

MOTIVATION AND THE RAIN ANIMAL IN THE ROCK ART OF SOUTHERN AFRICA

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Die vraag ontstaan waarom skilderinge en gravures geskep is op die rotse van suider-Afrika en waarom die tema van die 'reëndier' of 'reënslang' so dikwels voorkom. Motivering vir die betrokke artistieke aktiwiteit word gevind in 'n stygende hiërargie van menslike behoeftes; terwyl die gereeldheid van die uitbeelding van die 'reëndier' in verband gebring word met verskeie vlakke binne hierdie hiërargie. 'n Verteenwoordigende aantal kunswerke word ondersoek as demonstrasie van die gegewe argumente.

The question arises why paintings and engravings were made on the rocks of southern Africa and also why the theme of the 'rain animal' or 'rain snake' was often executed. Motivation for the artistic activity involved is found in an ascending hierarchy of human needs; while the frequency with which the 'rain animal' was depicted is related to various levels in this hierarchy. A representative sample of artistic expression is considered in demonstration of the arguments put forward.

MOTIVATION

Why were paintings and engravings made on the rocks of southern Africa? In particular why was the theme of the rain animal or rain snake executed with such frequency and individual skill? A.H. Maslow (1954) has set out an ascending hierarchy of human needs which may be summarised as:

- 1 physiological needs, food, clothes and shelter necessary for survival
- 2 safety from danger and external threat
- 3 social needs for association with one's fellows, friendship and love
- 4 self-esteem, respect of one's fellows, status
- 5 self-fulfilment through development of powers and skills and opportunity for creativity

The satisfaction of these needs provides motivation for both physical and mental activity.

No anthropological study would appear to contradict this finding from psychology but it is obviously a broad statement which requires modification when applied to artists. There are many well-known cases where artists

concentrated on the highest need – self-fulfilment – while giving minimum consideration to some or all of the others, such as food and status.

Is it possible to apply this motivational hierarchy to the people who produced the rock art of Southern Africa? It seems to me that it is, especially in relation to the theme of rain animals. In this I share the view expressed by archaeologist Gordon F. Ekholm who, speaking at the Museum of Primitive Art in New York said: "We might even say that it is impossible for anyone to become well acquainted with a body of art of a particular style, no matter how remote it is from our own, and not to evaluate it and to judge the feelings and motivations of the artists who worked and created it" (1959:86).

Physiological needs in the society of the later Stone Age – which produced the art – depended on two major activities, the gathering of veldkos by the women and hunting, fishing and trapping by the men. From these activities food, clothes and artefacts such as bows, arrows and digging sticks were derived. Shelter and safety was provided by

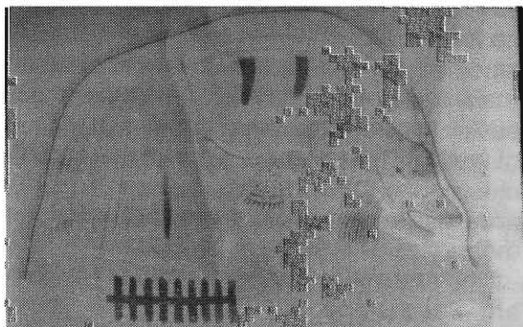


Illustration 1 : Rain animal copied by George William Stow and identified as 'she-rain' by Bushman informant of Dorothea Bleek.

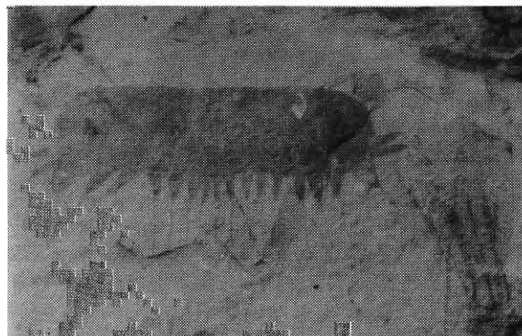


Illustration 2 : Multi-breasted 'rain sow' (Clocolan District)



Illustration 3 : Fearsome 'he-rain' animal (Zastron District)



Illustration 5 : Actual 'legs of rain' (a summer storm in the Orange Free State)



Illustration 4 : Prototype of rain animals with a 'leg of rain' falling from the clouds (Bethlehem District)

the shallow caves or rock shelters in which the people lived.

