

# THE FISH, THE SHAMAN AND THE PEREGRINATION: SAN ROCK PAINTINGS OF MORMYRID FISH AS RELIGIOUS AND SOCIAL METAPHORS\*

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## ABSTRACT

Species-specific rock paintings of freshwater mormyrid fish in central and eastern Zimbabwe and the south-eastern mountains of South Africa are interpreted in terms of San shamanism. Elements of mormyrid appearance and physiology appear to have been foregrounded in order to more precisely nuance San perceptions of supernatural potency and extra-corporeal travel. Many of the south-eastern mountain ichthyoid paintings have not been widely accepted as representations of mormyrids because they do not correspond with the natural distribution of mormyrid fish. This discrepancy may be indicative of extensive forager social networks in eastern southern Africa during the late Holocene.

## INTRODUCTION

Rock art<sup>1</sup> imagery produced in southern Africa by people most often referred to as 'Bushman' or 'San' is often ambiguous and idiosyncratic (Lewis-Williams 1981a: chapter 1; Dowson 1988). The current synthesis is that much of southern African forager rock art was implicated in the religious (Vinnicombe 1976; Lewis-Williams 1981a; Huffman 1983; Deacon 1988; Kinahan 1991; Yates & Manhire 1991; Loubser 1993; Stevenson 1994) and political (Campbell 1987; Dowson 1994; Loubser & Laurens 1994) endeavours of shamans. Guenther, working among the San of Botswana, notes that "the religion and cosmology of the Bushmen is deeply and pervasively ambiguous and heterogeneous, as fluid and lacking in standardisation" (1994:267).

The lack of standardisation, however, applies to specific beliefs and their corporeal expression. Ethnographic and archaeological data suggest that foragers in southern Africa, including Zimbabwe, belonged to the same language family and had a similar material culture (Inskeep 1978:67-68; Garlake 1987a:4; Walker 1994:96). Moreover, these foragers shared a broadly similar system of religious belief (*e.g.*, Bleek & Lloyd 1911; Potgieter 1955; Cooke 1969; Marshall 1976; Huffman 1983; Guenther 1986; Garlake 1987a & b, 1990; Biesele 1993) though regional boundaries and traditions did exist. In certain areas, such as Zimbabwe and the south-eastern mountains of South Africa, which comprise Lesotho and parts of western and southern KwaZulu-Natal and the eastern parts of the Eastern Cape Province, detailed forager ethnography is scarce (but see Arbousset & Daumas 1846; Orpen 1874; Anderson 1888;

Stanford 1910; Ellenberger 1953). However, the remarkable number and range of southern African forager beliefs that correspond, sometimes in minute detail, is indicative of a certain unity of forager conceptual thought in during the Holocene (Lewis-Williams 1984; Deacon 1988). With great caution (*cf.* Wylie 1985, 1989), rock art imagery may therefore be used as a primary source of evidence for the world-view of certain southern African foragers.

Despite its visual accessibility, rock art imagery is difficult for non-San people to comprehend, particularly when images are not readily identifiable or classifiable according to a Western taxonomic system. However, there are instances where it is possible to identify specific depictions, such as animal species (*e.g.*, Loubser & Brink 1992), which may, in turn, lead to a more precise understanding of the ideas and metaphors that informed the shaman-artists' apparent idiosyncrasies and ambiguities (*e.g.*, Lewis-Williams *et al.* 1986; Loubser *et al.* 1990).

San people were aware of a great number of animal species, yet they chose to depict only a limited range of animals. Furthermore, painted and excavated faunal evidence seldom correspond, indicating that differential decision-making processes were at work for each activity. Such selectivity indicates that specific animal species were recognised and considered suitable subjects to depict on account of their social and religious importance (Vinnicombe 1976; Lewis-Williams 1981a). For example, rhebuck may have been painted because of their association with the family unit (Vinnicombe 1976:197-198) and hartebeest and eland because of their importance to /Kaggen, the trickster deity of the southern San (Bleek 1924:12).

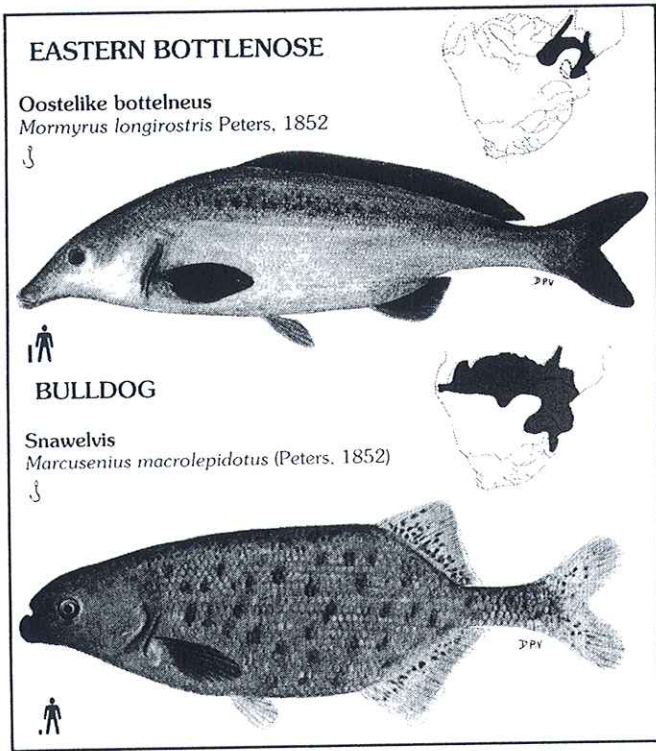


Fig. 1. *Mormyrus longirostris* and *Marcusenius macrolepidotus*.

relatively large-bodied fish measuring between 130 and 750 mm long when fully grown (Skelton 1993:92) with a distinctive proboscis or 'snout' (Fig. 1). Mormyrids are active at night and prefer the larger rivers. These fish are often gregarious, occurring in shoals of varying size and are known to migrate considerable distances, most probably for breeding purposes (Skelton 1993:98). Mormyrids appear to be territorial but are not aggressively so.

Rock paintings of mormyrid fish are known from McIlwaine National Park (Summers 1959:13) and Mumurgwe Cave (Garlake 1987a:6, 69) in central and eastern Zimbabwe (Fig. 2). At both sites the depictions have the striking proboscis, large body and homocercal tail typical of freshwater mormyrid fish. Summers (1959:13) notes that these "large fishes of the bottlenose [Mormyrid] type are of special interest." Moreover, the Lake McIlwaine image has a long dorsal fin that is visually identical to those of real mormyrids. Both painted sites are contiguous with the present natural distribution area of mormyrid fish. Importantly, there are depictions of non-mormyrid fish such as *labeo capensis* at nearby Silozwane Cave (Summers 1959: 136; Garlake 1987a:89) which indicates that the artists selected specific fish species.

Similar species-specific recognition and selection

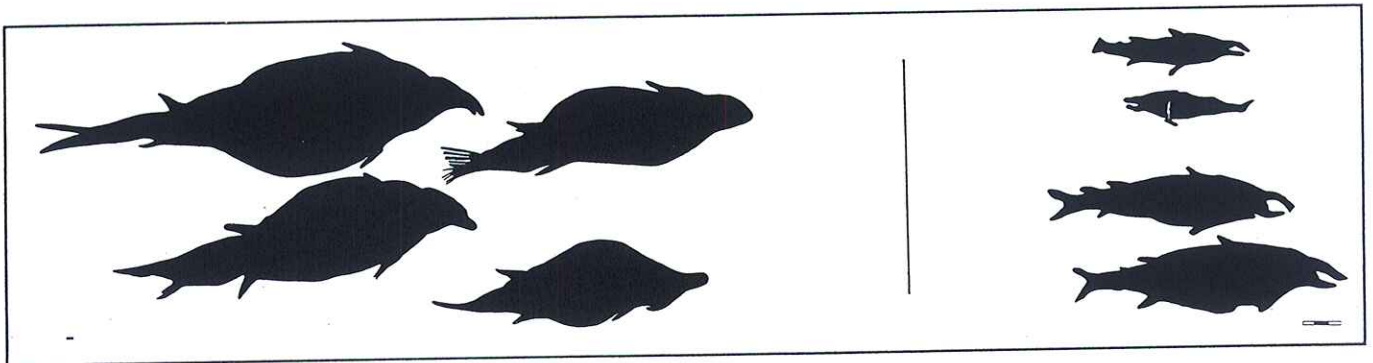


Fig. 2. Rock paintings of mormyrid fish from McIlwaine National Park and Mumurgwe Cave, Zimbabwe. Black represents red. Redrawn after Summers 1959 and Garlake 1987a.

