Chapter 7
Conflict on the Frontier: San Rock Art, Spirituality, and Historical Narrative in the Free State Province, South Africa

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Introduction

Few rock art researchers in southern Africa today question the notion that San rock art was produced within a ritualistic framework; ethnographic evidence has shown that San paintings and engravings in numerous southern African regions indicate a belief in a tiered cosmos and the interpenetration of cosmological tiers by shamans (Lewis-Williams 1981; Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1989; Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2004). The heuristic potential of this framework has allowed recent studies (Blundell 2004; Challis 2005, 2008; see also Hampson 2011) to focus on social and individual histories and to incorporate rock art into the production of the past.

Relating rock art to ritualism, animism, or shamanism does *not* remove it from the historical arena. A key question, however, remains: Even if we can attribute specific paintings to certain individual artists, does San rock art ever depict or commemorate particular historical events in a strictly narrative sense? By investigating the remarkable paintings at the BOS 1 rock shelter in the Free State Province of South Africa, I offer suggestions as to how researchers might begin to answer this deceptively simple but overlooked question.

Local histories in the Free State: conflict in a frontier society

This investigation of the BOS 1 paintings close to the Caledon River near the town of Wepener in the Free State Province of South Africa (Fig. 7.1) begins with a specific historical incident that occurred nearby. In 1850, a Bushman or San man named Maglatsi asked a European *bywoner* or farm tenant—a man named van Hansen—for tobacco (van Hansen 1859: 134; Collins 1907: 15; Midgely 1949: 270–271).

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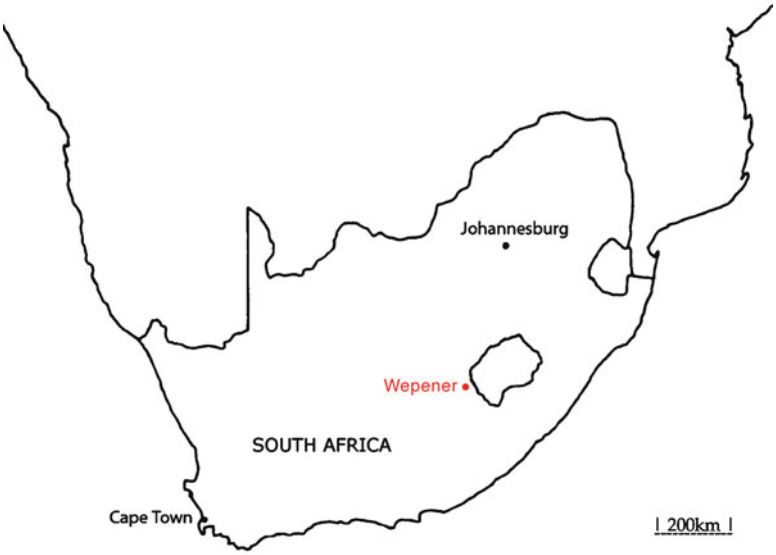

Fig. 7.1 Map showing the town of Wepener, close to the South African border with the landlocked country of Lesotho (map drawn by J. Hampson)

Van Hansen kicked Maglatsi, and refused. Later that day, Maglatsi and at least 12 other Bushmen attacked and set alight van Hansen's house, and killed him, his wife, their three children, and two Khoe (herder) servants.

A Boer commando, aided by a Cape corps and local San trackers, located van Hansen's attackers and during a skirmish killed six of them. The remaining six Bushmen were arrested and subsequently hanged in Bloemfontein, the provincial capital about 80 km distant. Wepener locals believed that one member of the original group escaped and fled towards the Caledon River, a few kilometres from the burned house (Collins 1907; James 2000). It is this alleged escapee whom the Wepener locals believe may have depicted these historical events in the BOS 1 rock shelter. Before addressing the authorship of the rock art images, I outline the nature of frontier society in the Orange Free State during the nineteenth century.