The whole economy was dependent on rainfall which ensured the growth of the roots, berries, etc. gathered by the women, and the

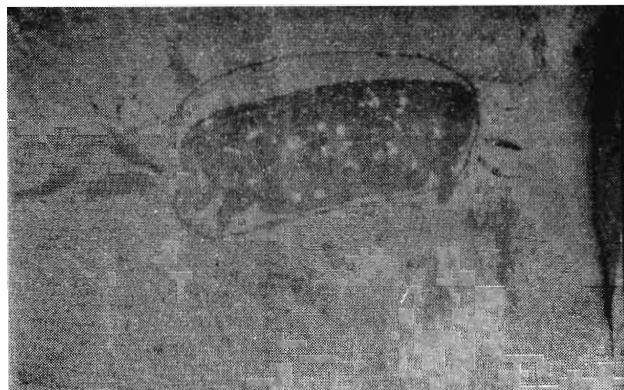


Illustration 6 : Rain animal with line from nose and accompanied by fish (Smithfield District)

grass or shrubs on which the animals hunted by the men, grazed or browsed. The motivation to prevent deprivation by failure of rainfall

was therefore very strong and anyone who claimed to be able to influence it was not only filling a social need but also likely to achieve respect and status. That such people existed, at any rate in the nineteenth century, we know from frequent references to 'rain medicine men' and 'water's people' in the ethnography (Bleek 1933: 375-392). These phrases were subsequently dropped in favour of 'rain sorcerers' (Bleek 1935: 1-47) at the request of Prof. Maingard. In recent times the expression 'medicine men' has regained popularity among anthropologists.

The study of the ethnography has also established that one of the distinguishing features of medicine men is and was their ability to enter a state of trance as a result of participating in a rhythmic dance. While in trance their spirits were said to go on out-of-body travel. It has been suggested that the artists were probably included among the medicine men who had this capability (Lewis-Williams 1982: 434) and one can see no reason to doubt the validity of this suggestion. It has long been recognised that the art is essentially shamanistic (Frobenius 1931), i.e. related to the ability of individuals to influence their group consequent upon their trance journeys and visions. It would seem that a great many of those visions related to rain and rainmaking were reproduced in the rock art. This article



Illustration 7 : Offering of the carcass of a buck to a rain snake (Fouriesburg District)

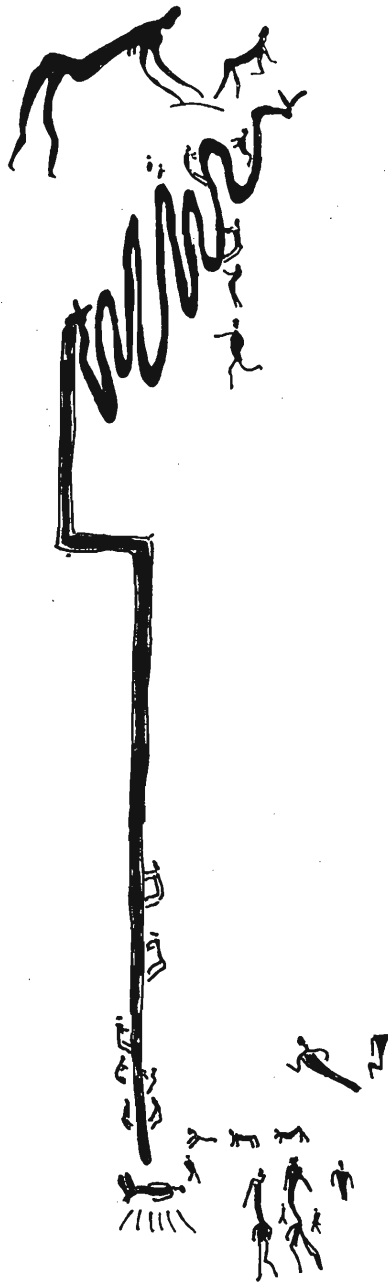


Illustration 8 : Certain human figures in this painting are in the attitude associated with the trance dance. (Marondera – previously Marandellas – District, Zimbabwe)

considers a representative sample, which it is hoped will demonstrate the essential motivation related to items 1 to 3 in Maslow's hierarchy, while simultaneously establishing the relevance and importance of the higher levels 4 and 5, especially the need for self-fulfilment on the part of the artist. As has been previously contended, the art is seen as the result of the interaction of an individual need for self-expression on the part of the artist and the social need for spiritual influence over the production process by the group.