In addition, San artists often exaggerated certain anatomical and behavioural characteristics of people and animals and suppressed others (see Vinnicombe 1972:129-131; Lewis-Williams 1981a: chapters 4-7). These exaggerations and omissions functioned as visual markers, the meanings of which could only be comprehended if the viewer was familiar with both the religious import of the art in general, and the appearance and behaviour of specific animals and people. One example of such species-specific depiction is rock paintings of mormyrid fish.

### MORMYRID DEPICTIONS

The *Mormyridae* are a freshwater fish family numbering over 200 species distributed throughout much of Africa (Jubb 1967:71, 73, 75; Skelton 1993:92). Mormyrids are

appears to have been at work in the south-eastern mountain area of South Africa. There are at least seven sites with ichthyoid depictions that are candidates for representations of mormyrids (Fig. 3). Unlike the Zimbabwean rock paintings these depictions have not been generally accepted as representing mormyrid fish. I discuss the ichthyoid imagery of each site in turn.

At the first site, at Rose Cottage Cave in the Ladybrand District, Free State, there are six ichthyoid depictions, two of which are reproduced here (Fig. 4). Breuil (1945:353-354) recorded four of these images in 1945 (Fig. 5) and basing his identification on certain physical features and the absence of mormyrids in nearby rivers systems, was of the opinion that the Rose Cottage Cave and similar ichthyoid depictions at nearby sites represented whales, sharks and dolphins. This was and is a popular and persistent idea (Battiss 1945; Wells 1946;

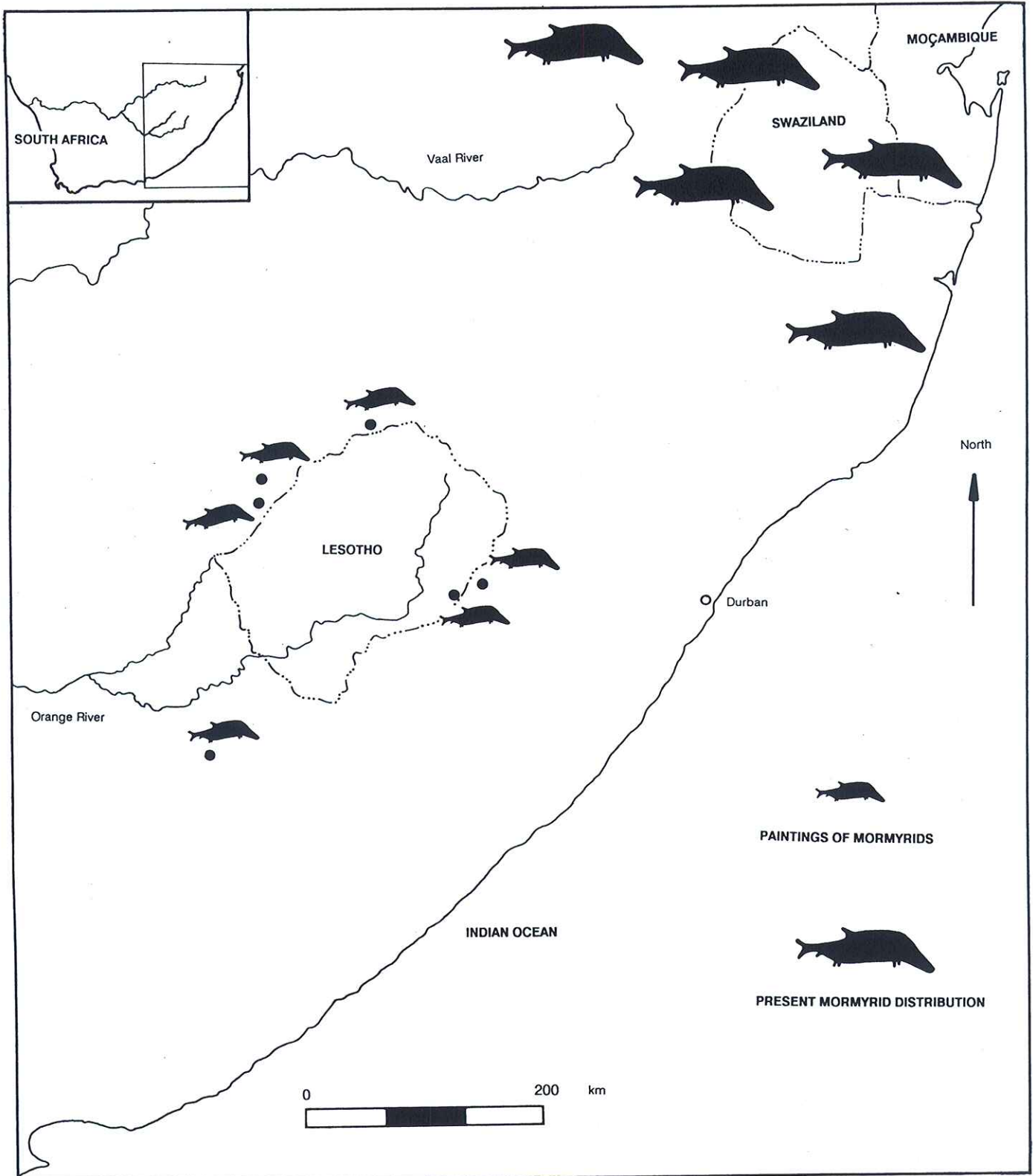


Fig. 3. Locations of the painted and natural distribution of mormyrid fish.

van Riet Lowe 1947; Editorial, South African Archaeological Bulletin June 1992), despite Professor J.L.B. Smith's identification of the Rose Cottage Cave ichthyoids as *Mormyridae*.

I consider it unlikely that these paintings were based on dolphins. Especially the paintings from the Ladybrand district indicate a Mormyrid fish. The dolphin has no anal or pelvic fins as are shown (Figs 4 & 7), the small fins beneath the

head on these paintings probably indicate the pelvic fins of a fish. Further these paintings show a tail fin in the vertical plain of the body. ... All in all therefore it is more likely that these paintings were based on some Mormyrid fish rather than on a marine animal (in Willcox 1962:6).

Smith's identification has recently been supported and extended by Drs Humphrey Greenwood and Paul Skelton

