of “its stamping method of disposing of an enemy” (Shortridge 1934, I: 426). Hannan’s Shona dictionary (1984: 514) contains the following explanation for the verb *-pembera*: “dance for joy, exult,

rejoice”. The centralised Mutapa state no longer exists and more recent ethnographic accounts of the *rukoto* dance do not refer to the *pembera* dance. Importantly though, it is emphasised that the *rukoto* ceremony is essentially a rain-control ceremony: prayers are made to ‘tribal spirits’ for rain, to thank the ancestors for the previous year’s good rains, as well as to enquire which crops should be planted (Gelfand 1959: 49).

Venda cultural practices shed further light on the cultural significance of the ‘rhinoceros dance’. They have close historical and linguistic ties with the Shona cluster and Venda ethnography is therefore an important and appropriate source of cultural data. The Venda language is basically an amalgam of Kalanga and Northern Sotho, and the Singo, the dominant clan among the Venda, trace their origins to the Torwa state in southwestern Zimbabwe (Loubser 1989, 1991). The equivalent dance among the Venda is known as *pembela*, the cultural significance of which is defined by Van Warmelo (1989: 295) as follows: “dance excitedly, in joy; ... be out of danger, past all hazards, secure, as old chief who has weathered all storms and is thought to have the full support of his ancestors, who has begotten his heirs and can now safely be rendered impotent by secret administration of a drug to remove the hazards of sexual activity”. Other data gathered by Van Warmelo (1932: 134–40) on the “burial of chiefs and *u pembela*” suggest that the *pembela* ceremony, the dance and the drinking of a potion to suppress sexual function, was performed upon the appointment of a new chief. Only those children born before the *pembela* ceremony were regarded as his legitimate offspring, but this fact was “kept secret, and his wives still continue to sleep in [his] hut” (Van Warmelo 1932: 139). According to Stayt (1931: 210–11), in his classic monograph on the Venda, the sacred ritual *u pembela*, during which the new chief dances into the royal court holding the ancestral spears and is administered the secret medicine to render him impotent, took place two to three years after the previous chief’s death and the ascendance of the new chief. While details of the rites and their timing differ, the association of the *pembela* or rhinoceros dance with chieftainship, whether with reference to rain control or succession, is beyond doubt.²

A large collection of clay figurines was recovered from Schroda, the tenth-century capital of the Zhizo chiefdom and its Leokwe successors in the Shashe-Limpopo Valley (Huffman 2002: 9). Among them is a rather impressionistic dark-grey head fragment, which has been identified on the basis of two stubby horns as a rhino figurine (Hanisch & Maumela 2002: 59). The bulk of the figurines were clustered in an area adjacent to a cattle kraal which seems to have been divided into two sections by a fence. The northeastern side of the fence yielded the largest component, comprising relatively large figurines of wild animals (including the rhinoceros figurine), stylised birds, a few sheep and oxen, semi-human and stylised human forms and phallic objects made on coarse, gritty clay. From the area to the southwest of the fence, small figurines of fine-textured clay were recovered that included domestic animals (cattle, sheep, goats and possibly dogs), phalli, and other unusually shaped and decorated objects. The spatial context and the high numbers of figurines suggest the performance of ritual ceremonies, more specifically the initiation of young boys and girls (Hanisch 2002: 21–45). In reviewing the female objects, Dederen (2010: 36) argues that their underlying meaning “would have been expressed in a symbolic manner in the praxis of ritual pedagogy”. There can be little doubt that the symbolic meaning of the rhino

figurine would also have been imparted, although the express content is not apparent from the archaeological context alone.

The leg of a possible rhino or elephant, which has been recovered from Castle Rock, a Leokwe facies site located on the farm Den Staat 27 MS in the Limpopo Basin, forms part of a small figurine assemblage that has been tentatively associated with fertility or initiation rituals performed at a 'supra-household level'. It has been argued that since both the rhino and the elephant could possibly be associated with leadership and power, the leg fragment from Castle Rock could have served a similar didactic purpose as the rhino figurine from the Schroda cache (Calabrese 2005: 182, 184).

As mentioned, the rhino figurine recovered from Melora Saddle (Fig. 2) is a surface find and its archaeological or cultural context therefore remains uncertain. Two periods of occupation have been distinguished on Melora Saddle: an early nineteenth-century occupation marked by Waterberg facies pottery and cone-on-cylinder huts that can be attributed to Sotho-Tswana speakers (or perhaps Sotho-ised Northern Ndebele), and an Eiland facies occupation (Boeyens et al. 2009). The Middle Iron Age Eiland expression at Melora Saddle has not been systematically explored or radiocarbon-dated but, based on general ceramic style, could be assigned to an AD 1000–1300 time frame. This period of occupation overlaps with the Leokwe and Mapungubwe complexes from which the other rhino figurines derive. At least two other incomplete clay figurines of bovids were retrieved on the surface from the same general locality. It is not possible to determine whether these figurines were isolated objects associated with individual households or whether they formed part of a larger cluster of figurines that could have been employed in homestead rituals. Yet again the rather crudely fashioned rhino figurine is a stylised representation, with the front horn forming a loop from where



Fig. 2. The Melora Saddle figurine (Photo: S.U. Küsel 2013).

the muzzle should have been placed. The tip of the posterior horn on the raised head appears to have been broken off. Based on its overall appearance, rhino conservationist Clive Walker (pers. comm., 2003) considers the figurine's posture to be suggestive of a black rhinoceros.

The archaeological contexts of the figurines referred to above indicate that the rhino most probably served as a metaphor for leadership and featured in didactic lessons during initiation rituals in which young boys and/or girls were prepared for adulthood and full incorporation into the social life of their community. This applies in particular to Middle Iron Age farming communities occupying the Shashe-Limpopo confluence area early in the second millennium AD. It is noteworthy that all the figurines are essentially indistinct and cannot be readily assigned to either the white or the black rhino species. The question arises whether this could have been deliberate, thus allowing for the culturally important characteristics of both species to form part of the instruction of the initiates.³

ARCHAEOFAUNA

Table 1 lists Iron Age and historical African farmer sites at which faunal remains of the rhino have been uncovered. The sites span the entire Iron Age up to the early historic period, from about the fifth century AD to the nineteenth century. The information, which is based on both published and unpublished sources, is incomplete, especially as far as identified rhino species, taphonomy, skeletal parts representation and provenance are concerned. Moreover, the organic composition of rhino horn, as explained earlier, precludes its preservation in archaeological deposits. With the exception of the Ratho Kroonkop remains, all the other specimens derive from residential sites. Without provenance data the ritual use of these faunal remains cannot be totally discounted, but their occurrence in domestic contexts suggests that it is highly likely that the rhino was exploited for its meat, hide and horn. This would concur with historical and ethnographic evidence to be discussed, which attests a dualistic relationship between African farming communities and the rhino: the rhino was not only good to think with, but also good to consume.

Clear evidence for the ritual function of rhinos comes from Ratho Kroonkop, a K2-period rain-control site in the Limpopo River Basin. Thirteen rhino bones were excavated from a rock tank, which served as a receptacle for rainmaking material, including fauna, on the hilltop. Lower extremities were most common in the rhino bone sample, which includes one thoracic vertebra, one radius, one carpal, one metacarpus, six calcanei, one metapodial and two proximal phalanges. Six of these bones were of juveniles. At least two of the bones could be assigned to the black rhino and one to a possible white rhino (Brunton 2010: table 12; Brunton et al. 2013: 121–2). It has been suggested that the rhino's symbolic association with political power and the ruling elite in the Shashe-Limpopo Confluence Area, as exemplified by the gold rhino from Mapungubwe, may have underlain its importance in farmer rain-control ceremonies (Brunton et al. 2013: 122). On a general level this was certainly true, since leaders were responsible for the well-being of their people, the fertility of the land and the abundance of the harvest. Chiefs would, therefore, have played a pivotal role in annual rainmaking ceremonies, even if this manifested mostly indirectly through their appointed rainmakers.