Violent and non-violent conflicts were not uncommon, as in most regions of creolisation (Lightfoot 1995; Lightfoot and Martinez 1995). Besides the San (Maglatsi and his colleagues) and the Boers (the van Hansens), there were British and French missionaries, deserters from British and German armies, Khoe herders and other Khoe-speaking groups (including Koranas), Afrikaans-speaking creolised Griquas and Bastaards, Sotho-speaking clans of various allegiances (including Batlokwa or Mantatees), and more. Many of these groups were often involved in disputes over land and property rights (Stow 1905; Collins 1907; Etherington 2001; Ouzman 2005).

In the late 1700s, before the competition for territory intensified, the San had occasionally welcomed the Boer hunting parties that came north from the Cape, usually because of the feasting that followed the slaughter of hippo and other large game by the farmers' muzzle loaders (Van der Merwe 1936; Dracopoli 1969; Etherington 2001; James 2000). By the nineteenth century, however, these intergroup hostilities took the form of regular warfare waged against the San by the Boers, British, Sotho, and other agricultural settlers. Despite treaties between the groups—treaties that were often made, broken, remade, and broken again—the relationships among the farmer-settlers and the hunter-gatherer (and increasingly creolised) San were marked by profound distrust and prejudice. According to George Stow (Stow and Bleek 1930: 215):

> The pastoral tribes of natives and colonial flock owners could not appreciate the feelings of attachment which those who lived by the chase alone had to their hunting grounds. … Their … utter contempt for all pastoral or agricultural pursuits, made them to be looked upon by all the larger and more robust of the African races as a species of wild animal which it was praiseworthy to exterminate.

By 1850, Bushmen were frequently indentured by settlers and sent to work for farmers in and around Bloemfontein (Midgely 1949: 270; Legassick 1989; Etherington 2001). After the killing of van Hansen and his family, at least 100 San in the area were arrested and put into Boer service, although many of these men and their families escaped and fled to the hills (Midgely 1949: 270; James 2000). For the most part, the raiding and stealing of Boer cattle stopped, except for a few instances when Bushmen allied with Basotho chiefs (Midgely 1949: 271; Etherington 2001). In fact, it was rumoured that Maglatsi and his allies were adherents of the minor Basotho chief Poshili (Collins 1907: 15; James 2000). On the other hand, there is also evidence to suggest that Boers employed Basotho chiefs (such as Malapo) to arrest and even to kill the San who escaped after the patrols and arrests of the early 1850s (Montgomery 1914: 108). In a creolised frontier society, allegiances rapidly alter.

In addition to ethnographic and historical evidence, archaeological artefacts confirm that there was multidirectional contact between farmers, pastoralists, and hunter-gatherers. European bullets, metal, and cloth have been found in rock shelters in the Caledon District alongside Bushman stone tools and grindstones (Brooker 1980; see also Wright 1971; Sampson 1974).

Having addressed some of the complexities of the nineteenth-century frontier society in the Free State, I now consider the specific San painting at BOS 1 in a shallow rock shelter close to the Caledon River. The rock art—in faded red, black, and white pigments—is not well known in the area (James 2000), and there is only a fleeting reference to it in print (Brooker 1980). Local farmers that are aware of its existence have for some years suggested that it depicts the skirmish between the fugitive San and retaliating Boers after the murder of van Hansen and his family. They believe the individual that survived and fled to the river may have painted it (James 2000).

Although many researchers have successfully argued that the "common sense" or "gaze-and-guess" approach to rock art interpretation will almost certainly lead to false conclusions, the suggestions of the local Wepener farmers raise interesting issues regarding San rock art and historical events. It *is* possible that a fugitive San artist produced rock art—including the images in BOS 1—at some point after the events of 1850. But how likely is it that these images depict a specific incident? In order to answer this question, and before considering the applicability within the San world view of the word "depict", I describe the remarkable painting and adumbrate some of the pertinent motifs.

Site BOS 1: Painted History?