THE RAIN ANIMAL

The identification of rain animals in the rock art of southern Africa must have commenced



Illustration 9 : Almost life-size elephants (Mtoko, Zimbabwe – a rainmaking site)

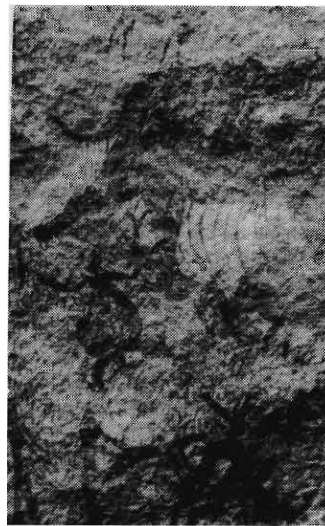


Illustration 10 : 'Source-figure' associated with the rain elephant (Mrewa, Zimbabwe)

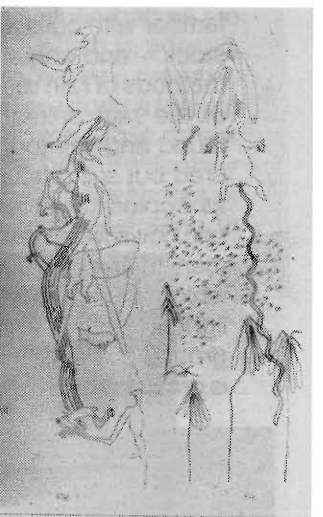


Illustration 11 : Other 'source-figures' recorded by Elizabeth Goodall (Zimbabwe)

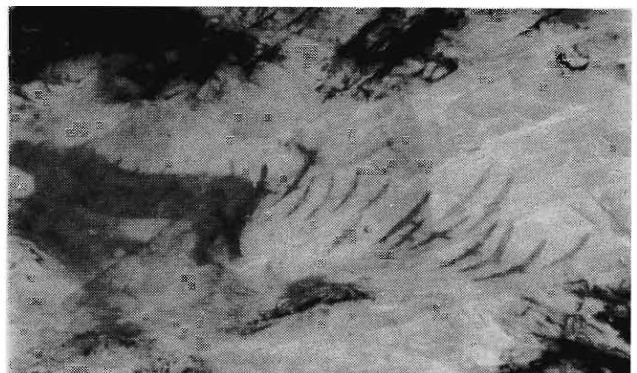


Illustration 12 : Rain elephant with vultures on 'roof' of shelter (Uitenhage District)



Illustration 13 : Rain elephant with clouds and elephant-headed therianthropes (Piketberg District)

with the detailed examination of the copies made by George William Stow in the 1870's, but they were not published until 1930 and 1953 (Stow & Bleek 1930, Rosenthal & Goodwin 1953) by which time Dorothea Bleek had tried to find and re-examine the actual paintings at a number of sites. She also had the benefit, in many cases, of explanations given by Bushmen, some of which tallied with the ethnography recorded by her father and aunt (Bleek & Lloyd 1911). So, for instance, although she did not find the rain animal reproduced by her as plate 34 (Illustration 1) she obtained the following explanation: "She-rain with the rainbow over her..." and she drew attention to the rain bulls and rain cows – spoken of by Bushmen who were already familiar with bulls and cows among domestic stock – and something of the activities and methods of rain medicine-men. This example of the rain animal has subsequently been found and photographed. It is badly weathered but still retains the main characteristics as copied by Stow. The 'she-rains' sent by rain cows were greatly preferred by the Bushmen to the 'he-rains' caused by rain bulls which were violent and accompanied by lightning and hail, which left its spoor on the ground. An additional example of a she-rain is provided by a multi-breasted 'rain sow' from

the Clocolan District, (Illustration 2) while a fearsome 'he-rain' might well be deduced from a rain animal recorded in the Zastron District (Illustration 3). Many of the rain animals were heavily spotted and thus probably related to hail.