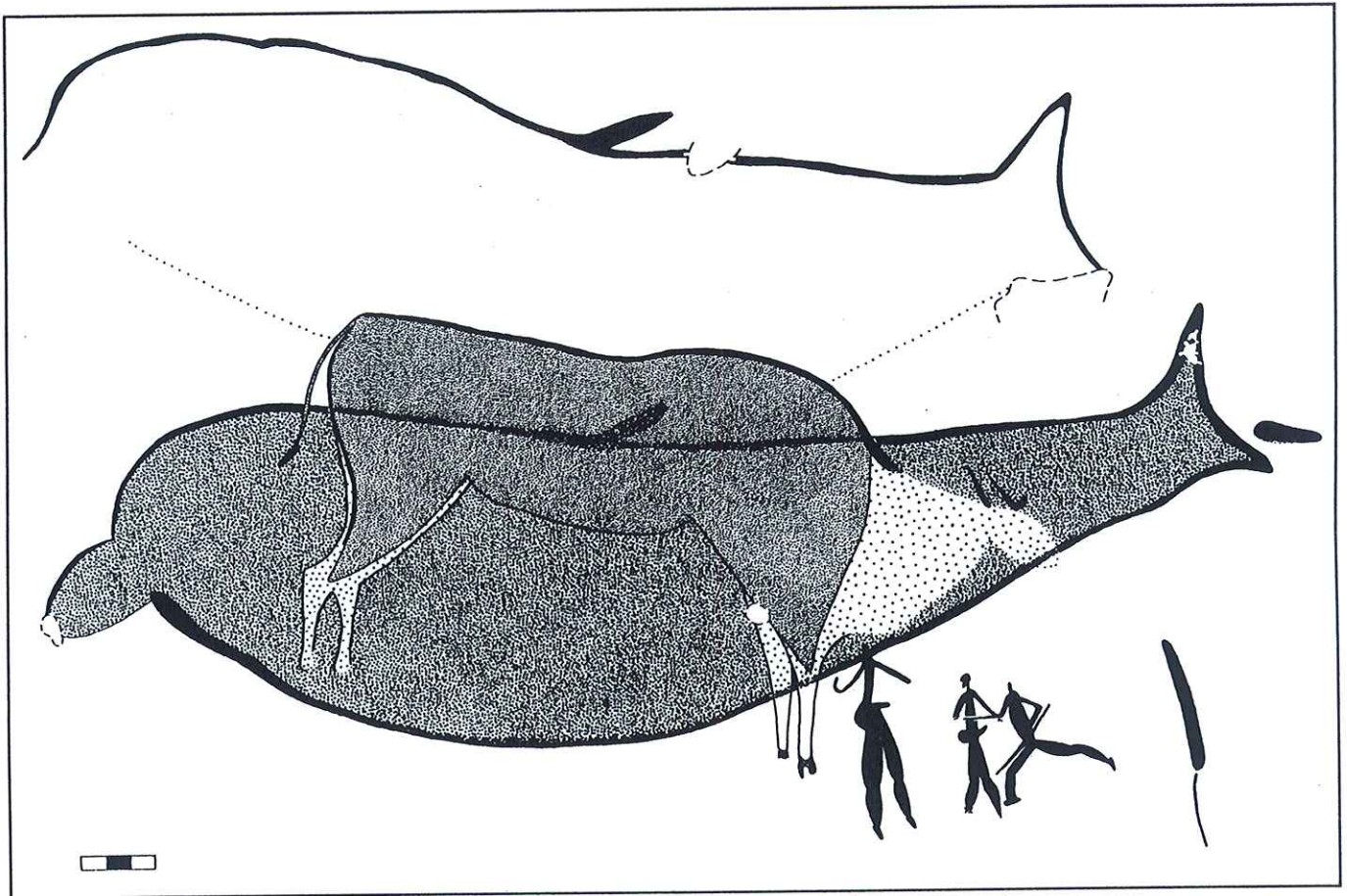


Fig. 4. Rock painting of two ichthyoids, Rose Cottage Cave, Ladybrand District, Free State. Black represents dark red, large stipple light red and dense stipple ochre.

of the J.L.B. Smith Institute of Ichthyology.

The tracings, [Figs 4 & 7] are of fishes that I would identify as Mormyridae of the genus *Mormyrus* (Greenwood, *in litt*, 01/03/1994).

The most likely representation [Figs 4, 7-11] is of a mormyrid fish, and then with the distinctive "beak" or snout protuberance, the species commonly known as the "bulldog" (*Marcusenius macrolepidatus*) is a prime candidate. Other candidates are *Mormyrus lacerda* and *Mormyrus longirostris* (Skelton, *in litt*, 18/04/1994).

There are four anatomical features of the Rose Cottage Cave painting (Fig. 4) that may account for Breuil's and subsequent researchers incorrect identification. Firstly, the very distinctive proboscis that juts out at a sharp angle from the head of Figure 4 is formally similar to the snouts of the *Odontoceti*, or toothed cetaceans, specifically dolphins (Smithers 1983:320). The snout is also similar to the protruding lower jaw of a sperm whale or *Physeter macrocephalus* painted on a block of stone from the Knysna District, Western Cape Province (Fig. 6).

Secondly, the large size of the image (490 x 140 mm) as well as its pendulous shape create the impression of a

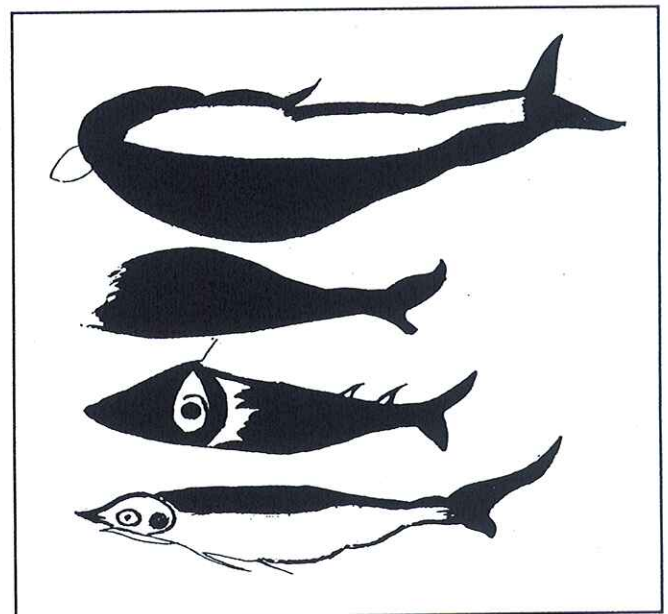


Fig. 5. Breuil's copies of the Rose Cottage Cave ichthyoids.

large aquatic animal not unlike a whale or dolphin. Thirdly, the anal fin recalls the tail flukes of a whale or dolphin (Smithers 1983:318; *cf.* Figs 4 & 6). Fourthly, the small dorsal fin is proportionately similar to the dorsal and ventral fins of whales. These four anatomical

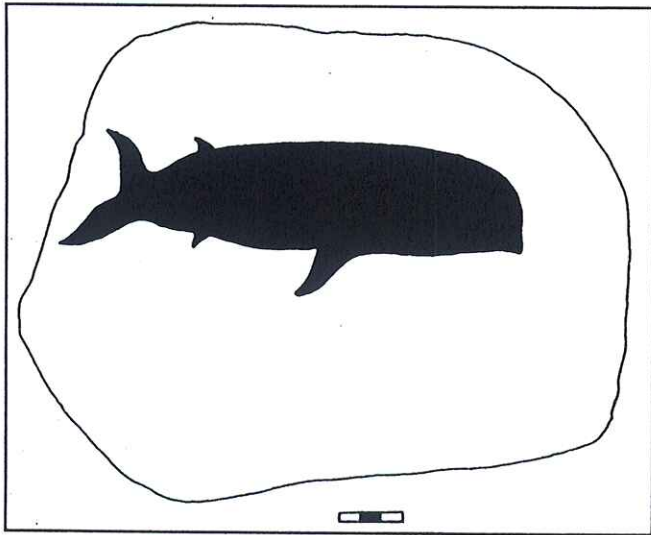


Fig. 6. Painting of a sperm whale on a stone from the Knysna District, Western Cape Province, now in the collection of the South African Museum. Redrawn after Inskeep 1978.

features may, however, be more adequately explained as characteristic of freshwater mormyrid fish.

Firstly, and most compelling, the remarkable proboscis depicted in the Rose Cottage Cave painting (Fig. 4) which Breuil called "a strange appendage, perhaps the tongue" (1945:353), while to a measure formally similar to the lower jaw or snout of some cetaceans, has a far greater correspondence with the proboscis of *Mormyridae* (Fig. 1; Jubb 1967:71-75; Skelton 1993:92-101). No other southern African fish species has a comparable proboscis.

Secondly, the large, pendulous body shown in Figure 4 is formally consonant with that of mormyrid fish (Skelton, pers. comm.). Moreover, the Rose Cottage Cave painting shows a rounded body which tapers toward the anal fin whereas whales generally have a much squarer, more angular body that truncates just before the tail flukes (Smithers 1983:318).

Thirdly, the tail flukes of *Physeteridae* whales have a more angular and notched appearance than the anal fin of the Rose Cottage Cave depiction. Whales require massive tail flukes to propel themselves in strong ocean currents (Smithers 1983:331). The same need for propulsion is less marked in freshwater fish which have less well-developed and more homocercal anal fins.