Two groups—or what some researchers have dubbed "processions" (Smuts 1999; Hampson et al. 2002: 18)—of human figures are depicted in the main panel at BOS 1 (Figs. 7.2 and 7.3).

One group, painted in black, faces the left of the panel, and the other, predominantly red, faces the opposite direction. I have divided the figures into six somewhat arbitrary groupings in order to show the detail in the re-drawings and photographs.

There are 12 black figures to the left of the panel, all of which hold a club-like piece of equipment in their raised right hands. The legs of these figures are unusual: the calf muscle is not as clearly defined as it is in other San paintings. Three doglike animals separate two subgroups of six: that on the left (subgroup 1) comprises six figures with penises and that on the right six figures with no discernible penises. The figures on the right (subgroup 2) are all touching their waist with their left hands; across their waists are three parallel lines. Three of the figures of subgroup 1 are also depicted with their left hand at their waist, but there are no parallel lines. The human figure at the rear of this subgroup, closest to the canines, has his left arm outstretched towards them. The only figure in the entire panel with his head turned backwards is the leading figure in subgroup 2 to the right of the doglike animals.

Fig. 7.2 Redrawing of main panel at BOS 1 rock shelter, Free State Province, South Africa (~800 mm × ~200 mm) (traced by J. Hampson and W. Challis)

Fig. 7.3 Photograph of main panel at BOS 1 rock shelter. Note the white bags at centre right (photo by J. Hampson)

All but 3 of the 29 figures in subgroups 3 through 6 to the right side of the panel—most of which are painted predominantly in red—have an emanation from the shoulder, protruding behind them towards the left of the panel. Subgroup 3, immediately to the right of the black figures, consists of seven figures, all in red, and all with a white band across the waist and another across the shoulder. Four of these figures have similar white bands across the knees; two of them also have white bands around the ankles.

Farther to the right is another procession of six figures designated subgroup 4, with the three at the far end of the panel partially obscured by a calcite wash. At least five of these figures have white bands across the waist and shoulder (none have bands across the knees or ankles), and all have emanations (some longer than others) from the shoulders.

Below the red figures of subgroup 3 lies an alignment of nine figures belonging to subgroup 5 (Figure 4). The eight red and one black image all face to the right of the panel. Only the black figure does not have an emanation from the shoulders, and one smaller red figure (second from the left and the only one with white bands across waist and shoulders) seems to be carrying a sticklike object in one hand. Six of the figures, including the one in black, are partially hidden by a disproportionately large white bag-like object from which 31 black "tassels" emanate; two of these tassels overlap.

The last subgroup to the far right side of the panel comprises at least seven figures. One is red, and the others black *and* red—usually with a black torso outlined in red. Four of the figures have emanations from the shoulders; the first four in line are partially covered by another, smaller white bag-like object with approximately 24 red tassels. One of the figures has a white torso. To the right of the seven subgroup 6 figures is another white bag-like object that covers remnants of red pigment, most probably additional figures. The calcite wash referred to earlier obliterates most of the details on this third bag-like object, but three black tassels emanate from the right-hand side.

In total, the four subgroups 3 through 6 comprise at least 29 figures, only one of which is depicted entirely in black. Nearly all of them have emanations from the shoulders, and many possess white bands across the waist, shoulders, and ankles. In contrast, the subgroups 1 and 2, facing left, contain 12 black figures, all of whom carry club-like equipment, and six of whom have parallel lines across the waist.

Who are these faded depictions of? Are these the van Hansen family and the Boer authorities (on the right), eager for revenge after the attack on the homestead? The red figures appear to be clothed and carrying weapons. And to the left, the naked, fugitive Bushmen, fleeing for their lives? There is a romance to these unsubstantiated suggestions that is still attractive to many. Narratives, especially those that involve arson and bloodshed, excite. The answer to these questions involves an understanding of certain relevant aspects of the polysemic complexity that underlies southern African San rock art.

