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Monologue and multivocality in San rock art studies

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It is contended here that the leading approach in San rock art studies, commonly referred to as the shamanistic model or theory, has evolved over a period of three decades into a dominant voice. The prominence of this particular theoretical orientation has obscured alternative ways and means of understanding the artistic heritage of the hunter-gatherers who once inhabited the sub-continent. In order to stimulate multivocality and debate the authors have identified, by means of an extensive literature search, the diverse vantage points from which the paintings and engravings of the San could be examined. Based on the results of their survey a more inclusive form of analysis is first proposed and then briefly tested against a composite painting from a rock art site in Limpopo.

Keywords: rock art, San, shamanism, paradigm, multivocality

1. Birth and growth of a paradigm

Advance in an academic discipline is routinely achieved when a new paradigm is created in opposition to one or more existing ones. Yet it is equally true that little can be gained from the denial

or dismissal of earlier and competing interpretive narratives as this will result in the loss of potentially relevant data and meaningful insights (Lévi-Strauss 1968: 352, Voget 1975: 802-803). Over-privileging a particular point of view, exciting as it may appear to its supporters, is bound to create an analytical monologue. Each of these truisms, it is proposed by the authors, characterises equally well the mainstream theory in rock art studies.

In the late 1970s David Lewis-Williams (soon afterwards assisted by a number of co-workers at the Rock Art Research Institute (RARI)) initiated an exciting, novel approach to prehistoric visual art, namely the shamanistic model or theory. It was initially proposed that San rock art was essentially ritualistic and religious in nature, a hypothesis which had been pioneered by Pager (1975) and Vinnicombe (1976). Lewis-Williams subsequently explained the religious nature of the art primarily in terms of the so-called trance hypothesis. He believed that shamanistic healing “constituted the social, ritual and conceptual contexts in which the art was made” (Dowson and Lewis-Williams 1994: 395).

During the next three decades the institute’s meticulous recording and analysis of thousands of images has produced numerous journal articles and several excellent books. Each decade, we would like to suggest, roughly coincided with a different phase in the development of the paradigm: initiation, consolidation and expansion. The birth and growth of the shamanistic theory is portrayed and documented fittingly as a “personal journey” by Lewis-Williams in a volume entitled *A Cosmos in Stone* (2002).

In the 1980s the institute focused on the definition and clarification of the basic assumptions in which the theory was grounded. During these active early years several introductory monographs emerged: *Believing and seeing* (Lewis-Williams 1981), *Images of power* (Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1989) and *Discovering Southern African Rock Art* (Lewis-Williams 1990). In the following decade the theory was consolidated and it achieved international fame. As a result of its generally acclaimed merits and ever increasing prominence the concept “shamanistic art” nearly became synonymous with “rock art”. A collection of essays entitled *Contested Images* (Dowson and Lewis-Williams 1994), which we will revisit shortly, clearly exemplifies how the paradigm was well under way to dominating the centre stage of rock art studies. On the other hand, *The Mind in the Cave* (Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2002) and its sequel, *Inside the Neolithic Mind* (Lewis-Williams 2005), illustrate the search for new ground and expansion which was initiated in the late 1990s and became the defining feature of phase three. Some of the most renowned Palaeolithic rock art sites in the Old World were valiantly re-interpreted. Well established interpretations of artefacts and monuments of the Euro-Asian Neolithic were challenged too. The final phase is

further characterised by a renewed and intensified interest in the development of human consciousness and cognition. This is exemplified by *San Spirituality* (Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2004: 29-37) and *Conceiving God* (Lewis-Williams 2011), which probably represents the apex of the trend.

2. The shamanistic model

By the mid-70s the study of rock art in South Africa had reached an impasse. The statistical analysis and the descriptive and classificatory output of the so-called “empiricist tradition” had become a stale intellectual enterprise. The field was ready for a novel perspective and Lewis-Williams, who had become dissatisfied with his own empiricist research, was about to provide just that.

Careful, creative and perceptive scrutiny of the Bleek notebooks, an invaluable collection of 19th Century manuscripts documenting San culture and religion, equipped Lewis-Williams with a fresh means of interpretation (Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1989: 27-32, 138).