Another possibility to consider is that the rainmaking rituals of African farmers could have been influenced by the beliefs of the autochthonous San and Khoekhoen. It is well known that the rhino features prominently in the rock art of San hunter-gatherers, primarily in rock engravings and painted scenes relating to rain control or curing (Ouzman 1995, 1996, 2002; Eastwood & Eastwood 2006). In San cosmology, the rhino was viewed as a rain animal and a distinction was made between the more docile white rhino, associated with soft or she-rain, and the more aggressive and ill-tempered black rhino, associated with thunderstorms or he-rain (Ouzman 1995: 60). San engravings of rhinos emphasising the long front horn, as well as painted therianthropomorphic images with rhino horns, suggest that the artists not only equated the body fat but also the horns of this herbivore with supernatural potency to be drawn upon in shamanic rituals (Hollmann & Lewis-Williams 2006: 511). Le Vaillant (quoted in Meester 1973: 8) noted during his travels north of the Orange River and into Great Namaqualand in the 1780s that rhinoceros blood was considered “a medicine in repute” among the Khoekhoen, and that it was “reckoned excellent for luxations, fractures, and inward hurts in general”.

Such cultural borrowing or influences certainly cannot be excluded, but the presence of rhino remains in the rain-control setting at Ratho Kroonkop was more likely underpinned by perceptions of rhino behaviour informed by agropastoralist cosmology. Droughts, the greatest threat to the prosperity and security of African agriculturists, were traditionally attributed to a disturbance of the social order and associated with ritual danger, which generated heat and had to be cooled down (Schapera 1971). A belief among farming communities that black rhinos supposedly charge and stomp out camp fires could provide an explanation for their association with rainmaking rituals. This presumed behavioural trait could serve as a metaphor for the cooling of heat and thus the alleviation of drought. Though rhino experts strongly dispute such a behaviour pattern (Peter Hitchens pers. comm., 2013), it is noteworthy that Shortridge (1934, I: 418), in describing the black rhino as “at all times excitable, sometimes inquisitive, and occasionally stupidly aggressive”, recalls that twice during a Kaokoveld Expedition in what was then Southwest Africa their camp fires were charged by black rhino. While these charges might have been entirely incidental, what is relevant in this regard is not so much the scientific or empirical documentation of rhino behaviour, but what indigenous communities themselves believed, in other words their perceptions. Though we have as yet not uncovered further ethnographic evidence that African farmers traditionally held such beliefs, the following lines from a praise poem of Khama III, the Ngwato (Tswana) chief who ruled in Bechuanaland in 1872 and from 1875 to 1923, suggest that such a perception might have existed: “Bangwato, on what do you rely? Or do you rely on a rhino’s heart, on the heart of Fire-hater [Khama III] the black rhinoceros?” (Schapera 1965: 205). Such a belief may also explain why the rhino bone assemblage from Ratho Kroonkop comprises mostly foot and leg bones, the body parts that were assumedly used to stomp out fires.

NOMENCLATURE, HISTORICAL ETHNOGRAPHY AND ARCHITECTURE

The study of human–animal relations transcends the traditional boundaries between the human and natural sciences. An emphasis on ethnography remains a key feature of this broad field of enquiry, which has become known in some quarters as ‘multispecies

TABLE 1

Rhinoceros remains retrieved from African farmer sites. KNP = Kruger National Park; SLCA = Shashe-Limpopo Confluence Area; KZN = KwaZulu-Natal; EIA = Early Iron Age; MIA = Middle Iron Age; LIA = Late Iron Age.

Family/Species	NISP/ MNI	Skeletal part	Site	Period	Context	Reference
Rhinocerotidae	5/1		KNP Mo/8	EIA		
<i>Diceros bicornis</i>	20/2		KNP Le6	EIA		
<i>Diceros bicornis</i>	11/1		KNP Le7a	EIA		
<i>Diceros bicornis</i>	3/1		KNP Le7b	EIA	ash pits and middens	Plug 1989a, b
Rhinocerotidae	7/1		KNP Sk17	EIA		
Rhinocerotidae	3/1		KNP O120	EIA		
Rhinocerotidae	1/1		KNP Sh16	LIA		
<i>Diceros bicornis</i>	-/2		SLCA Pont Drift	MIA	middens	Voigt 1980; Plug 2000
Rhinoceros/ Hippopotamus	1/1		SLCA Sla 2229AD5	MIA	ash pit/midden	Plug 2000; I. Plug, email 2014
Rhinocerotidae	1/1	sesamoid	SLCA Schroda	MIA Zhizo	possible house	A. Raath Antonites, email 2013, 2014
<i>Diceros bicornis</i>	4/1	1st phalanx calcaneum 4th carpal 3rd carpal	SLCA Leokwe Box Canyon	MIA K2	kraal/midden	Huffman et al. 2003; M. Geldenhuys, email 2013
<i>Diceros bicornis</i> & probably <i>Ceratotherium simum</i>	1/- 1/- 1/- 1/- 6/- 1/- 2/-	thoracic radius carpal metacarpus calcaneum metapodial phalanges	SLCA Ratho Kroonkop	MIA K2	rock tank	Brunton 2010; Brunton et al. 2013
<i>Diceros bicornis</i>	37/2		Limpopo Waterberg Diamant	EIA	ash pit/midden	Plug 2000; I. Plug, email 2014

TABLE 1 (continued)

Rhinoceros remains retrieved from African farmer sites. KNP = Kruger National Park; SLCA = Shashe-Limpopo Confluence Area; KZN = KwaZulu-Natal; EIA = Early Iron Age; MIA = Middle Iron Age; LIA = Late Iron Age.

Family/Species	NISP/ MNI	Skeletal part	Site	Period	Context	Reference
Rhinoceros/ Hippopotamus	1/1		Limpopo Tshiriluluni	LIA/Historical	midden/house	Loubser 1991; De Wet-Bronner 1995; Plug 2000
<i>Diceros bicornis</i> / <i>Ceratotherium simum</i>	1/1		Limpopo Maremani	Historical	midden	Raath Antonites & Kruger 2012
Rhinocerotidae	1/1		Mpumalanga Phalaborwa Sonkoanani Hill	Historical	midden	Plug & Pistorius 1999
<i>Diceros bicornis</i>	3/2		North West Mabjanamatshwana	LIA	mostly from midden	Plug & Badenhorst 2006
cf. <i>Ceratotherium simum</i>	1/1		KZN KwaGandaganda	EIA	cattle byre/ middens	Beukes 2000
<i>Diceros bicornis</i> / <i>Ceratotherium simum</i>	2/2		Mozambique Chibuene	EIA	coastal trading station	Badenhorst et al. 2011
<i>Diceros bicornis</i>	3/-		Mozambique Manekweni	LIA	midden	Barker 1978
Probably <i>Ceratotherium simum</i>	2/1	2 phalanges	Botswana Toutswe	MIA	midden/house	Welbourne 1975
Rhinocerotidae	1/1	phalanges	Botswana Basinghall	MIA Toutswe	midden/ disposal pit	Biemond 2014
Rhinoceros/ Hippopotamus	1/1	postcranial	Botswana Tsodilo Hills Divuyu	EIA	midden/ house?	Turner 1987a
<i>Ceratotherium simum</i> / <i>Diceros bicornis</i>	4/3	postcranial	Botswana Matlapaneng	EIA		
Rhinoceros/ Hippopotamus	1/1		Botswana Qugana Okavango Delta	EIA	midden/house	Turner 1987b
Rhinocerotidae	7/1		Botswana Moritsane	MIA	midden	Cohen 2010

ethnography’ (Smart 2014: 3–7). It should be emphasised at the outset, though, that ethnographic information on the rhino is scant, since it was almost extinct when the first professional ethnographies were compiled in the twentieth century. After European colonisation, both the black and the white rhino were hunted until they hovered on the brink of extinction in southern Africa. The white rhino was particularly vulnerable and was virtually wiped out from all areas outside KwaZulu-Natal by around 1900 (Lang 1924: 173–80). Consequently, early travellers’ accounts substitute as implicit or historical ethnographies, in particular those compiled by explorers, hunters and missionaries who traversed the lands of Tswana speakers in the western and northwestern parts of southern Africa during the early nineteenth century. These travelogues provide useful information on ethnobiological nomenclature, folk taxonomy and the nature of past interrelationships between African farmers and the animals in their environment.

Ethnobiological nomenclature

Ethnobiological nomenclature is defined as “a natural system of naming that reveals much about the way people *conceptualize* the living things in their environment” (Berlin 1992: 26). This applies in particular to the subgeneric labelling that the Tswana traditionally applied to classify apparent variants of the black and white rhinoceros. In this regard early historical accounts of sightings of and encounters with the rhinoceros constitute an invaluable source of information. As Kees Rookmaaker’s exhaustive and seminal study, *Encounters with the African rhinoceros* (2008), so vividly demonstrates, these accounts have been mined by zoologists for data on the early habitats and distribution of the rhinoceros but less so for cultural and linguistic information.