Fourthly, the small dorsal fin shown in Figure 4 is placed too far forward to be that of a whale (Smithers 1983:318-319). A whale's dorsal fin is typically located on the hindmost third of the body. The Rose Cottage Cave dorsal fin is painted in the foremost half of the body. The dorsal fin of mormyrid fish is, however, usually quite long. Smith pointed out that; "Quite often however, the front part of such a fin may stand erect while the hinder part is depressed and may be almost invisible" (in Willcox 1962:6).

The long dorsal fin of mormyrids is only visible when the fish is at rest or in taxonomic diagrams (e.g.,

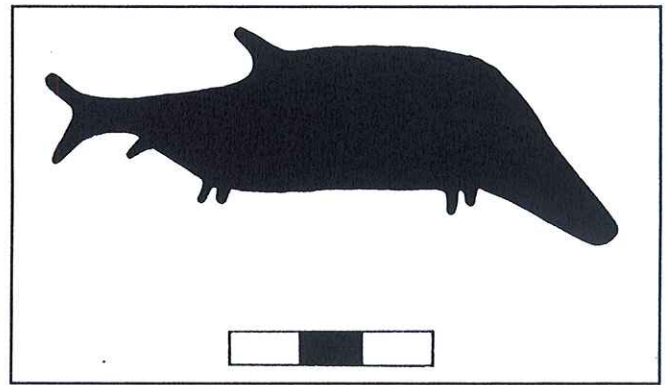


Fig. 7. Rock painting of a mormyrid fish, Ladybrand District, Free State. Black represents red. This panel is in the collection of the Rock Art Research Unit, Wits University.

Fig. 1). Breuil's copies of the Rose Cottage Cave ichthyoids were clearly influenced by his belief that they represented marine animals (cf. Figs 4 & 5) and by his unfamiliarity with southern African fish species. His influence on researchers has been considerable and many of his ideas persist. However, we are now in a position to re-classify these paintings as representations of freshwater mormyrids and not marine animals.

The second site at which mormyrids were depicted is 22 km north-east of Rose Cottage Cave. Fifty four fish are depicted in a shoal turning about (Fig. 7). Breuil (1945:35), using the same criteria as for the Rose Cottage Cave ichthyoids identified these fish as "a shoal of fish being attacked by dolphins". These 'dolphins' and 'sea fish' are most probably representations of mormyrids on account of their distinctive snouts and body shape. In addition to these distinctive physical characteristics, the shoaling behaviour depicted is typical of the gregarious *Mormyridae*.

At the third site, on the banks of the Little Caledon River in the Fouriesburg District of the Free State, there is a depiction of a shoal of six fish (Fig. 8). Wells (1946:237), influenced by Breuil's work, identified three of these fish as dolphins, despite having misgivings. Again, the distinct, even exaggerated proboscis, is visible on at least four of the images which also have large, pendulous bodies and long dorsal fins.

Shoaling behaviour is similarly conspicuous at the fourth and fifth sites in the Underberg District of KwaZulu-Natal (Fig. 9) and on the banks of the Tsoelike River in Lesotho (Fig. 10). These two sites, along with one slightly further south-west, are well-known on account of the 'fishing scenes' depicted there (Battiss 1945; Goodwin 1949; Vinnicombe 1960). Several fish species such as the snouted *mormyrus* and whiskered *barbus* are depicted at both sites (Vinnicombe 1960:18; 1965), indicating the artists' ability to differentiate between and select for specific fish species.

The sixth site at which mormyrids were painted is also in the Underberg District and twenty fish are depicted in association with fish-traps. Four of the fish display the

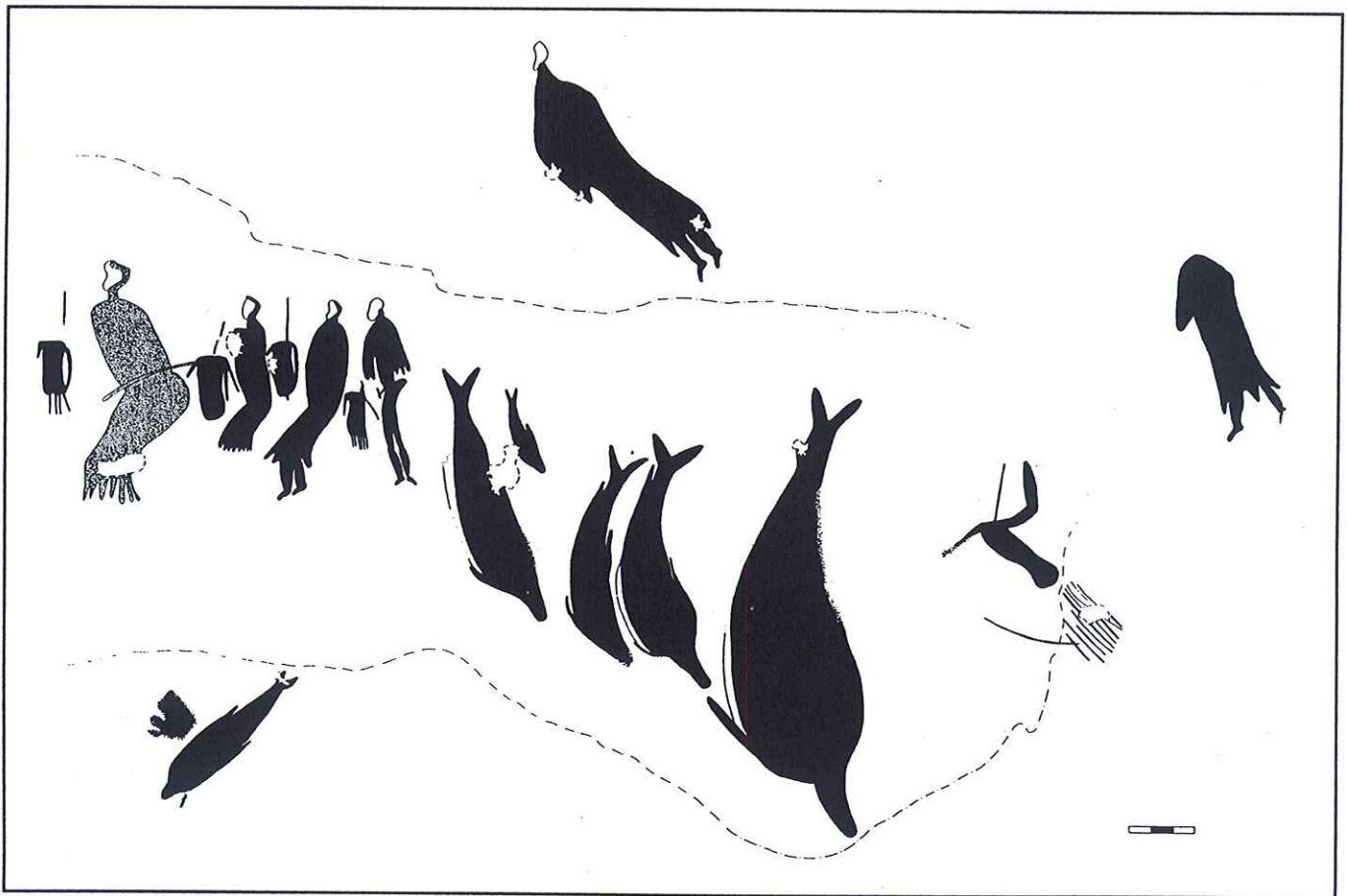


Fig. 8. Rock painting of mormyrid fish, ichthyanthropes and bags. Fouriesburg District, Free State. Black represents red, stipple represents light red.

snout, body shape and depressed dorsal fin characteristic of mormyrids (Vinnicombe 1961; see also Smits 1967). The other fish depictions are not identifiable to species.

Finally, in the Wodehouse District of the Eastern Cape Province there is a site at which two fish are depicted in association with three human figures and a bird (Fig. 11). The body shape, snout, dorsal fin and markings of the painted fish correspond almost exactly with those of known mormyrid species (Skelton 1993:92-101).

Many of the fish depicted at the seven sites discussed above can be securely identified as representations of freshwater mormyrid fish. A comparison between the painted imagery and the freshwater fish species that inhabit the river systems of the south-eastern mountain region, notably the *Cyprinidae* (Fig. 12), reveals none of the distinctive features such as the snout, body shape, markings and dorsal fin found on both real and painted mormyrids. Furthermore, the morphological variation expressed in the mormyrid depictions discussed is well within the range of the over 200 naturally occurring mormyrid species.