Painted History? San Art and Historical Narrative

We can no longer afford a gaze-and-guess approach to rock art, especially when rich ethnographic and historical resources are available. Many early travellers and researchers in South Africa (e.g. Kolben 1731; Barrow 1801; Alexander 1837; Tindall 1856; Balfour 1909), as well as those later in the twentieth century, ignorant of these ethnographic resources, or unwilling to use them, justified the problematic gaze-and-guess approach by asserting that the meaning of the art was self-evident: here were depictions by "primitive people" that reflected "daily life". Balfour (1909: 8) in particular spoke of the "representations of scenes and events in Bushman life-history", implying that rock art could be "read" as easily as the reports of early colonial travellers. Disastrously, the act of "reading" the narrative that was putatively inherent in the images—and the subsequent induction of meaning from that reading—was considered to be a straightforward task. Until the development of heuristic models in the 1970s and beyond (Lewis-Williams 2006), the complexity and ritualistic nature of San art were overlooked.

San paintings featuring European and Nguni-speaking settlers are widespread throughout southern Africa (e.g., Vinnicombe 1976: Figures 12–15; Johnson 1979: Figures 97, 98; Campbell 1986; Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1989; Dowson 1994; Loubser and Laurens 1994; Thorp 2000; Ouzman 2003; Challis 2008).

Several features in these "contact" era paintings unequivocally show European, Nguni-speaking, or creolised settlers—or their accompanying material culture. Indeed, many rock art sites show clearly painted wagons, horses and rifles, cattle, and other domesticated animals, including dogs. The simple depiction of these items, however, does not unambiguously denote European arrival. For example, dogs were domesticated before the colonial era, and non-European groups also had wagons (Brooker 1980; Lewis-Williams 1983: Figures 83–87; Ouzman 2003; Loubser and Laurens 1994; Challis 2008). Regardless of the era, when the San—or, indeed, creolised groups (Challis 2008)—wanted to make a depiction unequivocal, they did.

Many of the colonial era contact paintings also incorporate features that point to a shamanistic context (Vinnicombe 1976; Campbell 1986; Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1989; Dowson 1994; Ouzman 2003; Challis 2008). These features highlight the fact that rock art—whether produced during or prior to the arrival of Khoe-speaking herders, Bantu speakers, or European farmer-settlers—was not made "merely" to record or commemorate events. Western-style narrative and commemoration is not a universal of human image-making or image-meaning, so looking at paintings made by hunter-gatherers and other non-Western groups through Western eyes from a perspective of commemoration yields flawed interpretations. Even specific and the so-called historical events in San rock art are, in fact, implicated in shamanistic beliefs and rituals.

Also noted above is the fact that power relations between Bushmen, farmer-settlers, and other groups were not unidirectional. Because the numbers of nineteenth-century San communities were so reduced and resources so greatly diminished in many regions in southern Africa, hunter-gatherers and herders were obliged to forge new relationships with their agro-pastoralist neighbours—both European and Nguni speakers—in order to survive. Importantly, San, herder, and creolised groups forged these relationships *within* their extant sociopolitical frameworks and indigenous world views (Dowson 1994; Thorp 2000; Ouzman 2003; Blundell 2004; Challis 2008). Many farmers, on the other hand, believed that the San's rainmaking abilities could determine the outcome of their harvests, and therefore feared the Bushmen at the same time as acknowledging their dependence on them (Jolly 1996, 1998; Thorp 2000; Mitchell 2002). For similar reasons, where we *do* find unequivocal depictions of settlers in San rock art, these images do not necessarily depict conflict; rather, they are concerned with sociocultural and political negotiation (Dowson 1994; Ouzman 2003; Blundell 2004; Challis 2008).

