



## THE RHINOCEROS IN AFRICAN CULTURE

Jan Boeyens

It is well known that the rhinoceros features prominently in the rock art of San (Bushman) hunter-gatherers, primarily in engravings and painted scenes relating to rain control or curing. Engravings of rhinos that emphasise the long front horn, as well as painted therianthrope images, i.e. representations of humans with animal features such as rhino horns, suggest that San 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). 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, 1996; Ouzman & Feely 2002; Eastwood & Eastwood 2006).

Far less is known about the beliefs and perceptions that were traditionally held by early African farming societies and their historical descendants with regard to the rhino. As will become evident from the survey below, African farmers drew extensively upon the traits of this pachyderm in their conceptualisation of the qualities of leadership.

### Taxonomy and behaviour

Some knowledge of the anatomy and behaviour of the two rhino species is a prerequisite to understanding past cultural practices. Despite their overall close re-



Fig. 1: Rhino hunting (John & Charles Bell Heritage Trust Collection, University of Cape Town)

semblance, there are well-defined anatomical and behavioural differences between the species. The white rhino, or square-lipped rhinoceros (*Ceratotherium simum*), is a grazer. Adult bulls weigh between 2 000 and 2 400 kg, which is about double the mass of the black rhino. In terms of social behaviour, the white rhino is described as territorial

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and gregarious (Skinner & Chimimba 2005). It is more docile than the black rhino, although experts caution that the white rhino, too, can be bad-tempered and dangerous (Walker & Walker 2012).

The black rhino, or hook-lipped rhinoceros (*Diceros bicornis*), is a browser and, though smaller, is generally far more aggressive than the white rhino. It has a solitary rather than social disposition. In both species the weapons of attack are the horns, which are composed of a mass of keratin filaments that show considerable variation in size (Estes 1997). Of the large southern African mammals, the rhinoceros is the only one in which two closely-related species are found with overlapping physical traits and complementary behavioural attributes. The cosmology of African farmers could thus be informed by the behavioural characteristics of both the black and the white rhino.

### Hunting and rainmaking

Bones of black or white rhino have been uncovered from several Iron Age sites, among them Diamant, Divuyu, Chibuene, Schroda, KwaGandaganda, Ratho Kroonkop, Toutswe, Basinghall, Moritsane, Mabjana-matshwana and Maremani TSH32 (Boeyens & Van der Ryst 2014: Table 1). Although evidence about the identified skeletal parts is sketchy, the faunal remains do suggest that the rhino was hunted and its meat consumed. Among the Rolong (Tswana), for example, subjects used to send the breast portion of a rhino, and of other large game such as eland, buffalo and giraffe, as tribute to their chief (Kirby 1939).

According to Andrew Smith, who has described several rhino hunts in the Magaliesberg region of the present-day North West Province in the 1830s, rhino meat was relished by both early European explorers and the local Tswana (Lye 1975). Rhino hunting was a communal effort, as illustrated in a sketch by Charles Bell, an artist who accompanied Smith on his journey (Fig. 1). Contemporary accounts also record that rhino horns were used to carve clubs and handles for knives or battle-axes, and that hides were turned into whips or leathern thongs, and the sinew into nets (Lemue 1847; Kirby 1940; Forbes 1967; Somerville 1979). The raw materials, or the commodities obtained from them, would have been exchanged through interregional and external trade networks set up by African farming communities.

Not all the archaeofaunal samples were retrieved from residential sites. Excavation of a rock tank on Ratho Kroonkop, a second-millennium rain-control site in the Shashe-Limpopo Basin with predominantly K2 ceramics, uncovered remains of black rhino and possibly white rhino (Brunton et al. 2013). The association of rhinos with rainmaking in African farmer cosmology is not fully understood, but a belief that black rhinos supposedly charge and stomp out camp fires may provide an explanation for the presence of their bones in such archaeological contexts. This



Fig. 2: Gold rhino (Mapungubwe Collection, University of Pretoria)

presumed behavioural trait could serve as a metaphor for the cooling of heat and thus the alleviation of drought.

Though rhino experts dispute such a behavioural pattern, it is noteworthy that the naturalist Captain Guy Shortridge (1934) recalled that their camp fire had twice been charged by black rhino during a Kaokoveld expedition in South West Africa (Namibia) in the 1920s. Such charges might have been entirely incidental, but what matters 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. Interestingly, the praise poem of Khama III, the Ngwato (Tswana) chief who ruled in Bechuanaland (Botswana) for nearly 50 years from the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, refers to him as 'Fire-hater the black rhinoceros' (Schapera 1965:205).