I now explore the reasons why certain foragers of the south-eastern mountains selected for the 'exotic' mormyrid. This exploration is articulated in the context of firstly San shamanism and secondly San social networks.

### MORMYRID DEPICTIONS AND SHAMANISM

Based on preservational and associative factors, the paintings of mormyrids I have discussed are unlikely to be of great antiquity and were probably produced within the last few hundred years. The relatively recent age of the depictions may increase the degree of confidence with which we apply certain ethnographically recorded forager beliefs to the imagery.

It has been convincingly argued that many depictions of fish in southern African rock art are representations of somatic hallucinations, such as the feeling of weightlessness, being underwater, and the affected breathing, hearing and sight sometimes experienced by San shamans in altered states of consciousness (Lewis-Williams 1988:8). Qing, a Maluti San, confidently associated rain-shamans in an altered state of consciousness as being 'underwater' (Orpen 1874:10) and a !Kung shaman from Botswana related how, when in trance, he was taken by God to a river and how he "entered the stream and began to move forward" (Biesele 1980:55).

Once in this otherworldly stream of consciousness, San shamans looked for ways in which they could harness sources of supernatural potency<sup>2</sup> in order to perform their tasks such as healing, controlling game, making rain and extra-corporeal travel (Lewis-Williams 1981a:77, 1982). I discuss three methods by which

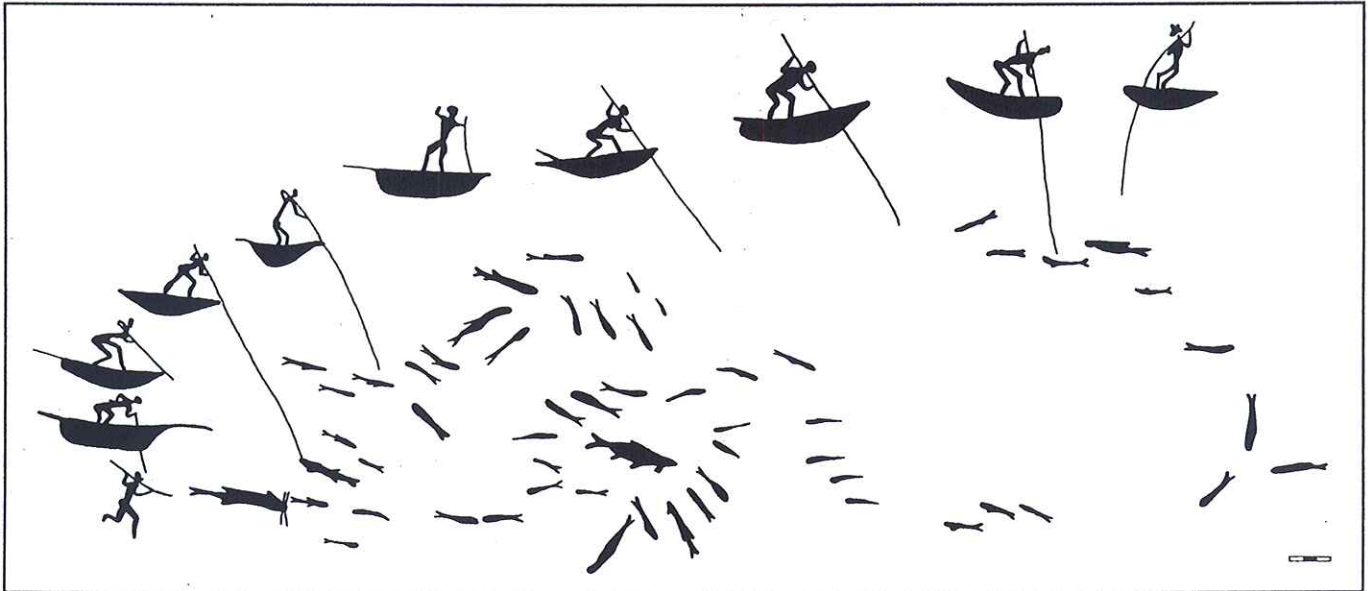


Fig. 9. Rock painting of a fishing 'scene', Underberg District, KwaZulu-Natal. Black represents black. Redrawn after Vinnicombe 1976.

shamans could have controlled supernatural potency and relate these to depictions of mormyrid fish.

### Repositories of potency

First, supernatural potency could be derived from certain animals that were considered potent such as eland, giraffe, gemsbuck and bees (Biesele 1993:94; Lewis-Williams 1981a:77). I suggest that mormyrid fish were considered repositories of supernatural potency on account of their unusual physiology. The *Mormyridae* are unusual in that the species are electrogenic and electroreceptive; they generate and receive electrical impulses (Jubb 1967:75; Skelton 1993:92). These electrical discharges are often weak but in some species, such as *Mormyrus longirostris*, a mild electrical shock is experienced when handling a freshly-caught specimen.

Contemporary San shamans report sometimes experiencing a tingling sensation caused by supernatural potency travelling up their spine (Katz 1982:95). This sensation is not unlike a mild electrical shock (Katz 1982:98). Significantly, Lorna Marshall (1969:351) likened supernatural potency or *n/um* to electricity when she was attempting to explain !Kung conceptions of supernatural potency. "Like electricity, *n/um* is powerful and invisible, capable of beneficent effects, but highly dangerous if too strong".

Because the tingling sensation experienced is a basic function of human physiology governed by the central nervous system, San shamans in times past probably experienced similar sensations. These shamans may have made cultural sense of this tingling sensation in terms of an apt natural analogue such as mormyrid fish. Mormyrids, more than other fish, may have been considered potent animals from which shamans could derive quantities of potency either by touching a real fish or an image thereof (*cf.* Jolly 1986:22; Yates & Manhire 1991).

### Capturing potency

The second way of harnessing potency is an intensification of the first. Instead of just touching a mormyrid image or fish, a shaman could choose to possess not only the potency of mormyrids but also the mormyrid. There is, for example, the shaman-of-the-game who 'kept' a springbuck tethered at her home, most probably to act as a familiar or source of potency (Bleek 1935:45).

One way of visually expressing control over mormyrid potency would be to catch the source of potency. Fishing from the river bank or in boats was part of the subsistence strategy of foraging people in southern Africa (Barrow 1801:300; Stow 1905:72,92-94; Clark 1960:77; Vinnicombe 1965) but, given the centrality of shamanism to rock art imagery, it is likely that rock paintings of 'fishing scenes' (Battiss 1945; van Riet Lowe 1947; Goodwin 1949; Vinnicombe 1960, 1961; Smits 1967, 1973:33) went beyond subsistence and related to San religious beliefs. For example, in the Eastern Cape Province a therianthrope is depicted catching a fish with a fishing rod (Schoonraad 1962), a composition that supports a non-literal explanation and links shamans with the capture of fish.

The well-known fishing 'scene' from Lesotho (Fig. 10; Vinnicombe 1960:16, 1976: fig. 82) comprises a large shoal of mormyrids (Skelton, pers. comm.), and at least twelve black human figures standing on boat-shaped objects apparently harpooning the fish. That this is not a literal fishing scene is indicated by a large red human figure standing amongst the fish whereas the depth of water necessitates that other fisherpeople require the use of boats. The large red human figure was probably an earlier depiction, but the author of the fishing scene appears to have consciously used this earlier figure in h/ his composition as indicated by the manner in which the mormyrid shoal breaks around the figure's body. In