Moreover, informed by Lorna Marshall’s anthropological fieldwork among the Kalahari San (1976) and inspired by an outstanding ethnographic account of their healing tradition by Katz (1982), Lewis-Williams singled out the trance dance, a healing ritual, as the most important event in the religious practices of the San. The performance of the dance routinely culminated in an out-of-body journey which was believed to enable shamans to replenish their healing powers. On their return, they re-activated this magical potency and used it to remedy illness and misfortune (Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1989: 30 ff). The very same two concepts – the trans-cosmological journey and the use of healing potency – it was proposed, constitute the central subject matter of the rock paintings and engravings.

Before long, with the help of neuropsychology, additional aspects of trance experience could be identified in the paintings. Research into altered states of consciousness supplied Lewis-Williams and his co-workers with data describing the somatic experience of trance: e.g. shivering; back, stomach and headaches; the sensation of flight or drowning; buzzing sounds; flickering vision, etc. This data could be applied to interpret visual details of the art that went previously unnoticed or had remained unexplained: dots, flecks, lines, elongated or supine bodies, winged humans and many more (Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1989: 32-33, 124-133). By the end of the 1980s the University of the Witwatersrand research team felt confident to pronounce a whole new semiotic interpretation in which rock art shelters were defined as storehouses of potency and showrooms of shamanistic activities and visions (Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1988, 1989).

The initial designation of the paradigm – known as the “interpretative approach” (Lewis-Williams 1990: 44-54) – is somewhat of a misnomer. Seemingly it was designed to differentiate the new perspective from the methodology of the “empiricists” of the 1960s and 1970s, who had modelled their work on the natural sciences (Lewis-Williams and Loubser 1986: 254-262, Dowson and Lewis-Williams 1994: 201-221, Lewis-Williams 2002: 15-49). In anthropology and archaeology, the label interpretivism categorises several perspectives within culture theory that are closely associated with hermeneutics and phenomenology (see e.g. Whittle 2003; Turner and Bruner 1986). While some aspects of the shamanistic model are admittedly reminiscent of the textual analysis that characterises the hermeneutic tradition, any obvious analytical connection to phenomenology is clearly wanting. To be sure: defining “being human” in terms of the biological functioning of the body or “the essential materiality of humankind”, as Lewis-Williams does (1998: 87), goes against the grain of interpretive thinking. The same applies to the suggestion that spirituality can only be understood fully in terms of the neurophysiology of the brain (Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2004: xxiv). For a more authentic interpretative analysis of spirituality, we refer the reader to the work of René Devisch on divination in Central Africa as well as to the marvellous book by Roy Willis entitled *Some spirits heal, others only dance* (1999). Dowson (2007) and Solomon (2011b), in our opinion, make for commendable reading in the phenomenology of rock art studies.

3. Rock art monologue

In order to demonstrate the impact the shamanistic model has had on rock art studies we only need to consult the relevant section in a general textbook such as *The Archaeology of Southern Africa* (Mitchell 2002: 192-213). Most of Mitchell’s discussion is dedicated to the leading perspective, which is tellingly defined as “the starting point for most analyses” (2002: 198). Moreover, the recent trends in rock art research are presented as being merely “an extension” of the same paradigm (2002: 210).

Mitchell’s overview of alternative vantage points seems equally biased. The art historical approach of Garlake, notably one of the major critics of Lewis-Williams, is said “to overlap considerably” with the shamanistic approach (2002: 210). Further on in the discussion we learn that Solomon (1992), an even more ardent opponent of the leading theoretical orientation (see e.g. 2000), has proposed that gender features centrally in San thought and expressive culture. Mitchell counters this by referring to writers who have questioned the dichotomous view of gender on which her hypothesis is supposedly based (2002: 212-213). A second critical contribution by Solomon (1998) – namely that San folklore provides useful

insights into their visual art – is likewise subverted by arguing that there may be clear discrepancies between folklore and rock art.

Mitchell, in the concluding remarks of his outline, at first hints at a possible reappraisal of the shamanistic paradigm only to assure the reader soon thereafter that a revision will be rather unlikely since the comprehensiveness of the ruling approach and its wide applicability will keep contemporary rock art research “grounded in the framework developed by Lewis-Williams and his associates” (2002: 213). In sum: the leading theoretical orientation is never really debated critically in this otherwise impressive textbook.