### Rhino figurines

The Mapungubwe gold rhino is undoubtedly the most famous find from southern Africa's first state complex, which flourished eight centuries ago in the Shashe-Limpopo Basin (Fig. 2). Besides the rhino and other gold-plated animal figurines, the gold objects from the royal cemetery on the hilltop include a sceptre, a bowl, nails, bangles, necklaces, anklets and thousands of beads (Tiley 2004). It is not possible to classify the gold rhino solely on the basis of its sculpted features as either a black or a white rhino. For example, it has only one horn and its snout is incomplete. Its lowered head, powerful shoulders and fat belly have led rhino-keepers, such as Clive Walker, to categorise it as a white rhino (Walker & Walker 2012). On the other hand, its raised tail could possibly be interpreted as portraying the characteristic dominance or threat display of the black rhino (Estes 1997).

Based on the archaeological context of the royal grave and Shona ethnography, the Mapungubwe figurine has been associated with a black rhino and leadership symbolism in a class-based society (Huffman 2005). A key reference in this regard is a 16<sup>th</sup> century Portuguese account of the ceremonial *pembere* dance of the Shona leader (Theal 1901), which was reflective of the movements of the black rhino, known as *chipembere* in Shona. The equivalent dance among the Venda is known as *pembela*, which

refers to the joyous dance of an 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' (Van Warmelo 1989:295).

More than 2 000 clay figurines were recovered at Schroda, another Iron Age site in the Shashe-Limpopo Confluence area. The collection, which was found near a cattle enclosure in the centre of the settlement, included a somewhat impressionistic head fragment of a rhino figurine with two stubby horns. The spatial context of the figurines points to their ritual use, e.g. during the initiation of young boys and girls (Hanisch & Maumela 2002). Such initiation schools offered the opportunity to inculcate societal norms and cultural values, also those pertaining to leadership.

The association of rhino figurines with initiation ceremonies is corroborated by historical accounts. The most important of the carved wooden figurines used during the *bodika*, the first phase of the circumcision school for boys among the Pedi (Northern Sotho), was that of a rhino (Roberts & Winter 1915). The figurines served as 'aids to memory' in lessons on traditional customs, norms and beliefs (Pitje 1950: 123), which included honouring the chieftaincy, the physiology of sexual relations and the rules of marriage (Schapera 1938). The cultural significance of the rhino is again alluded to in connection with the so-called black *bogwera*, the second initiation phase among the Tswana. This took place about a year later when the boys were formally grouped into a regiment. According to the missionary explorer David Livingstone (1857), the initiation ceremony was followed by a rhinoceros hunt, after which the boys could marry.

### Folk taxonomy

Both the white and black rhino were almost extinct by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, several decades before the first professional anthropologists entered the field (Lang 1924). We therefore have to turn to the accounts of early travellers for 'ethnographic' insights into the interrelationship between African farmers and rhinos. The most informative of these derive from explorers, hunters and missionaries who traversed the lands of the southern and western Tswana during the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

A study of travelogues and praise poetry reveals that at least seven different names existed in Tswana to distinguish between the two species of rhino, in particular as regards their body size and, especially, their horn dimensions. Besides the generic term *tshukudu*, which was used for both species, there were five terms for the black rhino (*bodile*, *kgetlwa*, *kenenyane*, *makgale* and *thema*) and two for the white rhino (*mogoful/mogohu* and *kobaoba*) (Boeyens & Van der Ryst 2014: Table 2). Such a proliferation of names did not apply to any of the other large mam-

mals. It clearly indicates that the Tswana were not only acute observers but also attached great cultural importance to the rhino. This folk taxonomy also entered the scientific literature of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Even esteemed zoologists, such as Andrew Smith, initially distinguished at least four species of rhino, two black and two white, principally on the basis of horn size (Rookmaaker 2005, 2008).