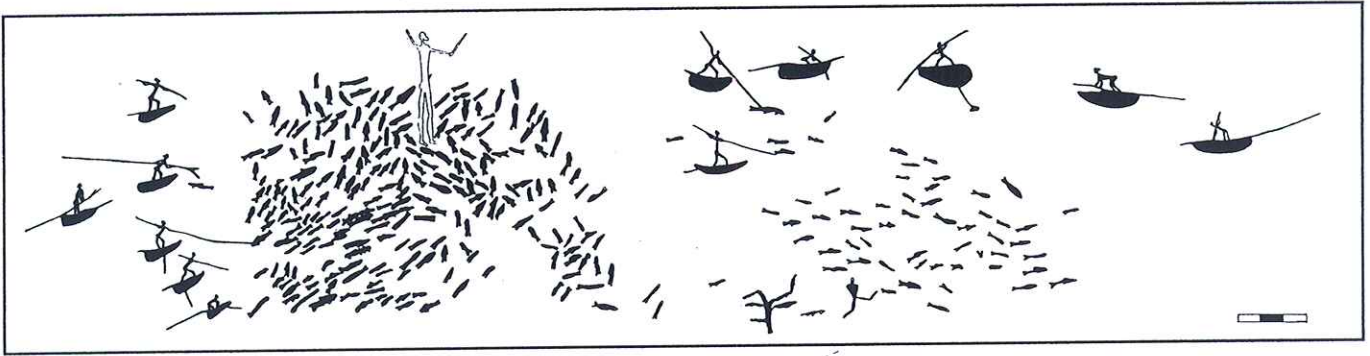


Fig. 10. Rock painting of a fishing 'scene', Tsoelike River, Lesotho. Black represents black. Redrawn after Vinnicombe 1976.

addition, the human figure is in or under water, thus 'wet', potent and in the spirit world. It is therefore highly likely that the human figure is a shaman surrounded by his source of supernatural potency. 'Fishing' is therefore most probably a metaphor for shamanistic acquisition and control of supernatural potency.

#### Assuming potent form

The third way in which shamans could harness potency would be to possess potency by assuming the form and abilities of a potent animal. The parallel between mormyrid physiology and certain somatic hallucinations is likely to have led to some shamans identifying closely with and even becoming, mormyrids. San shamans' transformative abilities are well-documented ethnographically (e.g., Bleek & Lloyd 1911:5, 107, 163, 261; Bleek 1935:7, 32; Biesele 1993:111) and in terms of rock art imagery (Lewis-Williams 1981a; Huffman 1983; Loubser & Brink 1992). Therianthropes, or part animal, part human depictions are a manifestation of a shaman assuming the form and potency of a particular or several animals. At least two rock paintings depict shamans assuming mormyrid form.

A closer examination of the painting of two mormyrid fish associated with three human figures and a bird (Fig. 11) reveals that the human figure on the extreme right hand side has zigzag arms. Zigzag limbs are a feature of southern African rock art (e.g., Ouzman 1993:26, 92; Uher 1994) and probably represent a conflation of visual and somatic hallucinations (Katz 1982:237). Furthermore, not only are the arms zigzags, but they terminate in bifurcations that are almost identical to the fishtails of the two mormyrids immediately to the left (see Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1988:86) indicating h/e is an ichthyanthrope assuming the form and potency of mormyrid fish.

The second depiction of mormyrid transformation is from the Fouriesburg District (Fig. 8). The swimming posture, dorsal fin and tail of the painted mormyrids are strikingly paralleled by the shape and position of the two human figures above and to the right of the fish. Their karosses are of an unusual shape similar to that of the mormyrids. The 'bump' in the torso region of the karos is visually similar to the ventral fin of the mormyrids and the neck of the karos evokes the mormyrid proboscis.

The two figures are unusual in that they are ichthyanthropes not by virtue of their own bodily transformation but by their karosses transformation. Ethnographically, karosses and bags feature in contexts where they are the agent of transformation (Bleek 1924:1-5, 16-17; Bleek & Lloyd 1911:27, 29; Lewis-Williams 1981a:91). 'Being in a bag' involves the same sensory stimuli as being 'underwater' and may also be a metaphor for altered states of consciousness in which transformation occurs. Significantly, the human figures painted to the left of the fish are also clad in karosses and have bags between them. Their juxtaposition with the mormyrid images is unlikely to have been fortuitous and may indicate an association between shaman and h/e source of supernatural potency as well as the means of transformation.

The hypothesis that the south-eastern mountain area constituted a single 'culture area' (Bleek 1932:77, 82; Wright 1971; Vinnicombe 1976) is supported by the treatment of paintings of mormyrids, 'fishing scenes' and mormyrid transformations which appear to have been part of an established regional painting and belief system. That of the people of the south-eastern mountains were familiar with the appearance and behaviour of mormyrids is, however, problematic as mormyrids do not naturally occur there.

#### MORMYRID DISTRIBUTION

The present distribution of the *Mormyridae* extends north of the Tropic of Capricorn with some species such as *longirostris* reaching their southernmost expression in the Umhlatuzi river in KwaZulu-Natal (Skelton 1993:98), 200 km north-east of the nearest known mormyrid painting (Fig. 3). That warmer, moister conditions could have prevailed during the Holocene enabling the *Mormyridae* distribution pattern to extend further southward is possible but the data are ambiguous. Butzer, basing his study on sediment analysis finds for a moist, warm Holocene (Butzer 1984; Butzer & Vogel 1979) but charcoal analysis supports a warmer and possibly drier Holocene scenario (Wadley 1991:127; Mitchell 1994:85). Mitchell, working in the Thaba Bosiu region finds for more woody conditions on the basis of faunal remains. More recently, Tyson and Lindesay (1992:275-276) have



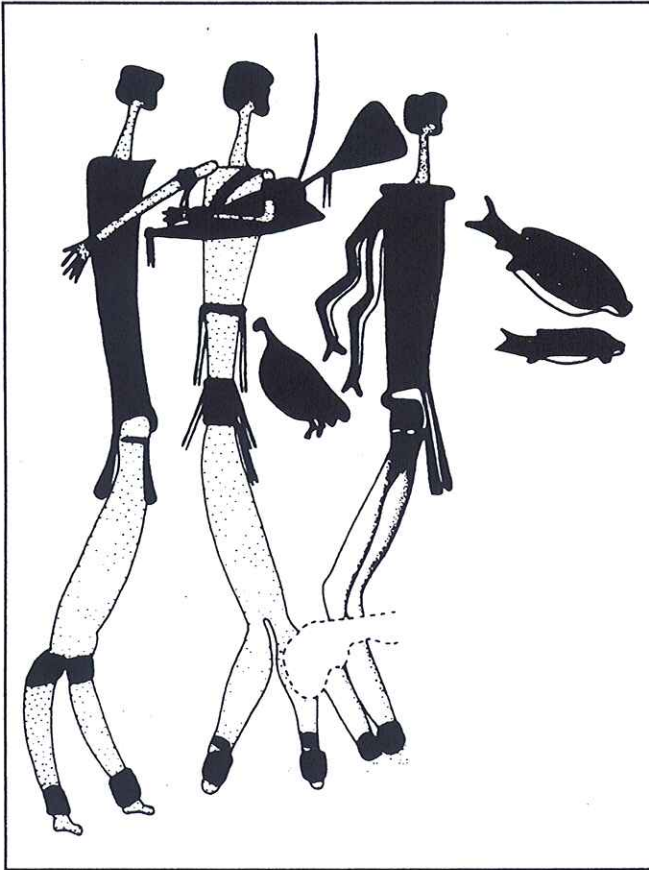


Fig. 11. Rock painting of mormyrid fish and ichthyanthrope, Wodehouse District, Eastern Cape Province.

argued for a more variable scenario comprising regular temperature changes every 200-300 years during the late Holocene.

The palaeo-climatic and painted data are, however, equivocal. The practise of depicting animals outside their present natural range is an idiosyncratic feature of southern African rock art (Loubser 1993:360). Ironically, the best example of this idiosyncrasy is the Ladybrand ichthyoids which, had their identification as marine animals been accurate, are 320 km from the nearest ocean. Even as mormyrids, these images are 200 km south of the present mormyrid range. A more adequate argument accounting for the discrepancy between painted and natural mormyrid distribution may be articulated in terms of ethnographically and archaeologically observed San social networks.

#### MORMYRID DEPICTIONS AND SAN SOCIAL NETWORKS

The 200 km distance between paintings of mormyrids and their present natural distribution appears at first to preclude any contact between foragers or foragers and food-producers. However, many San groups were characterised by their travels at various times of year (Bleek & Lloyd 1911:303-307; Parkington 1972; Barnard 1992:55, 68, 204; Biesele 1993; but see Humphreys 1987). /Kabbo, one of Bleek and Lloyd's /Xam

informants, tells of people "listening to stories from afar, which float along; they are listening to stories from other places" (Bleek & Lloyd 1911:301).