The tendency of a ruling paradigm to dominate the field is equally well exemplified in *Contested Images: diversity in Southern African rock art research* (Dowson and Lewis-Williams 1994). In spite of its promising title and the synopsis on the back cover of the book, this volume does not really bring together “the work of a number of scholars who have critically examined what has come to be known as the trance hypothesis”. We have found no obvious trace of dialogue, debate or disagreement in this book. The text is made up of parallel discourses instead. The only form of “contest” we came across is Lewis-Williams confronting his original foes, the empiricists, both in the introduction (1994: 1–8) and in the “critical retrospective” (1994: 201–22) that initiates the second part of the volume. In what ways the predecessors of the shamanistic paradigm could possibly threaten contemporary research is left for the reader to guess.

As for “diversity” we are informed enthusiastically by the editors that the collection of essays marks “a new beginning” and “the opening of new vistas and possibilities” (1994: 8). Surprisingly, with the exception of two papers (by Skotnes and Solomon), these new vistas are either generally supportive of the shamanistic interpretation or address issues which are wholly uncritical of it, such as the authorship and the chronology of the paintings. In all fairness, the editors do appear to be honestly convinced that their novel methodology has not produced a “monolithic view” (1994: 6). The artistic heritage of the San, it is claimed confidently, displays “many meanings” including visual references to the institutions of male and female initiation and rain making. Yet elsewhere in the discussion the very same rites of passage and rain making ceremonies are trivialised as merely providing the context or background for the primary or key symbols which, needless to say, derive from shamanism...

Inadvertent resistance to the notion of diversity of meaning also characterises the central argument of the essay entitled *Rock art and ritual – Southern Africa and beyond* (Lewis-Williams 1994), which states that San expressive culture is essentially ritual in nature (1994: 278). Lewis-Williams, unsurprisingly, has only one “principal” ritual in mind, namely the shamanistic ritual, i.e. the curing, or

trance dance (1994: 280). Pre-empting his critics, he submits that the meaning of the art was not “monolithic” but then promptly adds that the different meanings would have been interrelated. In fact, the concept of “ritual art”, we are told readily, unified the diversity of meaning (1994: 279). The ritual character of the art, incidentally, has been the subject of intense debate (e.g. Solomon 1998, 2000) as has its relation to folklore.

San religion, it is proposed, is “like all forms of shamanism...constituted by institutionalized altered states of consciousness” (1994: 278). Not only that but the very cosmos or world-view underlying the conception of the paintings is ardently defined as having been “posited on altered states of consciousness” (1994: 279). San religion and society are casually defined as “shamanistic religion” and “shamanistic society”, two appealing concepts that beg for enlightenment yet are never really clarified let alone discussed critically. The same applies to the term “shaman-artist” (1994: 279). Even the Mantis – the Khoisan trickster/supreme being – does not escape shamanistic definition. He is simply presented as the “original shaman” from whom all living shamans have received their power (1994: 179). The remaining sections of the essay complete the reductionist exercise by detailing all four stages in the production and consumption of the paintings in terms of shamanistic ideology and practice.

In the popular monograph *Discovering Southern African Rock Art* (Lewis-Williams 1990) the author recognises the significance of the methodological premise that “all new scientific theories and explanations develop within the matrix of existing theories and explanations”. However, at the time when the shamanistic model was introduced, he keenly recalls, “a clear-cut decision to abandon the old ways of doing research” had to be taken. Measured against the “really major advance” of the new paradigm all previous thinking was found “inadequate” or “incompatible” (1990: 3). And so the preceding work on rock art has been taken care of!

Competing approaches are dealt with in similar unreserved fashion. The chapter entitled *Many Meanings*, in the same introductory textbook (1990: 75–83), is misleading in that it alludes to a discussion of alternative viewpoints. Instead, Lewis-Williams explores the many meanings of the eland, a central symbol or metaphor in the shamanistic theory. The chapter is initiated and concluded with a reminder that San rock art “arose out of the experiences of shamans” (1990: 75). In spite of the openness and wideness of the art’s subject matter, he argues, “shamanism permeates all aspects of San thought and life” (1990: 83). When reference is made *en passant* to the gender and political dimensions of some of the paintings (1990: 80–81) these alternative meanings are casually reasoned away as being “in the background” of the shamanistic meaning and “in all probability

not consciously depicted” anyway (1990: 82-3). The same kind of argument is displayed a decade later when the issue of “many meanings” is revisited in a paper entitled *Quanto? Seen in the light of San ethnography and cosmology*, he maintains in response to his critics, the art is essentially shamanistic in nature (1998: 86) and the “other meanings and associations” such as the depiction of gender differences should therefore be really understood as “penumbral” or only of secondary importance (1998: 91, 96, see also Lewis-Williams 1999).