What may be regarded as the prototype scene of rain animals (Illustration 4) was recorded in the Bethlehem District (Harding 1950). The animals are apparently surrounded by clouds but it has been suggested that these and similar patterns may be compared with hallucinations seen while in trance (Maggs & Sealy 1983). The explanations are not mutually contradictory but the painting of certain of the patterns at right-angles to the others gives a strong impression of a visual rendering of the many Bushman references to the legs (Illustration 5) of the rain (e.g. Bleek 1933: 308). Although the patterns may thus have been derived originally from hallucinatory patterns or phosphenes it seems likely that they are employed to denote clouds and rain or water in this instance.

Not only does the ethnography record the responsibility of the rain medicine men for 'catching' the rain animal but it also records that it was their task to lead it over the parts of the countryside where rain was required (Orpen 1874). If one accepts that driving the animal was as efficacious as leading it, there are numerous paintings which appear to illustrate this process. The medicine men were said to attach a rope to the nose of the animal, which might account for the line in many of the paintings which emerges from the nose of the animal and surrounds it. Some of these lines are accompanied by paintings of fish (Illustration 6) which strengthens the association with water and suggests that the lines may also have been thought of as rivers or streams that the rain animal would start.



Illustration 14 : Figures with white faces and flowing amorphous body shapes associated with rain animals (Clanwilliam District)

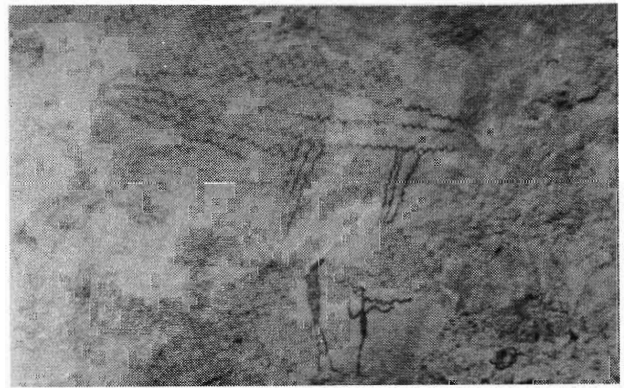


Illustration 15 : Sharp shower or 'leg of rain' (Calvinia District)



Illustration 16 : Two therianthrope figures appearing to control clouds and rain (Wodehouse District)

When explaining a painting of a rain animal to J.M. Orpen, the Bushman Silayi referred to the animal as a snake. The word seems to have been an acceptable alternative and the prevalence of snakes in rainmaking practices throughout southern Africa has been recorded (Schmidt 1979). There are many paintings of rain snakes identified by the showers which fall from them. One of the more complicated (Illustration 7) also includes a double-headed comet and human figures, one of which is offering the limp carcass of a buck to the raised head of the snake.

Many rainmaking ceremonies are accompanied by some form of sacrifice and this appears to illustrate such a concept.

At Waltondale in the Marondera (formerly Marandellas) District of Mashonaland is an equally complicated painting (Illustration 8) which has been interpreted as including human sacrifice – which was certainly a part of rainmaking ceremonies in Zimbabwe in the past (Dornan 1928). Although there is little or no San ethnography from Zimbabwe, Frobenius (1931) was of the opinion that many of the paintings were associated with the rainmaking practices of the Bantu-speaking people and there seems to be no reason to disagree. Certain of the human figures included in the Waltondale painting are in attitudes consistent with the trance dance which would probably have played a part if San were involved, as seems likely from the existence of the painting. Goodall (in Summers 1959: 102) saw the painting as a 'tree of life' rising from the body of the sacrificed victim, but agreed that the upper part resembled a 'snake with ears' which links with the concept of the rain snake. Most sacrifices were accompanied by columns of thick smoke. Whether the picture represents this feature is debatable and the right-angle in the centre remains a very puzzling feature.