These stories 'floated along' by visiting kin, friends and gift exchange partners and were considered an essential part of forager life as /Kabbo repeatedly mentions (Bleek & Lloyd 1911:303). We are also told of strangers entering the region (Bleek & Lloyd 1911:381-385), and the exchange of bags and arrows between forager and farmer groups (Bleek & Lloyd 1911:377; Hewitt 1986:36). Cooke (1965), using Zimbabwean rock art imagery, has argued for human migrations with domestic stock across Zimbabwe. In the last few hundred years San people in the south-eastern mountains acquired horses enabling them to cover considerable distances to hunt, raid, trade and visit (Wright 1971:55, 175). Contemporary San people in Botswana regularly make between 0 and 20 visits per year to groups living up to between 5 and 300 km distant (Weissner 1982; 1983:62; Cashdan 1983), which situated individuals and groups within a geographically extensive social context (Wilmsen 1989:53). Mobility thus appears to be a persistent, essential, although variable facet of forager life.

There is evidence of considerable mobility between foragers and forager and farmer communities between and within the south-eastern mountains and KwaZulu-Natal.

#### Evidence of forager contiguity between the south-eastern mountains and KwaZulu-Natal

Although the rugged terrain of the south-eastern mountains would appear to hamper movement, the Orange River Valley, which runs through 80% of Lesotho, is a natural corridor for human movement and is connected to the west and east by numerous passes as well as the Caledon River Valley (Illustrated World Atlas 1988:20). The large number of late Holocene Later Stone Age sites in the south-eastern mountains, particularly along river valleys, indicates intensive and probably extensive forager settlement (Mitchell 1994; Bousman 1988).

In western, southern and central Lesotho, the last 1000 years witnessed a change in forager settlement pattern characterised by the short-term occupation of many localities, often painted and sometimes with pressure flaked arrowheads (Bousman 1988; Mitchell *et al.* 1994:33). Mazel notes a similar change in forager land-use patterns in the last 2000 years in the Thukela Basin in KwaZulu-Natal (1989:22). It appears as if after an early Holocene interregnum the south-eastern mountain region and parts of KwaZulu-Natal were re-occupied by foragers and later by farmers. In contrast to previous findings (Carter 1970), Mitchell *et al.* (1994:50) consider forager populations to have been restricted to smaller areas without major corporate seasonal movements (see also Mitchell 1994:92), although social or trading visits probably still took place.

Slightly to the north of Mitchell's research area Wadley has identified a possible aggregation-dispersal

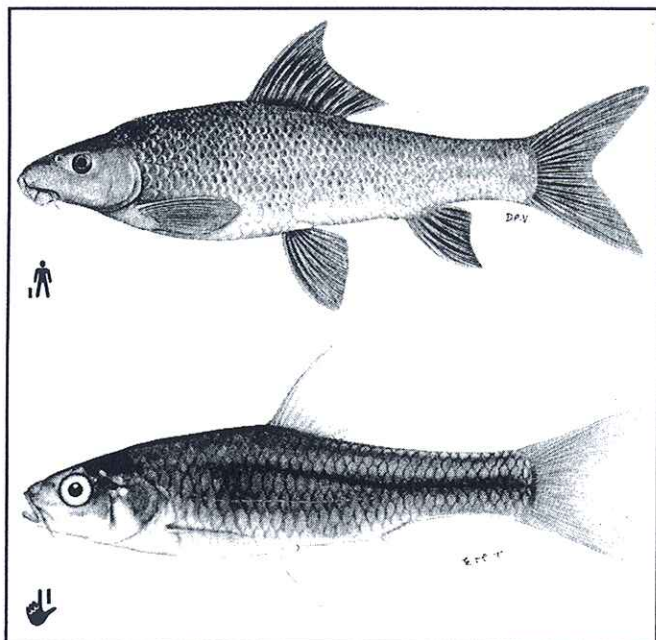


Fig. 12. *Labeo capensis* and *Barbus gurneyi* of the Family Cyprinidae.

complex in the Ladybrand District of the Free State with Rose Cottage Cave an important focus (Wadley & Engela 1990:7-8). To the south-east, Carter and Vinnicombe have described the wide-ranging seasonal movements of the Drakensberg San (Carter 1970; Vinnicombe 1976:163). The discovery of cowrie shell, *L. cyprea*, at a site in the Underberg District of KwaZulu-Natal, over 200 km from the coast (Vinnicombe 1960:17), provides secure evidence of extensive forager social networks during the late Holocene (Vinnicombe 1976:86). Similar finds of marine shell in the Thukela Basin and eastern Lesotho occur after 2000 BP, a period during which forager visibility and mobility increases significantly (Mazel 1989:143-144). Mazel notes that;

... the distribution of OES beads and marine shells suggests widening contacts among the hunter-gatherer communities. It is not inconceivable that while the hunter-gatherers established close reciprocal bonds with the farmers, they also felt the desire to strengthen and widen alliance networks to ensure social and biological reproduction (1989:144).

There are two further lines of empirical evidence that may be indicative of the strengthening of alliance networks within and between groups in the south-eastern mountains and KwaZulu-Natal.

#### Tanged arrowheads

This highly distinctive lithic type comprises unifacially or bifacially pressure-flaked, small-sized arrowheads with a hafting tang and fine workmanship (Humphreys 1991). These lithics enjoy a tight chronological bracketing to within the last 2000 years (Humphreys 1991). The geographical distribution of tanged arrowheads is

well-documented and covers the central interior, south-eastern mountains and, significantly, the western parts of KwaZulu-Natal (Mazel 1994:53). The distinctiveness of the tanged arrowheads would appear to preclude independent invention and argues powerfully for contiguity between groups within the distribution area of tanged arrowheads. It has been argued that tanged arrowheads, because of their visual and technological difference from other lithic types, acted as a marker of social or group boundaries (Humphreys 1984:3; see also Mitchell 1994:89). Like the occurrence of ostrich eggshell beads and marine shells after 2000 BP, tanged arrowheads may be a product of changed social networks. More defined concepts of territory<sup>3</sup> may have been in operation given the pressure on land and resources in the south-eastern mountains (Stow 1905:185-192; Wright 1971; Vinnicombe 1976; Campbell 1987; Dowson 1994). Items of material culture such as tanged arrowheads may have provided a means by which people could indicate their membership of a system of signification and justify ingress into other forager's territories and resources. This implies an emic recognition and maintenance of group identity, a finding supported by Mazel's (1989:104, 142) identification of social regions in the Thukela Basin during the late Holocene.

#### The thin red line

The second line of evidence that links groups in the south-eastern mountains with those in KwaZulu-Natal is the painted image-class known as the thin red line (Lewis-Williams 1981b). This image-class comprises a sinuous red line, often fringed with white dots, which may connect images within a painted panel and which often enters and leaves cracks, steps and irregularities in the rock face. The thin red line is found in much of Lesotho (e.g., Vinnicombe 1976:335), western KwaZulu-Natal, the northern and eastern parts of the Eastern Cape Province (Lewis-Williams 1981b) as well as in the eastern and southern Free State. So distinctive is the thin red line that two depictions 200 km apart are indistinguishable and may even have been the work of a single hand (Lewis-Williams 1981b:12). Like the tanged arrowheads the uniqueness of the thin red line very strongly implies a commonly understood regional forager belief. Lewis-Williams has suggested that the thin red line may be a graphic representation of a transformed shaman, or the footprints of a shaman as s/he travelled from this world to distant places and the spirit world (see Lewis-Williams 1981b:12; Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1990). This interpretation is significant because it points to the possibility that there is only one thin red line, snaking in and out of the rock, emerging at sites all over the south-eastern mountains, constituting a pathway which shamans could follow into new territories.

Ethnographic and archaeological evidence indicates that forager mobility during the last few hundred years in the south-eastern mountains and KwaZulu-Natal was extensive and complex. The 200 km hiatus between painted and natural mormyrid distribution does not

appear to be as problematic as was first thought. However, the transmission of the appearance, behaviour and significance of mormyrids still requires explanation. I articulate this explanation in terms of the role of shaman as traveller. In addition, certain shamans may have entered their experiences of extra-corporeal and real travel into the realm of forager power relations.