Sadly, these vernacular names have largely disappeared from common usage, in tandem with the near extinction of the rhino species in southern Africa. It would seem that, by and large, only the generic term, *tshukudu*, has retained currency among Sotho-Tswana speakers (Kriel & Van Wyk 1989). This lexical loss has grown to such an extent that some recent field guides contain direct translations of the English (and Afrikaans) names for the two species, namely *tshukudu e tshweu* (white rhinoceros) and *tshukudu e ntsho* (black rhinoceros) (Cole 1995). The colour appellations white (*tshweu*) and black (*ntsho*) have merely been added onto the generic Tswana term for the rhinoceros.

Incidentally, no satisfactory explanation exists for the origins of the colour appellations 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).



Fig. 3: Black rhino (*kgetlwa*) (Smith 1849: *Mammalia Plate I*).

### Metaphors, proverbs and leadership symbolism

It was Andrew Smith who early on recorded the leadership symbolism associated with the black rhino among the Tswana. After his expedition had killed a black rhino early in June 1835 in the vicinity of Mosega, near the present town of Zeerust, a local Hurutshe man arrived on the scene and exclaimed, 'Ah Kietloa! You have found your Master!' (Lye 1975:213). He told Smith (1849) that this type of black rhino, whose name is rendered as *kgetlwa* in the current orthography, had a ferocious nature and was



considered by the Tswana to be the most dangerous of all. It could ostensibly be distinguished from the common black rhino on the basis of its large horns, which were nearly of equal length (Fig. 3). The visitor informed Smith that the Tswana in the neighbourhood likened their new overlord in the Mosega Basin, the Ndebele ruler Mzilikazi, to this animal (Lye 1975).

According to Prosper Lemue (1842), a French missionary who had laboured among the Hurutshe at Mosega until they fled Mzilikazi's Ndebele, the saying 'you are my master' had its origin in the mutualistic relationship between the rhino and the oxpecker, which is known as the 'rhinoceros bird' in Afrikaans. There are two species of oxpecker, the red-billed (*Buphagus erythrorhynchus*) and the yellow-billed (*Buphagus africanus*), both of which characteristically perch on megaherbivores to forage for ticks and other ectoparasites (Campbell 1822, vol. I; Nunn et al. 2011) (Fig. 4). The Tswana named this bird *kala ya tshukudu*, which translates as 'servant of the rhinoceros'. Addressing somebody as 'you are my rhinoceros' was synonymous with acknowledging that person's authority and leadership (Lemue 1847:111).



Fig. 4: Red-billed oxpeckers perching on a white rhino (SU Küsel)

The rhino-tick bird metaphor was also extended to capture the essence of friendship. This is expressed in a little-known Tswana adage that can be translated as 'the oxpeckers and the rhinos have gone their own ways', which carries the meaning 'the best of friends have parted company' (Cole & Moncho-Warren 2011: 222).

The symbolic load carried by the rhino is also reflected in an eventful episode that occurred in the early 1860s. At the time, Sekhukhune, the paramount chief of the Pedi, and Mabhoko, the leader of the Ndzundza Ndebele in the then eastern Transvaal, were embroiled in a conflict. One morning Mabhoko discovered to his horror that Sekhukhune had delivered a corn basket, from which the head of a rhino protruded, to the entrance to his capital. Mabhoko's followers were panic-stricken and he immediately called upon all his diviners to counter the magic spell and return the head (Wangemann 1957). In similar vein, during his 1820 journey through Tswana territory, London Missionary

Society director John Campbell (1822, vol. II:180) recorded that an uncle of the reigning Rolong chief at Khunwana, who had aspired to the throne of his cousin, 'on the death of a rhinoceros ... privately took the breast of that animal, which was tantamount to declaring himself king'.

Given its leadership connotation, it makes sense that the rhino, in contrast to other large mammals such as the elephant, hippo or buffalo, does not feature as a totem animal among the Tswana (Wookey 1945). Tswana speakers were traditionally grouped into numerous clans, each of which had a totem, usually an animal, which they venerated and avoided killing. It is possible that consigning the rhino 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 rhino served as a collective symbol that cut across or transcended societal divisions.

### Clubs of rhino horn as royal insignia

In view of the importance of the shape and size of rhino horn in folk taxonomy, it comes as no surprise that clubs of rhino horn served as leadership symbols. In July 1883, the Ndzundza (Southern) Ndebele chief Nyabela in the then eastern Transvaal was captured by forces of the Transvaal state after a protracted war. Upon his surrender, General Piet Joubert impounded Nyabela's chiefly club of rhino horn (Fig. 5). It is noted in an accession note preserved in the Ditsong National Museum of Cultural History that the club served as 'the symbol of the dignity of the chief'.