After taking cognisance of *Seeing and Knowing. Understanding Rock Art with and without Ethnography* (Blundell et al. 2010), we feel justified to conclude that the monologue is alive and well. The “classic” shamanistic approach, we are assured by the editors in the introduction, has been most productive; is widely accepted; continues to yield productive results; allows for the construction of an ever expanding body of knowledge and provides the foundation for new forms of rock art research (Blundell et al 2010: 3).

4. Many meanings

The concern that we are raising in this essay is that little can be gained from isolation, complacency and obscuring diversity of meaning. We have therefore identified in the literature 11 additional vantage points from which the meaning of the art has been considered ever since the first attempts at interpretation were made in the 19th Century. It would, of course, take a much longer account to do justice to the relevance of each of the theoretical windows. The following synopsis merely aims at sketching the wider analytical horizon against which the interested reader can locate herself.

Lewis-Williams has compiled an excellent overview of the intellectual efforts of the pioneers (1990: 12-33, 2002: 1-14) in which these early enthusiasts have been classified under the labels “aesthetic and narrative approaches”. Sir John Barrow’s notes on the rock art of the Cape interior (1801) illustrate the former. Barrow admired the artistic quality and the beauty of some of the paintings. His **aesthetic** perspective emphasised the importance of form and encouraged the viewer to look affectively at the art. Moreover, he assumed that the artists themselves tried to capture things of beauty. In spite of the fact that many of the art works can be justly praised for their outstanding formal qualities, Lewis-Williams has cautioned researchers that aesthetic admiration does not lead to understanding (1990: 12-13, 21).

Sir James Alexander (1837) and George William Stow (Stow and Bleek 1930) have been identified as representatives of the **narrative** approach. Alexander understood the images in the rock shelters to be illustrations of daily life in

traditional San society (Lewis-Williams 1990: 5-7). Stow on the other hand cherished a keen interest in the hunting activities and technology of the Cape hunter-gatherers. He used several of the paintings, which he had copied on site, as documentary evidence to support his analysis of their subsistence (Lewis-Williams 1990: 7). Dowson has recently renewed the interest in depictions of daily life (2007). Motivated by the observation that the shamanistic model "has not been able to advance a convincing interpretation" for this kind of images he has attempted an original, existentialist understanding of the hunter-gatherer world-view.

Partly in opposition to the early, unsystematic interpretations of the visual art of the San and partly influenced by the mainstream trends of scientific archaeology worldwide, the **empiricist** perspective of the 1960s and 1970s characteristically focused on the compilation of accurate descriptive data, tables, graphs and statistics (Lewis-Williams 2002: 5-49, Dowson and Lewis-Williams 1994: 3-4, 201-204). Tim Maggs (1967) and Harold Pager (1971) have been commonly identified as representatives of this approach (Lewis-Williams 1990: 19, 39). Patricia Vinnicombe too is known for her systematic efforts at classification and quantification of rock art data and for its analysis in terms of intra and inter-site comparison (1976: 349-354).

A study of the Coso rock art in California provides us with a contemporary application of this theoretical window. Gilreath and Hildebrandt assume that the Coso images are best analysed with reference to the archaeological record itself. They therefore base their interpretations on an extensive and fastidious survey and analysis of artefact distribution, settlement patterns, subsistence data, land use histories and faunal remains (2008: 1, 4-8).

The fourth perspective revolves around the issues of hierarchy, competition, conflict and power, the subject matter of **politics**. None of these concerns come easily to mind when discussing hunter-gatherer societies as they are generally believed to be egalitarian and peaceful in nature. Dowson informed by the stylistic diversity of rain snake images has pointed out that political rivalry might have occurred among rainmaking shamans (1998: 86-87). It is worth noting however that Dowson's interest in the political and historical dimensions of the art came about as a result of the criticisms that have been levelled against the shamanistic model for ignoring social conflict and social change.