Many of the rain animals of Zimbabwe are modelled on the elephant – which is, after all, a great sprayer of water. Some are painted on the standing stones which are such a feature of the Zimbabwean landscape, while others are in caves in the granite hills. Particularly notable are the almost life-size elephants at Ruchera in the Mtoko District (Illustration 9)

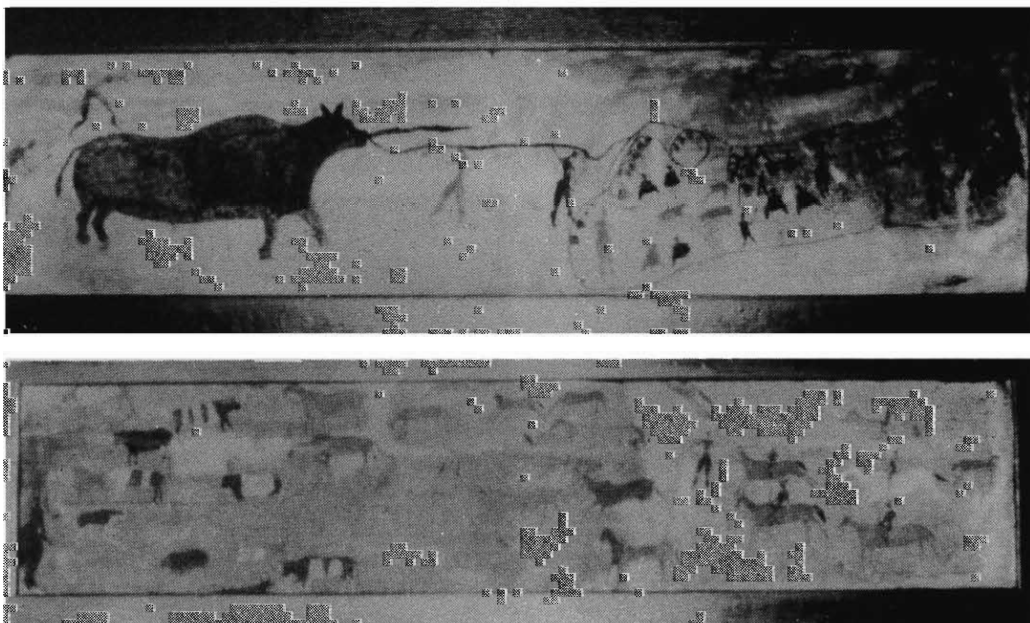


Illustration 17 : A rain animal is led across the veld by rain doctors in order to obliterate the spoor of cattle and horses stolen by a mounted raiding party of San. (Underberg District, now in Natal Museum Pietermaritzburg)



Illustration 18 : Eland emerging from a crack in the rock-face (Lesotho). Many rain animals are painted in this manner.



Illustration 19 : A broad line painted horizontally takes the place of a natural crack (Barkly East District).



Illustration 20 : Complete rainmaking scene with rain doctors, rain animals and dancing (Natal Drakensberg)

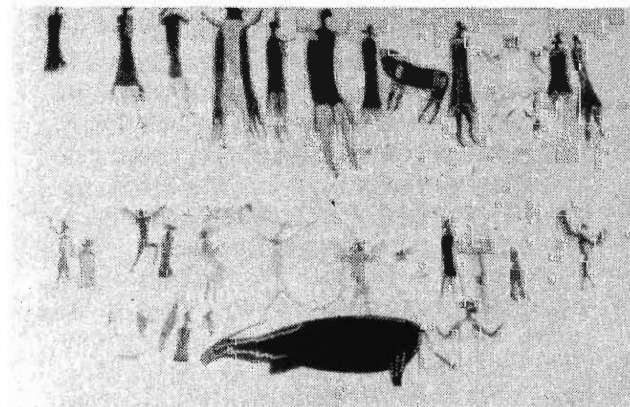


Illustration 21 : Stow's copy of a rainmaking scene (Smithfield District, now in National Museum Bloemfontein)

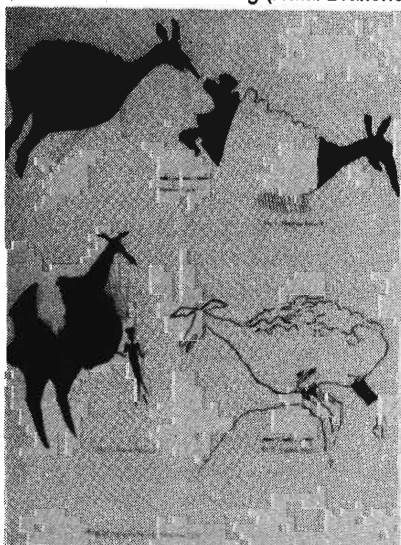


Illustration 22 : Rain birds copied by Corona Thornycroft (Marondera District, Zimbabwe)