Vernacular names may offer a clue to a species’ cultural significance. A study of travel literature on the early nineteenth-century Tswana reveals that at least seven different names were used for the two species of rhino (Table 2). Since no standard orthography existed at the time, these names were recorded in a plethora of forms, some of which are hardly recognisable or relatable to the current Tswana orthography or spelling system. On this issue Rookmaaker (2005: 372) comments: “When reading the sporting literature of the 19th century, rhinos were commonly divided into at least four [and sometimes five] species referred to by their vernacular names in a rather bewildering variety of spellings”. Besides the generic term *tsbukudu*, four Tswana terms appear in early historical accounts for the black rhino (*bodile*/*bodilenyane*, *kegethwa*, *kenenyane* and *makgale*) and two for the white rhino (*mogofu*/*mogobu* and *kobaoba*) (Rookmaaker 2008: 124–6, table 46).⁴ To this we may add an eighth term, *thema*, another Tswana word for

TABLE 2
Naming the rhino in Tswana.

Generic term <i>Tsbukudu</i> (white or black rhinoceros)	
Black rhinoceros <i>(Diceros bicornis)</i>	White rhinoceros <i>(Ceratotherium simum)</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Bodile</i> / <i>Bodilenyane</i> • <i>Kenenyane</i> • <i>Kegethwa</i> • <i>Makgala</i> / <i>Makgale</i> • <i>Thema</i> / <i>Theme</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Mogofu</i> / <i>Mogobu</i> • <i>Kobaoba</i>

the black rhino that occurs in two praise poems recorded in the 1930s among the Lete (Ellenberger 1937: 4–5, 26, 30). It is striking that in Tswana a similar proliferation of names for a single species does not apply to any other large mammal species, such as, for example, the elephant, the buffalo or the hippopotamus. This clearly points to the cultural significance of the rhinoceros among Tswana speakers.

From travellers' accounts and early lexicographic studies, it is clear that the different vernacular names for the black and white rhino were used by early Tswana speakers to classify the animals on the basis of body size and, especially, horn size. In one of the earliest Tswana dictionaries (Brown 1925: 138, 201) the gloss of the two terms for the white rhinoceros reads as follows: *kobaoba* ("a species of large, very long-horned rhinoceros") and *mogobu* ("a large, long-horned rhinoceros"). Dictionary entries for some of the terms for the black rhino read as follows (Brown 1925: 23, 118, 125): *bodile* ("a small, short-horned rhinoceros"), *kenenyane* ("a short-horned rhinoceros") and *kegethwa* ("a large, very long-horned species of rhinoceros"). In the early travelogues *bodile* was distinguished from *bodilenyane*, which was described by Thomas Baines as the "little black rhinoceros, exceedingly fierce and vicious" (Rookmaaker 2008: 91). Both *bodilenyane* and *kenenyane* contain the diminutive suffix *-nyane*, most probably in reference to their body size. The terms *makgale* and *thema* do not appear in any extant Tswana dictionary, but their lexical equivalents, *makbale* and *thema*, have been recorded as entries for the black rhino in the standard Venda dictionary compiled by Van Warmelo (1989: 168, 372).⁵

As could be expected, vernacular names disappeared from common usage in tandem with the near extinction of the two rhinoceros species in southern Africa. This lexical loss has grown to such an extent that some recent guidebooks contain direct translations of the English (Dutch/Afrikaans) names for the two species, namely *tshukudu e tshwen* (rhinoceros white) and *tshukudu e ntsbo* (rhinoceros black) (Cole 1995: 7). These renditions add the colour appellations white (*tshwen*) and black (*ntsbo*) to *tshukudu*, the generic term in Tswana for the rhinoceros. From our own observations and from noting dictionary entries, it would seem that, by and large, only the generic term has retained currency among Sotho-Tswana and Venda speakers (Wentzel & Muloiwa 1982: 173; Kriel & Van Wyk 1989: 443). This lexical loss is compounded by a shift in, or confusion about, the meaning of now almost obsolete specific names among native speakers (Shortridge 1934, I: 412). For instance, recent lexicographic fieldwork among the Ngwaketse in southeastern Botswana recorded the meaning of *kegethwa* as white rhinoceros (Cole 1995: 65; Cole & Moncho-Warren 2011: 250, 1056), while nineteenth-century historical accounts indicate that this name was consistently applied in reference to a large-horned black rhinoceros (Rookmaaker 2008: 124–6, table 46). In this regard, Andrew Smith's announcement of the existence of a particularly large black rhino, the two horns of which were almost equally long, was hailed as a major scientific discovery in *The Penny Magazine* of 17 March 1838. Smith dubbed this presumed variant black rhino species *Rhinoceros keitloa*, the specific name being his rendering of *kegethwa*, the Tswana name for this variant.⁶

The folk taxonomy of Tswana speakers also entered the scientific literature of the nineteenth century. Even esteemed zoologists, such as Dr Andrew Smith, distinguished at least four species of rhino, two black and two white, principally on the basis of horn size. As Rookmaaker (2005: 372) points out, the hypothetical varieties were regularly used in scientific publications: "This practice was by no means restricted to

tales recounted around the camp fires, and it soon entered the taxonomic literature". It took some time before hunters such as Selous (1881: 725–34) began to doubt the fourfold subdivision and became convinced that there were only two African forms (Rookmaaker 2000: 57–8, 2007: 112, 123, 2008: 5). David Livingstone (1857: 612), the renowned missionary explorer, was among these early doubters and wrote:

Four varieties of the rhinoceros are enumerated by naturalists, but my observation led me to conclude there are but two; and that the extra species have been formed from differences in their sizes, ages, and the direction of the horns

Despite this proliferation of names, it is noteworthy that the rhinoceros, in contrast to other large mammals such as the elephant (*tlou*), hippopotamus (*kehubu*), lion (*tau*), eland (*phofu*) and buffalo (*nare*), does not feature as a totem animal among the Tswana (Wookey 1945: 77).⁷ Tswana speakers were traditionally (and to some extent still are) grouped into numerous clans, each of which had a totem (*seboko*), usually an animal, which they venerated and avoided killing. It is possible that consigning the rhinoceros to the list of totem animals would have detracted from its significance as a symbol of leadership. Similar to a chief or king, who acted as the head of multiple clans, the rhinoceros served as a collective symbol that cut across or transcended societal divisions. Somewhat paradoxically, as will be shown, this also implied that despite its symbolic import, rhinoceroses could be killed and consumed, albeit in accordance with culturally or economically determined imperatives.

It would seem that, cosmologically, the Tswana made a distinction between their relationship with the white and the black rhinoceros. According to their origin myth, the first humans and animals emerged from a waterhole at Matsieng near Mochudi in Botswana, in the rocky outcrops around which their footprints are still visible (Breutz 1953: 67–8, 1989: 1). The footprints, which include probable rhino, elephant and buffalo spoor, are predominantly of humans and felines, among which are those of adult lions (Walker 1997: 99). As has been well documented, these tracks are in actual fact rock engravings made by San hunter-gatherers in the distant past, but which have been appropriated by the Tswana and incorporated into their cosmology, probably to affirm and explain their link to the land (Walker 1997: 102). An early recording of this origin myth was by Andrew Smith (1849: n.p.; cf also Kirby 1940, II: 221–2), who noted that

Mohoohoo [*mogohu*, the white rhinoceros], the name of this species among the Bechuanas, is considered by them to be one of the original animals of their country, and to have issued from the same cave out of which their own forefather proceeded: in this respect they make a difference between it and Keitloa [*kegethwa*, the long-horned black rhinoceros], with whose origin they do not profess to be acquainted.

This declared ignorance about the origins of the black rhinoceros cannot be readily explained. One possibility is that the white rhino is more sociable than the black rhino and could thus be associated with the emergence of the first humans. More probably, the lack of knowledge about the origin of the black rhino should be linked to the geographical distribution of the two rhino species, as explained earlier. If the roots of the ancestral Sotho-Tswana can be sought in eastern Africa, as attested by the archaeological evidence (Huffman 2007: 429), their association with black rhino goes back much deeper in the past, long before they settled in southern Africa and first encountered the white rhino.

From the above overview of the naming of the rhinoceros, it is clear that the Tswana were acute observers and, as the several names suggest, attached great importance to

this animal. As is apparent, horn size and shape, in particular, played a major role in ethnozoological classifications, which, in turn, influenced early scientific classifications by European explorers and naturalists.