Anne Solomon on the other hand has demonstrated persuasively that paintings can inform the viewer about San gender politics. This will be explored shortly. John Parkington (1996: 287), like Solomon, has repeatedly emphasised that the expressive vocabulary of the paintings could be much wider than that which the trance hypothesis has suggested. He has defined politics as a

“pervasive strain between people of different social categories” (1996: 281) and argued that the “internal politics” among the San mainly involved sex and age, the primary criteria for the creation of social categories, social relations and the tension around which traditional forager life revolved (1996: 289).

Contested Images (Dowson and Lewis-Williams 1994) contains four papers that reflect on the **historical** dimension of the creative heritage of the San. In one particular study selected rock art sites are corroborated with faunal remains and artefacts in order to interpret a 4 000-year sequence in the Western Cape (1994: 29-60). Elsewhere, images that portray ethnic interaction in the Eastern Cape are identified and analysed (1994: 61-82). Culture contact in the Caledon River Valley is investigated by means of paintings and ethno-historical evidence (1994: 83-118). Lastly there is an extensive discussion of culture change in the Matopos rock art of Zimbabwe (1994: 119-130). A study by Peter Jolly (1995) suggests that the history of the San became inextricably tied to that of their neighbours, the African farmers. Jolly goes as far as to suggest that some of the rock art imagery possibly depicts religious concepts borrowed from Nguni and Sotho-speaking agro-pastoral farmers. More recently, Smith has published an appealing theoretical evaluation of the analytical limits and possibilities of the historical perspective (2010).

Battiss (1948) and Van Riet-Lowe (1941) have conventionally been identified as the pioneers of the **art historical** window on account of their passionate interest in the formal aspect of the paintings and engravings, and their preoccupation with stylistic development (Lewis-Williams 1990: 17-20). Pager and Vinnicombe have attempted stylistic sequences informed by their extensive and laborious data collection in selected regions of southern Africa. With the rise of the shamanistic theory the interest in classification, sequence and style diminished drastically.

In the past decade or so visual histories have returned, some of them in an entirely new format. Mazel (2009) has successfully matched a particular painting technique (the so-called shaded polychromes) to the archaeological record and situated the art works in their historical context. The emergence and elaboration of this style are explained with reference to socio-economic change, namely population movements and the appearance of cattle in the wider region (Solomon 2011a: 55). Flett and Letley (2013) have used Mazel's chronological and general stylistic framework to anchor their more detailed formal analysis of a selection of paintings from a section of the northern Drakensberg.

Solomon, in an admirable theorising study, has criticised contemporary attempts at art historical analysis (2011a). She concurs with Skotnes (1994: 316) that our understanding of San creative traditions will improve by focusing on the art works themselves, since “visuality” is their greatest asset. Solomon invites

researchers from different relevant disciplines to join forces in order to create true “visual histories”, i.e. formal studies that aim well beyond the conventional identification of regional styles and ethnic traditions (2011a: 54) or iconographic descriptions of subject matter, the meanings of which are often constrained by the emphasis on their “social, political and economic contexts” (2011a: 51).

Guenther (1994: 257) proposed that **folklore and mythology** hold little potential for the analysis of rock art, mainly because the stories “are set in their own symbolic key and play their own narrative tunes” and, in addition, are “hauntingly asocial and pre-cultural, as well as liminal and surreal” in nature. Solomon is more positive about the relationship between folklore and rock art yet her approach remains critical and cautious.

When analysing a rock art motif known as “mythic women”, Solomon demonstrates that the textuality and the organisation of San narratives closely resemble the attributes of rock paintings. In this particular instance regeneration and death, themes which surface routinely in San mythology, are expressed visually in the form of an obese female image in frontal view which is juxtaposed to several falling male figures. In Solomon’s understanding the swollen torso displays pregnancy or the production of life, while the act of falling is explained with reference to the traditional belief that the masculinity of men was mortally endangered by contact with female negative potency in the form of menstrual blood or amniotic fluid (1998: 277-278).

In *Myths, Making, and Consciousness* (Solomon 2008), the author analyses the very same “Orpen paintings” from Lesotho which Lewis-Williams has repeatedly referred to when illustrating and justifying his shamanistic model (1990: 53, 2002: 54, Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2004: 139). Solomon redirects the attention of researchers to the link between myth and rock art, one of the key interests of early investigators Pager (1975) and Vinnicombe (1976). The essay is primarily aimed at deconstructing shamanistic thinking and promoting the concept of image making as “instrumental action” and the “material mediation of thought” (2008: 59, 74). By the same token the author also asserts that there is no need to resort to shamanism when attributing meaning to the Orpen paintings. The particular panels under scrutiny “may be understood by reference to myth” and are consequently interpreted as representations of “mythical figures-cum-spirits” (2008: 65-67).