Illustration 24 : Capture of the rain animal in the form of an eland (Kliprivier District, Natal)

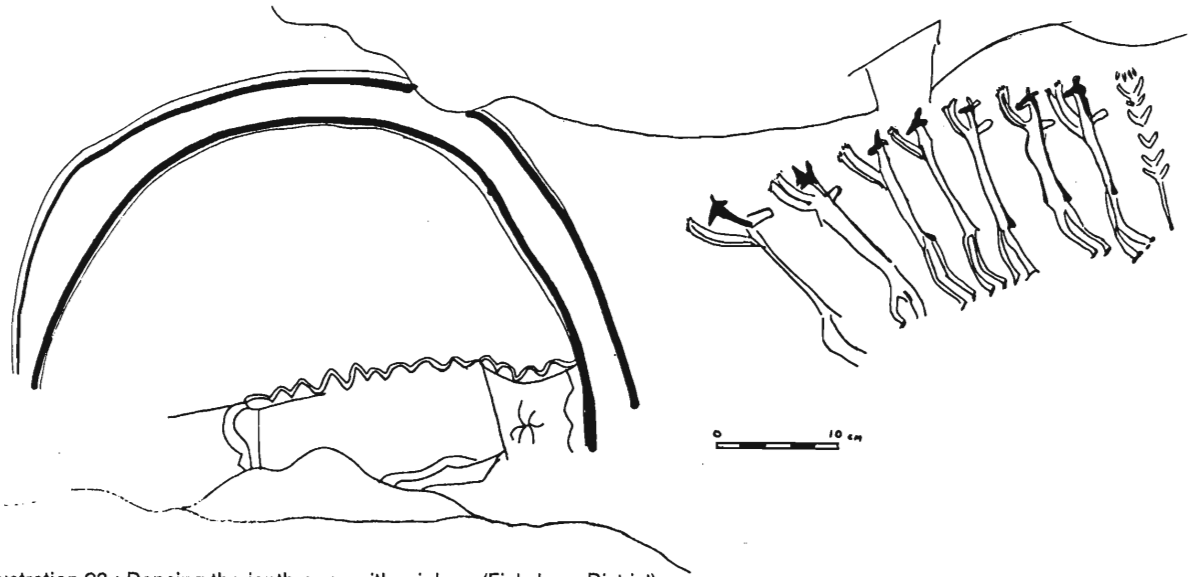


Illustration 23 : Dancing therianthropes with rainbow (Ficksburg District)

painted in thick white pigment – white being a colour much used by people throughout Africa in spiritual situations.

At Mrewa a rain elephant is accompanied by an example of a plump female figure which recurs at other sites. Goodall (1949, 1962) devoted some study to these figures (Illustrations 10 and 11) and read a paper on them at the fourth Pan-African Congress on Prehistory which produced a salient comment from the archaeologist J.D. Clark to the effect that there was a possible connection with Bushman rain magic. I would agree and would regard them as 'source figures' giving birth to streams or rivers rather than the mother goddesses suggested by Goodall. They vary in individual expression, just as do the rain animals – indicating the striving for self-fulfilment by the artist(s), simultaneously with the satisfaction of the social and physiological needs to be met by influencing the arrival of rain and the birth of rivers.

The linking of the elephant with rainmaking in Zimbabwe has its counterpart in the eastern Cape where an elephant is painted with vultures on the ceiling of a shelter (Illustration 12) and in the western Cape (Woodhouse

1985) where the rain elephants with their surrounding patterns of phosphenic clouds are accompanied by therianthropic figures with human bodies and limbs but elephant heads (Illustration 13). (Medicine men of the rain elephant?) There are many other examples of therianthropic creatures associated with rainmaking and rain animals. The western Cape has a particularly interesting example (Illustration 14) in the Clanwilliam District where figures with white faces have flowing body shapes that could well be derived from clouds, which were sometimes thought of as dead people (Bleek & Lloyd 1911: 397). The sharp shower that gave rise to the concept of the leg of rain is also clearly represented in a picture (Illustration 15) in the Calvinia area. Of the same genre is a picture (Illustration 16) in the Wodehouse District where two therianthropic figures are seated one on each side of clouds from which rain is pouring and above which there is a painting of a whirlwind, a fairly common sight on the South African veld in summer.