Metaphors, proverbs and rituals

Andrew Smith was also the first to record information indicating that this pachyderm served as a leadership symbol in Tswana society. After his expedition had killed the type specimen of the black rhino, which he subsequently named *Rhinoceros keitloa*, early in June 1835 in the vicinity of Mosega, near present-day Zeerust in North West Province, an animated discussion followed on the points of divergence of this animal from the common black rhino. Smith remarked that it was “a species different to either of the two inhabiting the countries more to the southward” and that the Tswana from Dithakong who accompanied him were “unacquainted with the animal”. During this debate a local Hurutshe man arrived on the scene and “exultingly” exclaimed, “Ah Kietloa [*Kgethwa*]! You have found your Master!” (Lye 1975: 213).

Smith was struck by the acumen with which the Hurutshe visitor described the differences between the presumed variants of black rhino. He told Smith that they considered the *kgethwa* to be the most dangerous of all rhinos in having a more ferocious nature and that it was of “a very savage disposition” (Smith 1849: n.p.; Rookmaaker 2008: 118). *Rhinoceros keitloa* could apparently be distinguished on the basis of its horns, which were nearly of equal length (Fig. 3). The same spokesman “slyly informed” Smith on another occasion that Tswana speakers in the neighbourhood likened their new overlord in the Mosega Basin, the Ndebele king Mzilikazi, to this animal (Lye 1975: 213). This observation alluded to the ruthless manner in which Mzilikazi subjugated



Fig. 3. *Rhinoceros keitloa* (Smith 1849: Mammalia Plate I).

the surrounding Tswana after he and most of his followers established themselves in the Marico in 1832 (Rasmussen 1978: 97–132). This is evident from an explanatory note on the black rhino appended to a London exhibition of specimens from Andrew Smith's South African expedition:

Few made mention of the Ketloa without at the same time showing an inclination to observe upon its character; and those who had sufficient confidence in the party to venture a remark upon a native chief then awfully oppressing that part of the country, spoke of the man and the animal as alike to be feared for their ferocity, and equally dangerous to the former inhabitants of that district.⁸

An explanation of the natural phenomena and cultural values that underlay the maxim 'you are my master' was provided by Prosper Lemue, a French missionary who started his career among the Hurutshe at Mosega shortly before they fled before Mzilikazi's Ndebele in 1832. Its origin lay in the mutualistic relationship between the rhino and the oxpecker (known as the rhinoceros bird in Dutch/Afrikaans). There are two species of oxpecker, the redbilled oxpecker (*Buphagus erythrorhynchus*) and the yellowbilled oxpecker (*Buphagus africanus*), both of which commonly perch on megaherbivores to forage for ticks and other ectoparasites (Campbell 1822, I: 282; McElligott et al. 2004: 348; Nunn et al. 2011: 1297). According to Lemue (1847: 111), the Tswana named this bird *kala ya tshukudu*, meaning the servant of the rhinoceros, an association which enriched the Tswana language with many metaphors. He explained that to the Tswana, addressing someone as 'you are my rhinoceros' was the equivalent of telling someone "you are my master; am I not the *'kala du choukourou'*, meaning must I not protect you?" It was said that in return for these good services the rhinoceros nurses such affection towards the oxpecker that it permits the bird to sit in its nostrils and right in the corners of its mouth (Lemue 1847: 111). Analogous to the bond between the rhino and the oxpecker, reciprocal obligations underpinned the relationship between a ruler and his subjects. Although chieftainship among the Tswana was not imbued with the same power and veiled in similar elaborate rituals and rules of accessibility as among the Venda, for example, the chief, usually a successor in the male line, still commanded an authoritative position. His "exalted status" is described by Schapera (1938: 620) as follows:

He is the symbol of tribal unity, the central figure round whom the tribal life revolves. He is at once ruler, judge, maker and guardian of the law, repository of wealth, dispenser of gifts, leader in war, priest and magician of the people.

The same metaphor was used to express the underlying principle of mutuality⁹ in the relationship between royals and their subjects as reflected in the cattle loan system (*mafisa*). According to this institution, poorer subjects looked after the herds of their masters and received milk and other benefits in exchange. In this way royals were also insured against total loss as a result of cattle raids or diseases since the loan cattle were distributed to different areas. In addition, the loyalty of the recipients was assured (Schapera 1953: 28). The lender, the chief or a royal member, was known as *tshukudu* (generic term for rhinoceros), while the guardian of the cattle was known as *kala*. In his discussion of the *mafisa* system among the western Kwena of present-day Botswana (the Bakwena ba Sechele), Okihiro (1976: 90) translates *kala* as "branch", relating it to the principle that the recipient had to be a trusted servant closely bound to the lender. While this definition of *kala* may be true in an abstract sense, there can be little doubt that the origins of this terminology lie in the mutualistic relationship

between the rhino and the oxpecker (*kala ya tshukudu*), outlined above. This metaphor has also been extended to capture the essence of friendship, as expressed in the Tswana adage, “*dikala di kgaoganye le ditshukudu*”, which can be translated as ‘the oxpeckers and the rhinoceroses have gone their own ways’, and carries the meaning “the best of friends have parted company” (Cole & Moncho-Warren 2011: 222).

As is evident from several cultural practices and historical incidents outlined below, the rhinoceros was symbolically associated with chieftainship among the Tswana, as well as other Bantu-speaking societies in southeastern Africa. During his 1820 journey through the country of the southern and western Tswana, London Missionary Society director John Campbell recorded that Mongale, an uncle of Kgosi, the then reigning chief of the Barolong booRatlou at Khunwana, had aspired to and attempted to usurp the throne. To signal his intent, therefore, “on the death of a rhinoceros, he privately took the breast of that animal, which was tantamount to his declaring himself king”. Mongale was unsuccessful, though, because Kgosi enjoyed greater support (Campbell 1822, II: 180; Breutz 1955: 8–9). Among the Tswana, the breast portion (*sehuba*) of all big game, as well as one tusk of an elephant and the skins of all leopards and lions, was reserved as tribute for the chief. This rule obtained whether the animals were killed by individual hunters or during communal hunts (*letsbolo*) (Schapera 1938: 63).

In the early 1860s, trouble ensued between Sekhukhune, the paramount chief of the Pedi, a large Northern Sotho polity, and Mabhoko, the leader of the Ndzundza (Southern) Ndebele. Sekhukhune considered Mabhoko his vassal but the latter increasingly started to assert his independence of both the Pedi paramountcy and the Transvaal state established by the Trekkers (Delius 1984: 91–2). As related by missionary Heinrich Grützner, Mabhoko discovered one morning to his dismay that Sekhukhune had delivered a corn basket at the entrance to his capital from which the head of a rhinoceros protruded. Mabhoko’s followers were panic-stricken and he immediately called upon all his diviners to counter the magic spell (Wangemann 1957: 38). “A crowd of diviners assembled around the basket and hit it with thin switches while they cried out loudly: ‘Rhinoceros head get up! Rhinoceros head get up!’” The diviners then recommended that since “the head on its own does not want to go, it should be dragged away, and specifically to whence it came from, namely to Sekhukhune’s land”. The suggestion met with approval and the following night the basket and the head were taken to Sekhukhune’s country. “Now they felt relieved, because the spell had been broken” (Gerlachshoop 1863: 385, our translation). It is important to note that switches used in witchcraft ceremonies were usually medicated (Pitje 1950: 111) and that the removal of the head also took place at night. The act was clearly a protective rite against witchcraft of the night, which was aimed at not only removing the danger but transposing the spell, that is, “to return the bad magic” (Mönnig 1967: 94).

As discussed with reference to the Schroda figurine assemblage, initiation schools were the primary setting and institution for inculcating cultural values and beliefs. The figurines served as important didactic tools. Among the Tswana, initiation schools for boys involved circumcision and were usually divided into two phases, referred to as *bogvera bo sweu* (white *bogvera*) and *bogvera bo ntsho* (black *bogvera*) (Schapera 1953). Among the Northern Sotho-speaking Pedi, the first phase was known as *bodika* (Mönnig 1967). Towards the end of the *bodika* ceremony various wooden figurines were carved, the most important of which was that of a rhino. While the initiates were sitting alongside

the fire in the centre of the circumcision lodge, the rhino figurine was “drawn slowly past them on the ground,” upon which they stabbed at it with miniature spears and called out their new manhood names and the feats they intended to perform as fully incorporated members of the chiefdom (Roberts & Winter 1915: 576). The figurines served as “aids to memory” in lessons on traditional customs, norms and beliefs (Pitje 1950: 123). These included honouring the chieftaincy, the physiology of sexual relations and the rules of marriage (Schapera 1938: 107). Interestingly, the rhinoceros idiom has also been recorded in the context of circumcision in post-initiate celebrations among the Manala section of the Southern Ndebele. The following stanza from a praise song—*I am Mankalakatana / With the horn of a rhinoceros I do not stab*—has been interpreted as a metaphor for “manhood and sexual knowledge” (Groenewald 2001: 53).