As Thomas Dowson (1994: 333) has argued: "Bushman shaman-artists were using two of their traditional techniques (entering the spirit world and making rock art) to engage the new threat"—the threat posed by the European and Nguni-speaking settlers. Once the settlers arrived, characters in the spirit world included not only Bushman spirits but also the new arrivals; settlers became part of the social production of rock art. Depictions of Europeans and other agriculturalists, therefore, represent the San negotiation of power with those settlers *in the spirit world*; there is no evidence to suggest that actual (historical) events—whether antagonistic or not—are depicted. Moreover, the production of rock art—both before and after

the arrival of European settlers—was an *engaging* process; paintings were not simply illustrative, commemorative, representative, or reflective depictions—they were powerful things in themselves, and reservoirs of potency (Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1989; Lewis-Williams 1995; Lewis-Williams 2006). Paintings also helped to "dissolve" the rock face membrane between this world and the next (Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1990; Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2004).

Sotho, San, Bags, and Ritualistic Contexts

Having outlined the complexity of San rock art produced both before and after contact with agro-pastoralist settlers, I return to the specific rock art panel at site BOS 1. As with most rock art sites in southern Africa, we do not know exactly who painted the images. Neither do we know how old the paintings are (cf. Bonneau et al. 2011, 2012); they may or may not predate the arrival of agro-pastoralist groups. This lack of chronological certainty, however, is not indispensable to the argument developed here; more important is the fact that it is unlikely that the ritualistic images illustrate a literal or a narrative event. Because San (and creolised San) paintings are ritualistic, they are always more than mere narrative—they were not produced simply to "tell a story". Despite the historical accounts of San being "shot out" by a Boer commando, and of Cape corps close to the rock shelter, it is improbable that (a) the red figures in the rock art are Boer (or European) soldiers; (b) the black figures are fugitive Bushmen; or, especially, c) together, the paintings depict the events of 1850.

The figures painted in black (Figure 2; subgroups 1 and 2) may depict *Sotho* men. If this is true, we could conclude that the painting categorically does *not* show the 1850 confrontation in a narrative sense, since the Sotho were not involved. Why might the black figures depict Sotho men? The three parallel lines across their waists resemble Sotho shields, depictions of which are also found at many rock art sites nearby (Vinnicombe 1976; Brooker 1980; Ouzman 2003; Loubser and Laurens 1994; James 2000). Also on neighbouring farms is an abundance of unequivocal images of cattle, sheep, and Sotho warriors; contact art is not uncommon in the Caledon River valley (Brooker 1980; Ouzman 2003; James 2000). As noted above, *resemblance* is not enough to develop convincing conclusions, but Sotho warriors also carried club-like knobkerries (Campbell 1986: 261) and owned hunting dogs (Lee 1999)—not unlike those on the left of the painting at BOS 1. The absence of the calf muscle also suggests (but by no means proves) that the artists were not depicting Bushmen, and there is nothing to suggest that the black-painted figures represent Boer settlers. Exactly why the San may have depicted Sotho figures is a more difficult matter, and one I do not attempt to unravel here, other than by reiterating the importance of the concept of San negotiation with the newly arrived settlers, in both the real and the spirit world through the ritualistic act of painting.

The red figures (Figure 2, subgroups 3 through 6) facing in the opposite direction to the black ones might depict soldiers, but are most probably depictions of

Bushmen; these images are consonant with what we know of San rock art and cosmology. To simply state that the emanations from the shoulders are guns and that the white bands across waist and shoulders are belts and bandoliers is not enough: evidence is required. The paintings at BOS 1 include several shamanistic components, suggesting that the processions of both red/black and also red figures to the right of the panel are connected in some way to shamanistic activity, and to the dance used to achieve altered states of consciousness and entry into the spirit world (Lewis-Williams 1981; Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1989; for discussion on processions see Smuts 1999; Hampson et al. 2002: 18).