After their contact with other races and the generation of conflict, the Bushmen used their knowledge of the weather to assist them in their stealing of cattle and horses – the concept of the private ownership of animals being quite incomprehensible to them. They waited until just prior to a thunderstorm before making a raid so that the spoor of the stolen animals was obliterated. A painting (Illustration 17) clearly illustrating this custom was first identified by Vinnecombe (1976:45) and it may be seen in the Natal Museum, Pietermaritzburg. In the Indwe District is a painting of eland being driven over the edge of a cliff by a warhog-headed man in a rainstorm which would, presumably, have added to the confusion and the likely success of the operation. In both these paintings, as in so many others, there are elements of the real world and elements of metaphor and



Illustration 25 : Rain felines with tusks (Fouriesburg District)

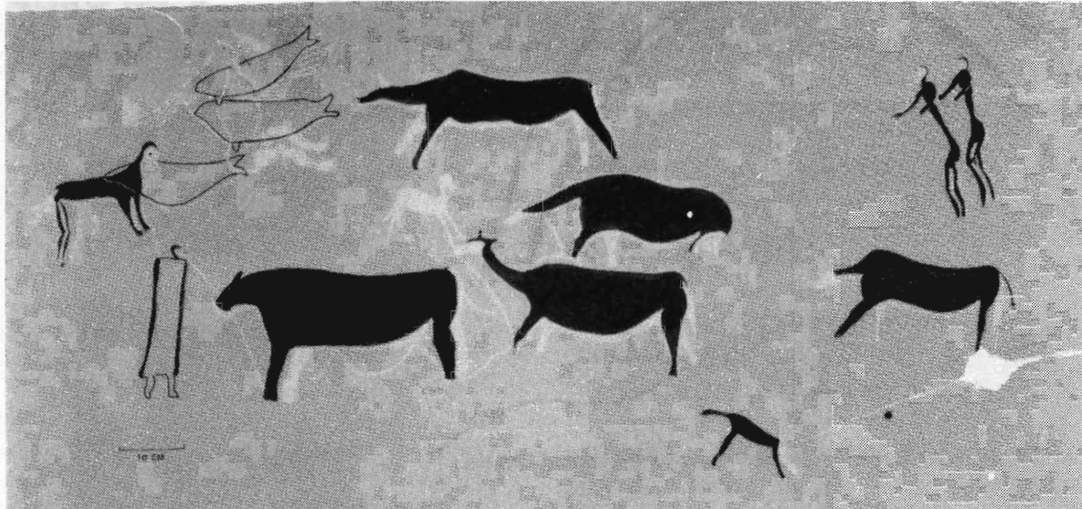


Illustration 26 : Tusked feline connected by 'lines of magic force' to a herd of rain eland and associated with a winged therianthrope and porpoise-like creatures (Clocolan District).

imagination based on belief and trance experience. It should not be thought, however, that the San valued consistency in their storytelling or their visions. On the contrary, new and even somewhat contradictory accounts were acceptable (Biesele 1987:937) and thus the individual works of the artists striving for self-expression were also acceptable within the general canon of the art.

A physical aspect of the paintings – which has not previously received comment but which is particularly applicable to rain animals – is the utilisation of a crack or uneven layer of rock as the commencing point for a painting (Illustration 18) giving the impression of an animal or group of animals emerging from the rockface. There are such examples in places as widely separated as the Harrismith and Wodehouse Districts. (In the latter case the animal is part of a group which must be among the largest individual paintings in

southern Africa.) Some compositions have a broad painted line instead of a crack in the rock, notably a painting (Illustration 19) in the Barkly East District. As yet no explanatory reference has been found in the ethnography, the nearest being a story of the wind living in a "mountain's hole" (Bleek & Lloyd 1911: 107) which was apparently something different from a cave. On the other hand there are many references in the ethnography to the rain animal living in a water hole or pit (e.g. Bleek & Lloyd 1911: 195) and so it is possible that this is the meaning of the convention.