Among the Tswana, the second phase of the initiation school, the so-called black *bogwera*, during which initiates were formally grouped into a regiment, took place about a year afterwards. In view of the importance of rhino symbolism, it comes as no surprise that, according to David Livingstone (1857: 147), the initiation ceremony was followed by a rhinoceros hunt, after which the boys were allowed to marry. Although we do not have adequate information on the rules of traditional rhino hunting, it was probably culturally regulated and often carried out as a communal effort, as illustrated in Charles Bell’s sketch of Tswana hunters’ encounter with a black rhinoceros in the Magaliesberg in the 1830s (Fig. 4). Game traps were also used but in such a case, too, a joint effort was needed to cut up and haul out the booty (Lye 1975: 249, 259, 261, 276; Rookmaaker 2008: 34–45).

Consumption and trade

The list of archaeofaunal remains (Table 1) has already hinted at the fact that traditional African farming societies had a pragmatic and utilitarian approach to nature and that rhinos were also killed and consumed. Furthermore, as has been pointed out, the rhino was not a totem among southeastern Bantu speakers and concomitant food taboos therefore did not apply. Though it is obviously important to bear in mind the turbulent historical context of the 1820s and 1830s, it is clear from travellers’ accounts that rhinoceros meat was equally relished by local Tswana, European explorers and their Khoekhoe assistants (Cornwallis Harris 1840: 82–5; Lang 1924: 176; Rookmaaker 2008: 31). On his journey from the Barolong booRatlou capital at Khunwana to the Hurutshe capital Kaditshwene in April 1820, John Campbell (1822, I: 199–200) was astounded by the frenzy that accompanied the cutting up of a rhinoceros that his party had shot:

The sight of so huge a carcass to eat delighted the natives who were with us. Four different parties, who travelled with us, began instantly to cut it up, each party carrying portions to their own heap as fast as they could. Some being more expeditious than others, excited jealousy, and soon caused a frightful uproar ... In less than an hour every inch of that monstrous creature was carried off, and nothing but a pool of blood left behind. Their rage and fury, during the struggle for flesh, gave them such a ferocity of countenance that I could recognise only a few of them, and actually inquired if these people belonged to our party, or if they had come from some neighbouring kraal.

The legs and feet of the above rhino were roasted in ant-heaps that had been hollowed out (Campbell 1822, I: 205). Wesleyan Methodist missionary Stephen Kay (1834: 33) gave a similar account of a rhinoceros butchered near Khunwana in 1821:



Fig. 4. Rhino hunting (John and Charles Bell Heritage Trust Collection, University of Cape Town, BC686 C28).

Every one threw aside his mantle; and in a state of perfect nudity began butchering for himself, conceiving that he was fully entitled to every piece he might be able to cut off; consequently very few minutes elapsed before this prodigious creature was dissected, and nothing but bones and dung left on the spot.

In a sense the ferocity with which rhino carcasses were cut up mirrors the aggressive behaviour of the rhino. According to Andrew Smith, who described several rhinoceros hunts in the Magaliesberg range, the flesh of a young rhino was “most delicious and would be relished by the most professed epicure ... No opportunity of acquiring it was lost and, though we lived much upon it, no one appeared to get satiated or wish a better food” (Lye 1975: 248). The same author also noted that the Rolong would send the breast portion of eland, buffalo, giraffe and rhinoceros as tribute to their chief (Kirby 1939, I: 408). The rhino was classified as an edible animal by the Pedi (Mönnig 1967: 175). Quinn (1959: 126), in discussing the food of the Pedi, noted that the meat of the black rhinoceros was traditionally eaten by all members of the family.

The rhinoceros was not only hunted for its meat but various parts, such as the skin and horn, were used to fashion ornaments and weapons. George Thompson, who travelled among the southern Tswana in 1823, remarked that on account of rhino horn “[b]eing a strong, ponderous, and elastic substance, it is much prized by the natives for handles to their battle-axes” (Forbes 1967: 103). During his sojourn among the Barolong booRatlou of Khunwana in 1820, John Campbell (1822, I: 295) was informed that four battle-axe handles could be carved from the front horn of a white rhinoceros. French missionary Prosper Lemue (1847: 110) also observed that the main horn was carved into clubs and that rhinoceros hide was used to cut whips. It would appear that rhino horn clubs were widely used by African communities, since Andrew Smith’s

Expedition Party collected at least 34 such knobkerries during their journey through the South African interior between 1834 and 1836 (Lye 1975: 299). In describing the outfit of Tlhaping women, Somerville (1979: 120) noted that “on the upper arm, and wrist they have rings of the Elephants tooth, the hide of the Rhinoceros or leathern thongs wound round with copper wire of different thickness”. Andrew Smith observed that the sinew of various animals, including the rhinoceros, was used to prepare storage nets to be used on draught oxen (Kirby 1940, I: 271).

Rhino hides and horns are organic remains and it is therefore unlikely that they would be preserved archaeologically. It can nevertheless be accepted that such raw materials, or the commodities obtained from them, would have formed part of the internal and interregional trade among farming (and also hunter-gatherer) communities of the southern African interior. Trade in rhinoceros horn, ivory and tortoise shell along the East African coast with Arabia and the Orient was first recorded in the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, a guide that was probably compiled in about AD 100 (Hall 1987: 78). Although there is no direct evidence, it seems plausible that unworked rhinoceros horn, elephant ivory tusks and probably gold could have constituted export items earmarked for external or international trade reaching the East Coast from Middle Iron Age communities in the Shashe-Limpopo Basin (Calabrese 2005: 350–2). Whether, or to what extent, perceptions and beliefs prevalent in the East about the presumed medicinal or supernatural properties of rhino horn would have permeated into the African interior is difficult to gauge, but the external demand for rhino horn would certainly have added to its local commercial value and enhanced its cultural significance.

Horns, praise poems and monoliths

We have already remarked that in Tswana folk taxonomy the size or shape of the horns served as the basis for recognising variants in each of the two species of rhinoceros. It can therefore be expected that the horns of the rhino featured prominently in cultural perceptions and practices, as well as in symbolic representations, among African farming communities. This is borne out by the fact that a special club of rhino horn served as a marker of chiefly authority. In July 1883 the Ndzundza (Southern) Ndebele chief Nyabela was captured by forces of the Transvaal state after a protracted war. Upon his surrender, General Piet Joubert, commander of the Transvaal forces, impounded Nyabela’s chiefly club of rhino horn (Fig. 5). The club, which is 49.5 cm long and has a knob with a circumference of 22.5 cm, eventually landed up in what is currently known as the Ditsong National Museum of Cultural History. The accession note explains that the club served as “the symbol of the dignity of the chief”. The association of a rhino horn club with chieftainship was apparently a long-standing tradition among the Southern Ndebele as is revealed in the account of how Ndzundza, the eponymous founder of a branch of the chiefdom, usurped the throne that rightfully belonged to his elder brother Manala. He did this with the assistance of his mother who conspired to deceive Bulongo, his blind old father, into believing that he was transferring the insignia of chieftainship to his eldest son: “He [Ndzundza] pretended that he was Manala and was given the rhino horn club and the medicine horn of chieftainship by his old father” (Van Warmelo 1944: 14).

In 1893 a story unfolded very similar to the capturing of Nyabela’s rhino horn club by Transvaal forces ten years earlier. Upon the British conquest of Matabeleland and



Fig. 5. Nyabela's rhino horn club (Ditsong National Museum of Cultural History) (Photo: F.P. Coetzee 2013).

Bulawayo, the Ndebele king Lobengula retreated north, but not before setting alight his headquarters. According to Major Frederick Burnham, who took part in the campaign, an immense amount of ivory, skins, horns and other treasures burnt down, but they managed to save “the great knobkerrie of Lobengula himself”. It is described as follows: “This was a single white rhinoceros horn, probably one of the finest existent, with a knob at the end as large as one’s fist. The horn was fully four feet in length and had been straightened and beautifully worked”. The rhino horn club was eventually turned over to Cecil John Rhodes, the driving force behind the colonisation of what subsequently became known as Rhodesia. This act was hailed by Burnham (1926: 84) with unabashed imperialist hubris: “It seemed particularly fitting that this emblem of authority should pass from the grasp of the most powerful black monarch of Africa into the hands of the strongest white ruler who ever dominated that continent”. It is also interesting to note that Lobengula’s half-brother Nkulumane, who on genealogical grounds should have succeeded Mzilikazi but became discredited during the Ndebele’s northward migration into Matabeleland, bore one of the Zulu terms for the white rhinoceros as his name (Rasmussen 1978: 233; Doke et al. 1990: 405, 579).