A rhino horn club had long been associated with chieftainship among the Ndzundza. Oral traditions recount that Ndzundza, the founder of the chieftainship, succeeded in usurping the throne that had rightfully belonged to his elder brother Manala by deceiving his blind old father into handing over the insignia of chieftainship: '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). A club of rhinoceros horn, known



Fig. 5: Chief Nyabela's rhino horn club (Ditsong National Museum of Cultural History)

as *thonga ya tshugulu*, also served as a symbol of chieftainship among the Venda (Van Warmelo 1989). *Tshugulu* is the Venda equivalent of *tshukudu*, the generic Tswana term for a rhinoceros.

Upon the British conquest of Matabeleland and Bulawayo in the 1890s, 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 were burnt, but they managed to save 'the great knobkerrie of Lobengula himself', which Burnham (1926:84) 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 handed over to Cecil John Rhodes, the driving force behind the colonisation of what subsequently became known as Rhodesia.

In view of the above it can be argued that, conceptually, the gold sceptre from Mapungubwe and a rhino-horn club served the same function, namely as markers of chiefly status. In essence and in form the gold sceptre thus represented an ornate knobkerrie.

#### Praise poems, rhino horns and monoliths

Praise poems of Tswana chiefs abound with references to the rhino as a leadership symbol. The following passage from the praise poem of Kgamanyane, who ruled the Bakgatla ba ga Kgafela between 1848 and 1874 at Moruleng in the Rustenburg area and at Mochudi in modern-day Botswana, serves as an example (Schapera 1965:68–9):

'The chief's Poker, Black Rhinoceros, black rhinoceros, brother of Makgetla the Rolong; ... 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. ...'

A study of 15 such praise poems has shown that reference is almost exclusively made to the black rhino or *tshukudu*, the generic term (Boeyens & Van der Ryst 2014: Table 3). A single reference to a white rhino (*mogofu*) and the frequent use of the generic *tshukudu* to identify chiefs nevertheless suggest that while the aggression of the black rhino was a highly-held attribute of chiefs and kings, leadership symbolism did not necessarily exclude the white rhino. Though not innately aggressive, the white rhino still remains a powerful and dangerous animal. Moreover, 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. An analogous leadership metaphor is found among the Zulu, according to which a homestead head had to embody the contrasting but



Fig. 6: Monolith marking the chiefly complex (musanda) on Magoro Hill

complementary characteristics of a bull, representing fierceness and authority, and an ox equating with stability and calmness (Poland et al. 2003; Armstrong et al. 2008).

The courts and walls of Shona capitals used to be adorned with monoliths. Their symbolic content, whether signifying protection, defence, justice, fertility or male status, obviously has to be inferred from their exact spatial and cultural context. It is noteworthy in this regard that Shona interlocutors intimated that the monoliths on the walls of the Western Enclosure at Great Zimbabwe were called "the horns of the mambo" 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' (Huffman 1996:35).

Similarly, several monoliths mark the royal residence (*musanda*) on Magoro Hill, the 19<sup>th</sup> century stronghold of a southern Venda chiefdom (Fig. 6). It is tempting to suggest that monoliths located in such chiefly contexts were the architectural and material correlates of rhino horns, and served as leadership referents. It is perhaps no coincidence that one of the praise epithets or honorific names of a Venda chief was 'Rhinoceros horn!' (*Lunanga-lwa-tshugulu!*) (Van Warmelo 1971:369).

The monoliths at the entrance to the central court of the Hurutshe capital Kaditshwene most probably carried a similar symbolic load. One monolith is still standing today, while another of almost equal length lies a few yards away (Boeyens 2000) (Fig. 7). The Hurutshe have been widely acclaimed to be the senior genealogical grouping among the Tswana. As such, the main court at Kaditshwene would have been imbued with considerable political and ritual status in the wider region (Boeyens & Plug 2011).

#### Conclusion

The evidence suggests that notions about the nature of leadership and the symbolic meaning of the rhino-





Fig. 7: Monolith at the entrance to the central court in Kaditshwene

ceros were widely shared among Shona, Venda, Sotho-Tswana and Ndebele speakers, and had considerable time-depth. Much of this cultural knowledge has unfortunately been lost or is largely forgotten. Nevertheless, given the rhino's deep historical significance as a primary leadership symbol in African culture, there is all the more reason to redouble our conservation efforts to ensure the future survival of this magnificent beast.