To say that the interest in **gender** has generally stayed low key in rock art studies would amount to a euphemistic appraisal. Fortunately, the original and creative contributions of Parkington (1996) and Solomon (1992) make up for this shortcoming. Parkington explores the relations between hunter and prey and proposes that some of the images which depict combinations of human and animal

features (the so-called therianthropes) are central to the understanding of male-female relations in San society. Solomon's arguments are based on two elementary premises: (i) humans create meanings in their lives through gender relations and, more significantly, (ii) the study of gender cannot be separated from the concept of social hierarchy. A critical look at the social interaction between San women and their male opponents, she contends, exposes men's negative perceptions of womanhood. Solomon illustrates and supports her premise by means of linguistic evidence ("grammatical gendering" 1992: 305-319) and cultural data sourced from storytelling and ethnography, such as the relation between women and the destructive powers of the rain; the taboos that protect hunters and hunting from the negative potency of young women, etc. (1992: 295-305).

Chippindale and Nash established that while **landscape** routinely appears in research discussions worldwide, "good and focused studies of location as a central concern" are generally lacking. Their volume entitled *The Figured Landscapes of Rock-Art* (2004) is meant to fill in the gap. It contains valuable contributions such as the essay by Taçon and Ouzman, which demonstrates by means of careful mapping that engraved rocks have been deliberately positioned, on selected sites, to form ordered geometrical structures. These structures possibly marked places in the landscape where the real world was perceived by the San to connect to the spiritual world (2004: 49, 55-6). Morris (2010) in his discussion of rainmaking has similarly pointed out the mystical bond that was believed to exist between particular locations marked by engravings and San cosmological beings that inhabited the landscape.

The second last window in our overview is beyond doubt the most unpopular one. The **sympathetic magic** approach holds that images of hunters and prey could have been produced as a ritual means to influence the outcome of the hunt. The origins of this theory can be traced back to the 19th Century, more particularly to evolutionism.

Thackeray, Apoh and Gavua have recently published an essay in which they attempt to convince the research community that this theoretical orientation may still hold some interest for the analysis of the art. The authors first compare hunting rituals from modern Ghana with their counterparts in 19th Century South Africa. The notion of sympathetic magic is subsequently applied to the analysis of selected paintings. Based on linguistic analogies between West Africa and the southern African region, it is suggested further, rather daringly, that the rituals in these two territories could share a common origin (2014: 113-114). The hunting magic perspective has been used also (Bradfield et al. 2014) to explain the presence of incised lines on the zebra-like image of a dolomite slab from the Wonderwerk cave.

Lastly, Dowson has selected a number of paintings and engravings that feature unusual metaphorical references, including images of elands which are depicted defecating, extending a hind leg or lifting their tail (1988: 118-20). His argument is that these rare or unusual images, while expressive of a collective shamanistic ideology, reflect the personal revelations of particular shamans (1988: 125). There is, in our opinion, no reason why this **individual perspective** would not apply equally well to aspects of San religion or culture depicted in the art which are not shamanistic. Solomon has noted in this respect that the idiosyncratic aspects of paintings and engravings, not unlike the concepts of style and artistic skills, have been greatly neglected by researchers (2011a: 52-53).

5. From monologue to dialogue

Before we forge the “many meanings” of rock art imagery into an analytical model and reflect briefly on its application to a cluster of paintings at our study site, a few general observations seem in order.

First, during our literature review we noted that the trance hypothesis has occasionally been aligned with other vantage points. Dowson’s discussion of the individual perspective, for instance, relates to the personal visions of shaman-artists. The case studies selected for the purpose of elucidating the relation between landscape and art support the shamanistic paradigm too. Even the sympathetic magic window, which has been rejected outright by Lewis-Williams and followers (and by almost everyone else), has been interpreted by Thackeray with reference to shamanism. Yet, our survey persuasively confirms that each of the suggested vantage points can throw light on cultural beliefs and practices that are not related to shamanistic ideology or practices. This has been eminently exemplified by Solomon when she integrated her gender perspective with the political and mythological approaches.