Ethnographic information gathered among the Tswana, too, shows that a rhinoceros horn symbolised leadership and political power. Research among the Bakgatla of Mochudi established that a chief used to possess two rhino horns, a small one, known as *lenaka la pula* (“rain horn”), for holding the medicines used during various rainmaking ceremonies, and a larger one, known as *lenaka la bogosi* (“horn of chieftainship”) or as *lenaka la ntwa* (“war horn”) (Schapera 1971: 32, 49 & plates 8a, 8b). The large horn of chieftainship was considered particularly sacred and kept separately (Schapera 1971:

26–32). The different dimensions are most probably reflective of the differences in the size of the anterior and posterior horns of rhinos, implying that the smaller rear horn was employed as a rain horn (Ouzman 1995: 60).

One of the praise epithets or honorific names of a Venda chief was ‘rhinoceros horn’ (*Lunanga-lwa-tshugulu*) (Van Warmelo 1971: 369). *Tshugulu* is the Venda equivalent of *tshukudu*, the Sotho-Tswana generic term for a rhinoceros. A club of rhinoceros horn, known as *thonga ya tshugulu*, was also a symbol of chieftainship among the Venda. It is described as follows: “rare article only found in *misanda* as *tshitungulo* & symbol of chieftainship & warlike prowess” (Van Warmelo 1989: 376). *Misanda* (singular: *musanda*) refer to the palaces of Venda leaders while *zhitungulo* (singular: *tshitungulo*) represent heirlooms that are used in ancestral rites. Among such rites, some of which are still performed today, is the annual *thevhuba* (first fruits) ceremony, during which the chief and members of the royal clan pour libations on the graves of their ancestors, thanking them for the previous year’s harvest and propitiating them for a good rainy season (Stayt 1931: 253–8; Van Warmelo 1932: 153–81). The word *thonga* is also used in expressions relating to pregnancy, such as *fara thonga*, “be in the final stages of pregnancy, shortly before parturition” and *inwedzji wa thonga*, “eighth month of pregnancy”. Van Warmelo (1989: 377–8) notes that he could find no explanation for this use of *thonga*, but perhaps it is to be sought in the horn’s association with and embodiment of regrowth and fertility as a phallus-like object.

Conceptually, the gold ‘sceptre’ from Mapungubwe Hill and the chiefly rhino horn clubs discussed above served the same function as markers of leadership. In essence and in form, therefore, the gold ‘sceptre’ represented an ornate knobkerrie. It has generally been assumed that the gold ‘sceptre’ covered a wooden core onto which it was tacked by gold pins (Oddy 1984; Duffey 2012). In view of the cultural significance of the rhinoceros and the widespread use of a rhino horn club as a leadership symbol by southeastern Bantu speakers, the question arises whether the foil of the gold ‘sceptre’, or of the other finials, did not perhaps cover a rhino horn club rather than a wooden knobkerrie.

Praise poems of Tswana chiefs, regents and other aspiring leaders or heroes abound with references to the rhino as a leadership symbol. At least fifteen praise poems have been documented in which such dignitaries are either addressed or referred to as a rhinoceros, or are associated with characteristics or powers attributed to the rhinoceros (Table 3). These praise poems derive from various chiefdoms and ruling lineages, such as the Kgatla, Ngwaketse, Ngwato, Tlokwa, Lete¹⁰ and Hurutshe (Ellenberger 1937, 1939; Schapera 1965). As examples, we cite passages from two praise poems of nineteenth-century Tswana chiefs. The first refers to Kgamanyane, who ruled the Bakgatla ba ga Kgafela between 1848 and 1874, and whose disputes and clashes with the Transvaal state and Commandant General Paul Kruger led him and a large following to leave the Rustenburg district in 1867 and settle in present-day Botswana (Schapera 1965: 68–9):

The chief’s Poker, Black Rhinoceros, black rhinoceros, brother of Makgetla
the Rolong;
when you poke, brother of Ramphelana, don’t poke as if you are anxious, ...
when you poke keep the horns facing, the horns must face each other,
Dodger,...

now that you've seen the Slasher fighting, the Slasher with the bloodstained horn?

The Brave One pokes and pokes again; he then draws out the victim's entrails....

The second excerpt is from a praise poem composed in honour of Ikaneng, the chief of the Lete, who repulsed an attack by the Ngwaketse on Ramotswa, located in present-day Botswana, in 1881 (Ellenberger 1937: 30):

Black Rhinoceros of the Maratadiba!

Black Rhinoceros of the salt-lick, what shape are your horns?

When they began to curve they curved inwards, your horns grew close together without any space between them, they took up most of the room of your face.

...Say that the Black Rhinoceros has created havoc over there.

Black rhinoceros of the curved horns, brother of Mokgojwe!

Black Rhinoceros bull of the upright horns, relative of Kobuane!

An analysis of the various Tswana terms for the rhinoceros used in these fifteen poems (Table 3) shows that the generic term *tshukudu* was used in eleven, in six of which it occurs as the only term. *Bodile*, one of the terms for the black rhinoceros, appears in six poems: in one as a stand-alone term; in two together with the generic term *tshukudu*; in one together with *thema* and *makgala/makgale*, both terms for the black rhino; and in two combined with *tshukudu* and *makgala/makgale*. *Thema* (*theme*), designating the black rhino,

TABLE 3
Rhino praise names.

Group	Leader	Rhino term/s	Reference
Bakgatla ba ga Kgafela	Pheto	<i>tshukudu</i>	Schapera 1965: 48
	Molefi	<i>tshukudu</i>	Schapera 1965: 62
	Kgamanyane	<i>bodile</i>	Schapera 1965: 66
	Kgamanyane	<i>tshukudu</i>	Schapera 1965: 75
	Lentswe	<i>tshukudu, bodile, makgale</i>	Schapera 1965: 82
Ngwaketse	Sebego	<i>tshukudu</i>	Schapera 1965: 150
Ngwato	Khama I	<i>tshukudu</i>	Schapera 1965: 188
	Khama III	<i>tshukudu, bodile</i>	Schapera 1965: 202
Tlokwa	Matlapeng	<i>tshukudu, bodile, makgale</i>	Ellenberger 1939: 181–2
Lete	Phoko	<i>theme</i>	Ellenberger 1937: 4
	Mmolotsi	<i>mogofu</i>	Ellenberger 1937: 6
	Modingwane	<i>tshukudu, bodile</i>	Ellenberger 1937: 7
	Mokgosi	<i>tshukudu</i>	Ellenberger 1937: 16
	Ikaneng	<i>bodile, thema, makgala</i>	Ellenberger 1937: 26
Hurutshe	Diutlwileng	<i>tshukudu, makgale</i>	Breutz 1953: 28

occurs in one poem on its own and is combined in another with *bodile* and *makgala/makgale*, both terms for the black rhino. *Makgala (makgale)* appears in four poems: in two with *tshukudu* and *bodile*, in one together with *bodile* and *thema*, and in another with *tshukudu*. *Mogofu*, one of the two terms for the white rhinoceros, appears only in one poem, that of Mmolotsi, a brother of the Lete chief Powe (Ellenberger 1937: 6).

Three points can be made with reference to the composition and rhino terminology of the praise poems. First, and foremost, the horns of the rhino feature prominently in the praise poems, clearly an indication of their central importance in cultural perceptions and beliefs about the symbolic significance of this herbivore. It should be noted in this regard that while horns vary greatly in size and shape, the front horn of the white rhino, the larger of the two species, is on average longer than that of the black rhino. The longest front horn has also been documented from a white rhino (Skinner & Chimimba 2005: 528, 532). Secondly, references are mostly made to the black rhino (*bodile, makgala/makgale, thema/theme*) or to *tshukudu*, the generic term. In particular, it is the dangerous nature and fighting prowess of the black rhino that are transposed onto leaders. These attributes were therefore widely treasured and associated with Tswana chiefs who were by no means sacred leaders in the sense of the Zimbabwe culture. Thirdly, the single reference to *mogofu* and the frequent use of the generic term *tshukudu* suggest that while the aggression of the black rhino was a highly held attribute of leaders, leadership symbolism did not necessarily exclude the white rhino which, though not innately aggressive, still remained a powerful and dangerous animal. The generic term also forms the basis of the Tswana concept of *bosukudu*, which translates as ‘rhinoceros nature’ and could have been used to refer to the quintessence of leadership (Snyman et al. 1990: 316). This implies that the attributes of territoriality, gregariousness and protection, which can be associated with the white rhino, were also cherished by the Tswana and other southern African farming communities in late precolonial and early historical times.