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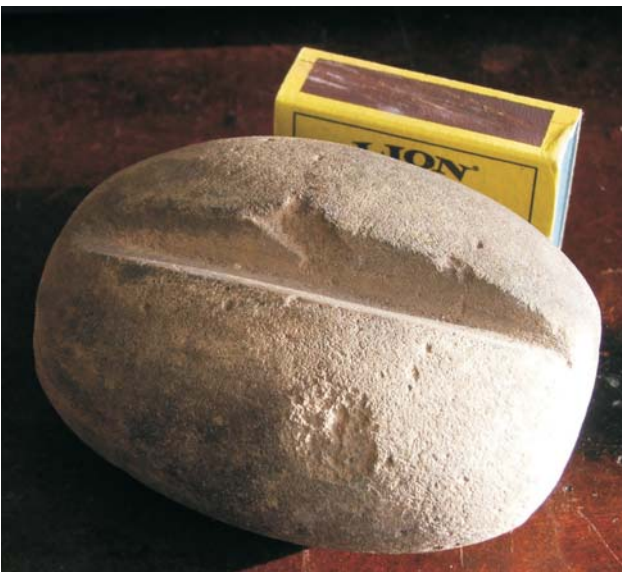
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## ZASTRON CEMETERY FIND EXPLAINED

**The Northern Branch** every so often receives an enquiry about an archaeological matter, usually from a member of the public. But recently an interesting question came from a former Trans-Vaal Branch member, David Holt-Biddle, who moved down to the coast 13 years ago. He and his wife Sue still occasionally get a copy of *The Digging Stick* via a Cape Town member, which he says they read avidly.

David attached the photo below and wrote as follows: 'The attached photo is of an object we found in the cemetery at Zastron in the Free State. Most of it was buried, just a bit sticking out, but enough to realise that it was something interesting (at another time we picked up a worked stone tool, possible a spearpoint, in the same cemetery). It is perfectly formed and symmetrical, the underside worn smooth, so probably used as a top grindstone, and the ends are slightly smoothed as well. The groove suggests a whetstone of sorts, but then perhaps not. A picture in an old Eskom archaeological guide shows something similar but with no identification, except that it may be Stone Age. We would love to know what it is.'



Our acting branch chairman, Graham Reeks, himself an archaeologist, obtained the opinion of Prof. Jan Boeyens, head of the Archaeology Division in the Department of Anthropology and Archaeology at UNISA, and Dr Maria van der Ryst of the division. Prof. Boeyens responded as follows:

'I would certainly identify the object as a grooved stone. We have a similar example in the museum collection with V-shaped incised decorative motifs. Grooved stones from Stone Age localities in the Waterberg usually have several grooves, and some specimens are two-sided. Their shape, diameter and depth vary from fairly broad and shallow to well worn. Some grooves run parallel, while others are on the

diagonal or are randomly placed. Sandstone was often used since a large-grained material was required for abrasion.

'Grooved stones are ubiquitous at most Later Stone Age sites. They are also not uncommon at pastoral and farmer sites (e.g. Diamant).

'The grooves serve to confine cylindrical objects – usually of organic materials – during the abrading process. That these implements were extremely versatile is evident from ethnographic and historic observances. Uses included the production of cylindrical bone tools; straightening of arrow shafts; shaping of strung ostrich eggshell rough-outs, shell and bone beads; and even the careful application of arrow poison to cylindrical arrows.

'The cross-section may be V or U-shaped. This variation suggests different functional applications, since the morphology of the end-product likely dictated the shape of the groove. Grooves of different size were required to produce tools with varying shaft diameters, such as the composite parts of arrows, awls or fine bone needles. An arrow straightener with a central groove is one of the rare stone tool types now made by Ju/'hoansi men. It is often left at camp to limit the carrying weight while hunting.'

Graham Reeks added that he is still puzzled by the fact that the grooved stone was found in a cemetery. However, it is possible that before European settlement there was a Khoisan site there and the finds came from a lower archaeological horizon dug up during grave preparation.



### The rhinoceros in African culture (continued from page 6)

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