### MORMYRID DEPICTIONS AND SHAMANIC PEREGRINATION

The role of the shaman was not restricted to the arcane but extended to the mundane. Shamans reminded people of the wider, invisible nexus of which they were part. "They could imagine the distant people and places of which the medicine man spoke because, through the changing membership of camps, they had themselves been there" (Lewis-Williams 1982:436).

Further, shamans may have held an additional understanding of mobility and travel, in that it was necessary to obtain and master certain spiritual resources and information fields (Moore 1983). Peterson (1978:28-29) notes that in forager thought access to the cultural systems, sacred sites and the ritual knowledge of an area often takes precedence over subsistence resources (see also Humphreys 1987; Smith 1994:383). In times of change and stress, such as characterised the last few hundred years in the south-eastern mountains, San foragers may have looked to their religion for answers. It is therefore significant that Mitchell *et al.* (1994:49), like Wadley and Engela (1990) and, to a lesser extent, Mazel (1989) discern a focus on painted rock shelters during this period. Possibly certain geographic loci became a focus of ritual permanence, emphasising San occupancy and custodianship of certain geographical areas. Occupancy and visibility could be reinforced and extended by invoking the sanction of the spirit world which could be accessed by shamans and rock art imagery.

In order to enter and experience the spirit world, San shamans went on extra-corporeal travel while in an altered state of consciousness. In the spirit world, which was presented by shamans to non-shamans as difficult to access, strange and even dangerous (Biesele 1980:58-59), shamans experienced the central truths of their religion. These truths were not self-evident but had to be synthesised and assimilated by the symbolically-literate shamans who would then transmit these truths to others by means of oral account and visual imagery. In San thought the spirit world constituted a definable and tangible territory (Katz 1982:115, 187) which could be explored and exploited by those who had access to it. Travel between territories and exploitation of resources operated at a literal and an hallucinatory level, both of which many San people considered real.

In thus representing out-of-body travel the artists were not turning their backs on the real world in favour of an independent world of imagination. On

the contrary, they were making statements about economic and social realities. (Lewis-Williams 1982:437-438).

Extra-corporeal travel and depictions thereof related, in certain aspects, specifically to space.

... the symbolic differentiation of space (topologisation) and the appropriation of the topologised space into a structure of meaning by attributing shared and public values to place, directions, and boundaries such that it may be graphically, or ritually represented in a coherent and enduring image (Smith 1994:376 *vide* Thornton 1980).

I suggest that one such enduring image was the mormyrid fish. Not only were rock paintings of mormyrids religious metaphors, they were also metaphors for the control of space (see Smith 1994:384). Someone, not necessarily a shaman, would have had to have actually seen and felt a mormyrid in a region where mormyrids occur naturally. This information would then have had to come to the attention of a shaman who could make symbolic sense of this unusual fish. The shaman may have decided to experience this fish for h/himself, necessitating a literal journey to the geographical locus where these fish occurred. Once completed, this literal journey may have been presented in metaphorical terms. For example, one could extend the 'underwater' metaphor to include rivers as routes by which certain shamans, like mormyrids, travelled while in an altered state of consciousness.

Painted representations of this fish would thus constitute a highly visible and enduring image that strongly presenced shamanic access to ritual knowledge and new but restricted territories. The sites at which these images were depicted may have constituted focal points of the landscape that signified foragers privileged access to real and supernatural territories and resources which was enabled by extensive social and religious networks. In this way painted imagery becomes more than religious and social metaphor; it becomes a manipulation and redefinition of the landscape which, in turn, alters peoples roles and relations with other people, resources and the spirit world. Control of rock art imagery was therefore critical in San concept-formation.

Control over material culture gives power and control over others in that the values and expectations of others can be changed or negotiated by providing a world of experience that creates new associations and evokes new relationships and values. But, again, individuals are not duped by the material world. Rather, they make sense of it in terms of their own interest. The same item can mean prestige or ridicule, control of freedom when used in different contexts or when viewed by different people in the same context (Hodder 1985:6).

Mormyrid images were critical in this strategy because "exotics can validate an individual's claim of long-distance ties, esoteric knowledge can validate group membership" (Moore 1983:186). Obtaining material or ideological resources from distant localities was, in San thought, associated with prestige because of the time and effort invested in accessing new territories and resources. Prestige may even have been translated into power which "derives from controlled access to sacred sites and ritual knowledge" (Layton 1986:23).

However, not everyone necessarily accepted the 'mormyrid' shamans' versions of reality. We are faced with at least two problems in this respect.

Firstly, we are not able to identify many of the interest groups that existed in forager societies. Those of which we are fairly certain include: young, old, initiated, uninitiated, shamans, traders, visual literates, orators, feminine, masculine, hunters, gatherers, tool makers, tool users, owners of waterholes, gift-exchange partners and so forth.

Secondly, following from the first problem, it is difficult to isolate the various uses to which specific items of material culture have been put. I, for example, am biased in favour of rock paintings because they are highly visible and enjoy ethnographic support. What people who were opposed to the 'mormyrid shamans' views did in terms of manipulating material culture to their own ends is uncertain.

Rock paintings of mormyrid fish, because of their exotic origin, constitute an obvious dwelling point for shamanistic activity, particularly extra-corporeal travel. This travel may have been presented as parallel to the natural migrations of mormyrids along rivers. These rivers then became pathways which shamans could follow to other territories. Such activity may have enabled prestige and possibly power to accrue to certain shamans because they presented themselves as the sole transmitters and validators of ritual knowledge of distant places, events, people and resources.

### CONCLUSION

There are at least two sites in Zimbabwe and seven sites in the south-eastern mountains of South Africa at which freshwater mormyrid fish are depicted. The ascription of mormyrid identity was based on a comparison between the appearance and behaviour of actual mormyrids and other fish with those depicted in the above nine sites. The specific identification of these images as mormyrids enables a more precise and subtle understanding of the reasons certain San shamans selected this unusual fish species.

Firstly, mormyrid depictions constituted a religious metaphor. Some mormyrids generate an electric current which is analogous to San perceptions and experiences of supernatural potency. In addition the depiction of 'fishing scenes' and ichthyanthropes in the south-eastern mountains are interpreted as metaphors for the acquisition and control of supernatural potency.

Secondly, mormyrid depictions constituted a social

metaphor. The disjunction in the painted and natural distribution of mormyrids, while at first puzzling, may be regarded as visible evidence of social relations between foraging groups of the south-eastern mountains and western KwaZulu-Natal. Contact between these and the Zimbabwean painted sites is more problematic because there is little comparative rock art in northern KwaZulu-Natal, although the meanings of the Zimbabwean mormyrid paintings appear to be similar (Huffman 1983; Garlake 1987a, 1987b, 1990). More specifically, mormyrid depictions may have been signifiers for the ability of shamans to access new territories and resources by extra-corporeal travel. Some shamans may have used their ability to access restricted ritual knowledge in an attempt to redefine both the landscape and San power relations.

Rock paintings may therefore be regarded as a primary source of evidence of the beliefs, lives and travels of San foragers. Though visually ingenuous, depictions of mormyrid are labyrinthine economic, religious, social and political metaphors. The importance of situating rock art interpretation within the shifting, idiosyncratic nature of San belief may appear to subvert attempts at precise interpretation but, by paying attention to the accurate identification of depictions of animals and possibly people and their physiological and behavioural characteristics, we may approach a simulacrum of the complex cognitive pathways of our shamanistic ancestors who have launched us on a journey no less fantastic than their own.

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### ENDNOTES

1. 'Rock art' refers to paintings and engravings made by shamanistic groups of foragers more often referred to as 'Bushman' or 'San'. I reject any pejorative connotations these terms may have.
2. I distinguish between 'potency' which denotes the San concept of supernatural potency and 'power' which denotes political power that is negotiated by various interest groups within San civilisation.
3. The concept of 'territory' among San foragers is problematic (Humphreys 1987; Barnard 1992:231; Smith 1994). There is a great deal of variability in the

definition and defense of geographical loci amongst San groups. Territoriality is a function of all mammals and we can predict that it will be present at some level in human communities.

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