Tswana praise poems tend to focus on the military exploits of chiefs and, by the very nature of their composition, tend to stress and laud the aggressive qualities of their leaders. However, a chief not only had to be aggressive and forceful, he also had to care for his subjects’ well-being and protect and defend their interests. Among the Tswana a chief was not as aloof and inaccessible as among the Venda, and his decisions could be questioned and challenged during general court assemblies of men or leaders (Campbell 1822, II: 157; Lestrade 1928: 429). The more representative and ‘democratic’ nature of Tswana chieftainship is encapsulated in the dictum *kgosi ke kgosi ka batho* (a chief must have the support of his people) (Cole & Moncho-Warren 2011: 262) or *kgosi ke kgosi ka morafe* (a chief is a chief by the grace of the nation) (Gulbrandsen 1993: 567). Leaders and their subjects stood in the same reciprocal relationship to each other as the rhinoceros to the oxpecker, the *kala ya tshukudu* (‘the servant of the rhinoceros’).

Of all the large mammals, the African rhinoceros is the only one in which two closely related species are found with overlapping physical traits and complementary behavioural attributes. The cosmology and leadership concepts of African farmers could thus be informed by the behavioural characteristics of both species, aggressive and solitary in the case of the black rhino, and more sociable and territorial in the case of the white rhino. An analogous leadership metaphor is found among the Zulu, according to which a homestead head had to embody the contrasting but complementary

characteristics of a bull (fierceness, authority) and an ox (stability, calmness) (Poland et al. 2003: 25; Armstrong et al. 2008: 531). Moreover, as ethnographic accounts attest, the rhino was not the only animal metaphorically associated with the chiefly position. In Venda court speech, the admirable qualities of other animals, such as the crocodile, the elephant and the lion, were also invoked to extol the virtues and magnificence of the chief (Van Warmelo 1971: 369).

The fact that a knobkerrie made from the horn of a white rhinoceros served as the chiefly emblem of the Ndebele king Lobengula also points to the significance of the white rhino. Even the Venda, whose political system was marked by sacred leadership (Van Warmelo 1971), used the generic term for the rhino to label the royal ‘knobkerrie’ employed in ancestral rites, the *thonga ya tshugulu*, and in a chiefly praise epithet, *Luxangalwa-tshugulu!* (‘rhinoceros horn’). Whether this broadened rhino symbolism also applied to Zimbabwe culture leaders and their predecessors at Mapungubwe remains to be established.

As pointed out, among the Tswana, horn size informed the folk taxonomy and rhino horns featured in rainmaking rites and as chiefly symbols. In this regard, the etymology of one of the names used for the black rhinoceros in Tswana, Venda and Shona is informative. Besides *chipembere*, the Shona also refer to the black rhino as *nhema* (Hannan 1984: 463). Morphologically and tone-wise, the noun is most probably derived from *-tema*, a Shona verb that can be translated as “cut, hew, slash, incise” (Hannan 1984: 640). The same etymology applies to the Tswana and Venda equivalent *thema*, which is a deverbative noun from *-rema*, a verb with the same meaning as *-tema* in Shona (Van Warmelo 1989: 322; Cole & Moncho-Warren 2011: 478). Moreover, a recent study of the etymology of *ngangula*, the royal Kongo title, traces its origin to a reconstructed common Bantu verb **-pangud-*, meaning ‘to cut, to separate’, and demonstrates a link in Bantuphone Africa between the concepts of ‘cutting’ and ‘ruling’ (Bostoen et al. 2013). It is interesting to note that another reconstructed Proto-Bantu verb **-tém-* (cut, cut down) shows a very wide distribution covering fifteen out of the sixteen geographical zones into which the Bantu languages have been divided. Moreover, reconstructions from **-tém-* (cut, cut down) include the semantic derivation **-tém-* (rule) in zone F and the deverbative nominal derivation **-témì* (ruler) in zones F and G of the northeastern region of the Bantu cluster (Bantu lexical reconstructions 3, 2010–12). It is from this same reconstructed verb root that the Shona verb *-tema*, the Tswana and Venda verb *-rema*, as well as the corresponding deverbative nouns *nhema* and *thema*, are derived. Clearly the horns of the African rhinoceros, which signalled danger and offered protection, constituted a key attribute which informed African farmer cosmology and symbolised political power and leadership. This decisive authority of the chief is fittingly captured in the Venda proverb (Van Warmelo 1989: 322), “*Ipfi Ia kebosi ndi mbaḍo, i a rema*,” which translates as “The chief’s word is an axe, it cuts through,” and carries the following meaning: “He gives the decision, which is final”.

In smaller-scale societies, symbols are multivocal, that is, they have many meanings, and are often taken from the natural world. They express thought processes that are acquired through a process of socialisation, for example, during initiation rituals, and underlie a particular worldview. They are powerful because they are condensed, evoke emotions and, importantly, articulate the ‘inexplicable’ (Hammond-Tooke 1989: 17–19, 22–3). In the case of early southern African farming communities, this symbolic link



Fig. 6. Magoro Hill monoliths (Photo: J.C.A. Boeyens 2012).

between the rhino and political power also became manifest in their architecture through monoliths that reference the horns of the rhinoceros bull or leader. The palace areas of Shona and Venda capitals are characterised by the presence of monoliths on walls and at entrances. Two monoliths (Fig. 6) stood and are still standing at the entrance to the private court of the chiefs of the Magoro dynasty at Mbwenda, their nineteenth-century capital in southern Venda (Boeyens 2012: 25–9). Upon enquiring about the significance of the monoliths on the palace walls of Great Zimbabwe, Shona informants told Huffman (1996: 35) that the monoliths were called “the horns of the *mambo* [king]’ because the king was metaphorically like a bull and defended his people with his spear (his army) as a bull defended its herd with its horn”. With regard to the royal insignia of Mapungubwe, Huffman (1996: 189) argues: “It may even be that the rhino’s horn was a symbol of defence comparable to the ‘horns’ at Great Zimbabwe and elsewhere”. We would like to suggest that the monoliths from Mbwenda and Great Zimbabwe are architectural and material correlates of rhino horns, and, in such chiefly contexts, served as leadership referents.

The monoliths in the entrance to the central chiefly court of Kaditshwene, the capital of the Hurutshe between c. 1790 and 1823, most probably carried a similar symbolic load. One monolith is still standing today (Fig. 7), while another of almost equal length lies a few yards away (Boeyens 1998: 213, 2000: 8, 10). The Hurutshe’s erstwhile mountain stronghold in present-day Marico in the North West Province is flanked by the *Ratsbukendu* (‘Mr/Father of Rhinoceros’) stream. Genealogically, the Hurutshe are widely acclaimed to be the senior grouping among the Tswana and, as such, the court at Kaditshwene would have been imbued with considerable political and ritual status in the wider region (Boeyens & Plug 2011: 1). Monoliths are also associated with the



Fig. 7. Kaditshwene monolith (Photo: J.C.A. Boeyens 1992).



Fig. 8. Marothodi monoliths (Photo: J.C.A. Boeyens 2013).

central courts of other early nineteenth-century Tswana capitals, such as at Marothodi, the capital of a Tlokwa chiefdom in the present-day Pilanesberg-Rustenburg region (Anderson 2011: 78). It is of interest that three monoliths, placed alongside each other, are found in the court area of a smaller homestead close to the primary chiefly ward complex (Fig. 8).¹¹ It is not possible at this stage to associate this homestead with a specific historical figure, but it could have been the abode of a senior headman with royal connections or perhaps of a son or brother of the chief. It is possible that, among the Tswana, rhino horn clubs and monoliths could have served as leadership symbols on different hierarchical levels of political organisation and authority. It should be borne in mind that the same high level of political centralisation and the elaborate trappings of sacred leadership, as manifested in the Zimbabwe culture or among the Venda (Van Warmelo 1971: 357), were absent among the Tswana. Moreover, leadership has many facets besides political authority and military prowess that could all be symbolically referenced by monoliths. Huffman (1996: 155, 160) has noted that in the Zimbabwe culture, monoliths could variously symbolise protection, fertility, male status, defence and justice. At Marothodi, for example, monoliths are embedded in stone circles which enclose the remains of iron-smelting furnaces (Anderson 2011: 208–9). Iron-smelting is a transformative process and its metaphorical association with child-birth, as well as the initiation of young boys, is well attested (Hall et al. 2008: 81–2; Anderson 2011: 224). Any archaeological study of the symbolic meaning of monoliths should, therefore, duly take into account their spatial location and cultural context.