We further believe that some of the insights that have been generated by early researchers, in spite of claims to the opposite originating from Lewis-Williams and his co-workers, remain relevant for contemporary practice. Anybody familiar with expressive culture and the realm of the artisan in traditional small-scale societies will be open to the suggestion that the **aesthetic** qualities of art works are potentially meaningful. Indigenous artists worldwide commonly enjoy the process of creation as much as they appreciate the end product, even more so because the spiritual nature of the production process and the religious function of the art works require a high standard of execution. With reference to San visual art we suggest that the beauty and the quality of the paintings and engravings therefore are not the privileged concerns of Western admirers, as has been repeatedly suggested by the critics of the aesthetic perspective. Indeed

image-making constitutes an important and analytically rewarding avenue for the investigation of the meaning of the art, as has been astutely pointed out by art historians locally (Skotnes 1994, Solomon 2008, 2011a) and abroad (Halverson 1987, Morphy 1991, 2009).

A similar plea for re-appreciation applies to the **narrative** approach. Hunter-gatherers routinely spent the greater part of their leisure time reminiscing about events which they considered worthwhile remembering. Surely then it is not unreasonable to propose that at least some of the art could be narrative in nature? And why would most of the rock art be metaphorical or depict what the proponents of the shamanistic theory have called “the non-real”, when the people who have created the paintings were connected so intimately with the realities of their social and natural surroundings? To deny the narrative nature of San expressive culture clearly contradicts, in our opinion, the meaningfulness, prominence and directness of their social discourse.

We suggest further, in the same spirit of encouraging an analytical openness of mind, that a more tolerant attitude towards the unpopular **empiricist** and **sympathetic magic** traditions will go some way to improve our understanding of rock art. While we would readily agree that any radical form of empiricism (in the sense of positivism) obstructs rather than promotes analysis, we also recognise the exemplary quality of the research produced in the 1960s and 1970s. The efforts of Pager, Vinnicombe and others have demonstrated that objectivity, attentive observation, fastidious description and perceptive comparison are indispensable features of the recording and formal analysis of the images on the rocks. Supporters of the sympathetic magic perspective on the other hand have made us aware that at least some of the art portrays those particular beliefs, norms and values that have shaped the primary mode of San subsistence: the hunt.

6. Applying multivocality: some preliminary reflections

The model suggested in Illustration 1, far from being sophisticated or comprehensive, aims at inviting researchers to participate in a kind of practice that is primarily informed by a wide variety of perspectives, differences of opinion and sound debate. It merely offers a visual synthesis of the analytical windows discussed earlier on. Four descriptive concepts have been added to each of the twelve dimensions of the art in an attempt to capture its essence. We have used this model as a tool to stimulate our thinking during the analysis of a panel of images that was traced at Legodi (Mokakabye 2015).