The white shoulder, waist, knee, and ankle bands could conceivably depict (albeit ambiguous) military regalia, but, as argued above, even if the red figures *are* depictions of European soldiers, the panel is *not* a simple, literal depiction, or representation, of the event described in the local history. We know that various San, Sotho, and creolised groups sometime displayed this regalia, and that they possessed muskets and horses (Orpen 1874; Collins 1907; Jolly 1996; Challis 2008), but there is strong evidence too suggesting that the bands refer to the sensation of constriction experienced by shamans in trance, caused by boiling potency (Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1989). Bushmen in the Kalahari describe their stomach tightening "into a balled fist" (Katz 1982: 46) and their sides being "fastened by pieces of metal" (Biesele 1975: 155, 1980: 56). Similar symbolic depictions of this sensation are found in rock art panels throughout the subcontinent (e.g. Dowson 1989: Figures 4–8; Hampson et al. 2002: 26). Moreover, as mentioned above, there are examples of *unambiguous* military accoutrements in many sites nearby (Lewis-Williams 1983: Figures 83–87; Ouzman 2003; Loubser and Laurens 1994).

The emanations from the shoulder also point to a shamanistic context. Although they have been described locally as poorly drawn rifles, ethnographic evidence again suggests an alternative—that the lines represent the expulsion of sickness from the *n*//*ao* spot at the nape of the neck (Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1989: 32). One of the tasks shamans perform in an altered state of consciousness is to lay their hands on people in order to draw out "sickness" and then return the sickness to its source—malevolent shamans in the spirit world—via the *n*//*ao* spot (Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1989: 32).

The meaning of the three superimposed bags (Fig. 7.4) is clearer, and significant. Bags were—and still are—of great importance to the San because they are imbued with potency. In the Kalahari Desert today bags are often made (by the Ju/'hoan San) from "red meat" animals that possess *n*/*om*, potency harnessed by shamans (Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1989; Biesele 1993; Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2004). Interestingly, Bushmen do not necessarily distinguish between the word for an artefact and that for the substance of which it is made (Biesele 1993). In one San myth, *A visit to the Lion's House*, the lion hides in a bag. From this example, Lewis-Williams and Dowson (1989: 116) have argued that placing oneself in a bag is equivalent to placing oneself inside an animal, that is, to taking on its potency. In another myth, the trickster-deity and first shaman/Kaggen gets into a bag to hide and to change himself into a flying creature (Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2004: 120, 126). In at least one other panel in the Drakensberg, bags are shown transforming

Fig. 7.4 Subgroup 5 of main panel at BOS 1 rock shelter with white bag. The bag is ~130 mm across (traced by J. Hampson and W. Challis)

into eland (Vinnicombe 1976: Figure 107; Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2004: fig. 6.6). Bags, therefore, are obliquely associated with the dance and visits to the spirit realm.

The tassels on the bags are also significant: they are akin to shamans' hairs standing on end while in altered states of consciousness (Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1989; Hollmann 2002). The tassels may also be associated with what Patricia Vinnicombe (1976: 260, 344) dubbed "thinking strings", metaphorical cords situated in the throat and associated with rainmaking specialists.

Whomever the figures may depict, the superimposed bags strongly suggest that the context of the painted panel is shamanistic. Importantly, there is plenty of unpainted rock in the shelter: it is significant that the artist(s) chose to place the bags directly on top of the red figures. If the red figures *are* soldiers, the bags demonstrate that they were understood and incorporated into an indigenous and ritualistic ontology.

A Way Forward?

Interesting tangential questions arise from the study of specific paintings at the Wepener site: Were the two distinct groups painted at the same time or hundreds of years apart? When were the superimposed bags painted? Why are some of the figures with emanations from the shoulder painted in black *and* red? Was colour significant to the artists? Why are some figures outlined (Hampson et al. 2002)?

Detailed studies of San beliefs may provide the answer to these questions. Regardless, researchers cannot afford to avoid rich ethnographic resources,

indispensable oral and written testimonies that, among other things, indicate clearly that San paintings do *not* depict actual historical events—at least not in the Western sense of commemorative narrative. Ethnographies have shown us not only that some beliefs are widespread but also that many *persist*; researchers must always demonstrate—and not merely assume—change through space and over time. The hermeneutic ritualistic models developed by researchers since the 1970s allow for further avenues of theoretically based research and methodology to be explored.

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