CONCLUSIONS

Altogether the evidence suggests that notions about the nature of leadership and the symbolic meaning of the African rhinoceros were widely shared among southeastern Bantu speakers and had considerable time depth. Leadership has many attributes, and in patrilineal Eastern Bantu-speaking societies was intertwined with the well-being of the community and associated with political power, military prowess, defence, security and fertility. Such symbolism extends back many centuries and marked not only the institution of sacred leadership as expressed in the Mapungubwe kingdom, but also applied to lesser-stratified Sotho-Tswana chiefdoms of more recent times. In general, the fortunes of a community depended on the political wisdom of its leader and his intercession with his chiefly ancestors. The chief had to defend his subjects, lead them in military campaigns, adjudicate in court cases, and oversee the performance of the necessary ceremonies and rituals to ensure good rains and harvests, as well as the enculturation of the youth. While the evidence for the leadership symbolism of the black rhino is unambiguous, the symbolic load of the white rhino is less evident. Nonetheless, several strands of evidence suggest that, at least during the late precolonial and early historical period, African farming communities drew upon both the black and the white rhino in their conceptualisation of the essence of leadership.

The cultural and symbolic significance of the African rhinoceros manifested itself in numerous ways. We can now affirm the somewhat tentative observation that the iconic golden rhinoceros from Mapungubwe “was most likely an emblem of royal power” (Hall & Steffoff 2006: 35; see also photo caption in Huffman 1996: opposite p. 103). Rhino figurines were also used as didactic tools during initiation ceremonies in which knowledge about values, laws and mores was imparted. Rhino horns were employed

as receptacles for rainmaking medicines, whereas rhino bones, especially foot and leg bones, became important elements of rainmaking rites. Rhino horn clubs functioned as markers of chiefly status and the epithet ‘rhinoceros horn’ served as an honorific title for a leader. Meat cut from the breast of a rhinoceros was the preserve of a chief and was received as tribute from his subjects. The presentation of a cut-off rhino head to a defiant leader or a subject chief conveyed a clear message that subordination would not be tolerated and that magic would be applied to restore the political order.

The cultural significance of the rhino is also borne out by Tswana nomenclature and folk taxonomy. Besides the generic term *tshukudu*, Tswana speakers had no fewer than five different names for the black rhino and two for the white rhino. These names were coined mainly to distinguish between variants of each species on the basis of horn and body size. The rhino metaphor also features prominently in praise poems of Tswana chiefs. In this regard, too, there is a strong emphasis on rhino horns as the key anatomical trait that epitomised the danger, aggression, authority, protection and military success of a leader. The front horn was not only a weapon of attack and defence, but its cutting action symbolised the final authority and decision-making responsibilities of the chief. It is argued that this metaphorical association found material expression in monoliths that functioned as rhino horn/leadership referents and adorned the walls and entrances of Venda and Zimbabwe culture palaces, as well as the courts of nineteenth-century Tswana capitals. Rhino horns and monoliths are phallus-like objects and, as such, could also symbolise male status, fertility and procreation.

In sum, this study reaffirms the enduring nature of cultural principles and the relevance of ethnography as a source and framework for probing culturally informed behaviour in the deeper past. Ethnography remains a key interpretative tool in African archaeology, enabling us to gauge how underlying perceptions of the natural world and systems of belief about people and society were materially and symbolically articulated.

NOTES

- ¹ In December 1843, for instance, the Swedish naturalist Johan August Wahlberg recorded that one of the Rustenburg Fokeng chief Mokgatle’s hunters had been charged by a white rhino. The rhino had thrust his horn into the hunter’s leg just above the knee and tossed him high up in the air (Craig & Hummel 1994: 115).
- ² Interestingly, a “Blicqouas or rhinoceros dance” was also recorded among a mixed group of Kora-Tlhaping in 1779 by Hendrik Jacob Wikar, who described it as follows (Mossop 1935: 171). “The women are the singers and usually stand in two rows clapping their hands and singing; then the men approach as they dance and at the same time two of the best dancers among the women come forward, simulating two rhinoceroses. Still dancing, these two supposed rhinos seek to make thrusts at the men, the hunters, who show their skill in the dance in evading and escaping them.”
- ³ If the Mapungubwe gold rhino does indeed portray a white rhino rather than the black variety, as has been suggested by Clive Walker, it could possibly represent the ‘cold’ and impotent older king who was more stable and less susceptible to the dangers of witchcraft and pollution that could affect his responsibilities for rain control (Gavin Whitelaw pers. comm., May 2014).
- ⁴ Tswana has a seven-vowel system and, to ensure correct pronunciation and thus meaning, it is essential to distinguish between the close vowels /e, o/ and the mid-open vowels /ê, ô/ respectively. While diacritics, such as the circumflex, are not used in ordinary publications, they are retained in dictionary entries and in discussions of linguistic aspects. Like most Bantu languages, Tswana is a tone language and, where known, the applicable tone pattern has been listed (L = Low Tone; H = High Tone) (see Cole 1995: 42, 65). The names are therefore to be pronounced as follows: *tshukudu* (HHL), *bodilê* (LHH), *bodilênyane* (LHHLL), *kgêthwa* (LL), *kenenyane* (HHL), *makgalê*, *thêma*, *mogôbu* (LLH) and *kôbaôba* (?LHHL).
- ⁵ In the case of these two terms for black rhino, two forms of the noun appear in Tswana praise poems, namely *makgala/makgalê* and *thêma/thémê*. In the distant past, a distinction used to be made in Tswana

- between the form of a personal noun when addressing or referring to someone; for example, the original final vowel *-a* changed to *-é* as in Mr *Kgama* (vocative form) versus Mr *Kgamé* (reference form) (from *kgama* = hartebeest). The final vowel also changes when animal names are personified as in folk tales; for example *Mmutla* becomes *Mmutlé* (Mr Hare) (Cole 1955: 73, 398).
- ⁶ No standard Tswana orthography existed at the time and early explorers rendered the name *kegethwa* in a variety of corrupted forms such as ‘keitloa’, ‘seikloa’, ‘jekckloa’, ‘ketloa’ and ‘kietloa’ (Rookmaaker 2008: 124–6, table 46). Early recorders evidently grappled with the velar fricative *g*, which commonly occurs in Tswana words and is pronounced as *ch* in Scots English *loch* (cf. Cole & Moncho-Warren 2011: 23–30 for a discussion of Tswana phonology).
- ⁷ Stow (1905: 409, 566) lists the Bahaole as a Tswana ‘tribe’ that venerated the rhinoceros. No such tribal or totemic grouping is mentioned in other historical or ethnographic accounts. His suggestion that ‘-haole’ means rhinoceros could also not be confirmed. In Southern Sotho the word *lebaole* (plural *mabaole*) refers to a “man or animal castrated when grown up” (Paroz: 1988: 106). A white resident of Sekhukhuneland informed Schofield (1938: 343) of the so-called “Shukudo” (*Tsbukudu*) people who venerated the rhinoceros and were known as the “Barokas”. However, the Roka ‘*bind*’ (dance) the scaly anteater or duiker as totem (Mönnig 1963: 170).
- ⁸ *The Penny Magazine*, 17 March 1838, p. 101.
- ⁹ It could also be argued that “the tick bird-rhino metaphor is strongly ideological in that it obscures the real nature of the *mafisa* system, which is that it creates relationships of debt and dependency, rather than mutuality, so binding subjects to lenders” (Gavin Whitelaw pers. comm., June 2014).
- ¹⁰ The ruling lineage of the Lete claims to be of Ndebele (Nguni) descent (Ellenberger 1937: 33–4).
- ¹¹ Our first impression was that the two white stones constituted broken parts of a single monolith, but on closer inspection it appeared that all three stones were separately secured into the ground against the court wall. It is noteworthy that some black rhinos have a third small horn, probably an atavistic remnant (Prof. Kobus Bothma pers. comm., May 2014).

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