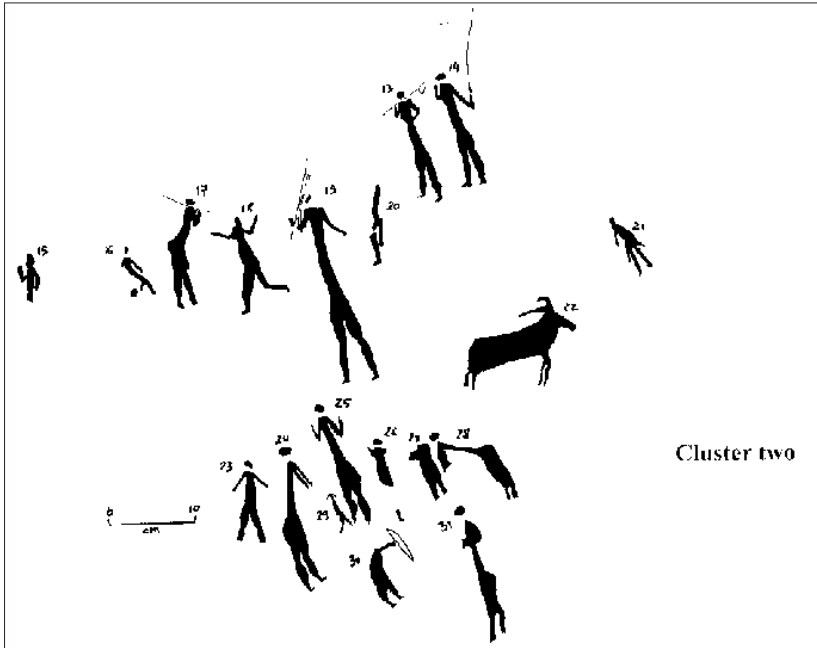
Illustration 1



The Legodi rock art site is situated approximately 26km from Polokwane city in Capricorn district. In terms of vegetation, the landscape of the wider region belongs to the savannah biome. The rock shelter is located on one of several hills known as *Bohwela Batho*, “the place where people died”. The shelter is a spacious ‘room’, with a long and wide open front section, and an equally wide back ‘wall’ which displays the paintings. The painted rock face is rectangular and covers an area of roughly 10 X 3 m. The human images vary between 4 and 29cm in height and the animal representations measure between 28cm and 6cm in length. The nearly hundred images have been divided in clusters and isolates. We have selected cluster two, which consists almost entirely of human figures for

the purpose of our discussion (Illustration 2). Although the analysis of the Legodi paintings is work in progress, it seemed relevant for the purpose of this essay to share the following elementary reflections.

Illustration 2



During our initial encounter with the paintings we found ourselves spontaneously looking for references to shamanism! The 'elongated' fig.19 was the first to be noticed in this particular cluster. Other visual indices of shamanistic activity were soon detected: e.g. fig. 28 with its body in the bent forward position, a stereotypical portrayal of the healer in trance. After tracing the images we decided that the starting point of our analysis should be as descriptive as possible. We chose to discuss and argue the formal features of the individual figures at length. This procedure proved to be rewarding in spite of it being very time-consuming. It not only familiarised us more intimately with the actual process of image construction, it also formed a sound basis for our subsequent attempts to debate each image in terms of the different vantage points. By means of example the 'neutral' description of fig.19 goes as follows: "tall elongated human figure-floating head-sticklike objects in right hand-left arm stretched out away

from body-facing left-possibly male-muscular legs-possibly walking". In the remainder of the discussion we present a few of our attempts at interpretation and by the same token demonstrate how little we actually know with certainty about some of the art!

In terms of the gender perspective e.g. it was not always easy to decide or agree which of the images are female or male. This uncertainty can be explained partly on account of the fact that we do not fully know or understand the relevant conventions of the art. To be honest, we can only *assume* that formal details pertaining to the lower or the upper body, garments worn and objects carried provide some indication of gender.

As a result no obvious gendered oppositions between the figures could be discerned either. The orientation of the bodies in the lower section of the cluster seemed at first to indicate some kind of opposition: 23, 24, 29 and 30 are facing right; the remaining ones face left (25, 26, 27, 28 and 31). However the variety in size and body posture, we felt, somewhat dilutes the perceived tension. Perhaps then the absence of clear opposition could be read as a visual statement on gender complementarity and balance?

A similar kind of ambiguity prevailed with reference to composition and challenged our interpretive efforts. The individuals depicted in the top half of the cluster appear to be ordered somewhat in linear fashion, but that proved to be of little use in the process of attributing meaning. The human outlines in the bottom section are, comparatively speaking, placed more haphazardly, an arrangement that seemed even less meaningful! Figures 15 and 21 are located in isolation from the others. Image 19 on the other hand appears to occupy a central position. Yet, in the absence of clarity about its relation to, and the meaning of the surrounding figures the centrality of 19 does not render the composition more focused.

It was nearly impossible to identify with certainty any form of interaction, with the exception perhaps of 13 and 14 who have been juxtaposed and possibly display some rapport in terms of their formal similarities. As for the others, the diversity of the formal features once more disabled our attempts at identifying elements of style. It was just as difficult to decide if more than one artist was involved in the creation of this cluster.

More significantly, in spite of the fact that shamanistic features may occur in the cluster, there isn't really any convincing argument to support the suggestion that beliefs or practices relating to shamanism hold together or structure the meaning of this particular Legodi cluster. In fact we couldn't see any kind of narrative keeping the cluster together other than perhaps one grounded in the concept of memory. In terms of the process of image-making, we concluded that

cluster two was possibly accumulative in nature. We presume that new figures may have been added to the cluster at different moments in time. The images could be references to particular events or personalities which were deemed worth remembering. Whether some of these events were related we simply cannot know for sure.

Perhaps it is time for rock art researchers to admit that theirs is a field of study that generates more questions than answers. A ruling paradigm and a dominating analytical monologue do little to improve matters.

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