Depictions of the rain animal are sometimes accompanied by scenes of dancing. One of the best examples (Illustration 20) is in the Drakensberg, high above the Sani Pass (Woodhouse & Lee 1978). It contains two rain animals, a dance scene and some elements of both the trance dance and Zulu rainmaking practices. There are several ethnographical

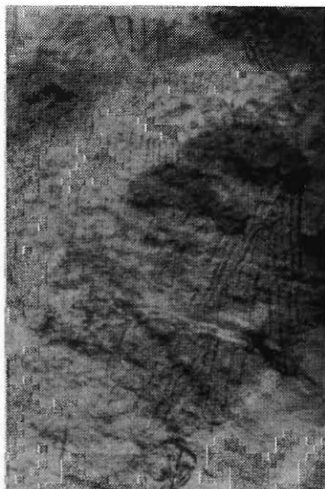


Illustration 27 : Clouds and rain (Wodehouse District)

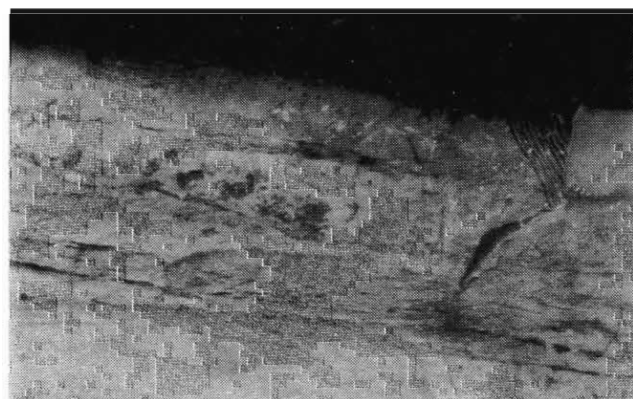


Illustration 28 : Wide open jaws of a fierce rain animal emitting clouds (Barkly East District)

records of the Bantu-speaking people holding the San in high esteem as rainmakers (e.g. Macquarrie 1962: 28-30) and thus a painting with elements drawn from both cultures is not unexpected. From the artistic point of view it may well be regarded as a masterpiece of skilful draughtmanship and composition with the circular motion of the dance and the activities of the medicine men clearly depicted.

Not quite so well composed but equally interesting and complicated is a scene (Illustration 21) which, when copied by Stow, was near the French mission station at Beersheba in the Smithfield District. It is now in the National Museum in Bloemfontein but it has, regrettably, lost much of its original colour. The Bleeks' informant related it to a story of a girl who ate forbidden food and was changed into a frog. He also pointed out the black rain animal and the reeds, associated with water but also identified as arrows – presumably because they were used for making arrow shafts.

Several of the figures in the Beersheba painting wear wings and there are numerous other examples of this practice including those reproduced on Swaziland postage stamps from the neighbourhood of Piggs Peak. The 'feathers' on the wings hang vertically downwards (Illustration 22) and may be taken to symbolise falling rain. In Zimbabwe there are very similar figures at Oatlands (near Harare) and two large rain birds painted in the Markwe cave and other similar ones elsewhere (Thornycroft 1978).

The reeds at Beersheba are repeated at a site in the Ficksburg District as part of a scene which includes a group of dancing therianthropes and a rainbow (Illustration 23). At the same site is an extremely dramatic rain snake high up on the rockface – where it has been unusually well preserved (Woodhouse 1984:90) – together with a human figure which has the wedge-shaped torso that so intrigued Frobenius (1931) and may be presumed to represent the rain medicine man.

The most frequently painted animal of the Natal Drakensberg, the eastern Orange Free State and Lesotho is the eland. There is little doubt that at least some of these paintings represent the eland as a rain animal. Paintings which depict people holding or hanging on to the eland's tail almost certainly represent the 'captured rain animal', bearing in mind that we are speaking metaphorically. The painting (Illustration 24) recorded by Prozesky and rediscovered after a hundred years (Woodhouse 1972) almost certainly falls into this category. In addition to the eland scene there are also rather lumpy, non-

descript animals in the painting which I now interpret as rain animals. The famous scene at Game Pass (Willcox 1956: pl. 44) may be interpreted in the same way as the eland scene at Prozesky's Shelter. Whether scenes of the successful hunting of eland in which the animals are upside down and presumably dead are to be treated literally or metaphorically is, however, still an open question. There may well be cases of both.

It is also an interesting question as to whether the rain animal may also be depicted as a feline. There is some ethnographical evidence in favour (Bleek & Lloyd 1911: 261) in the story of a man who took refuge in a cave and found a lion asleep there – "...when a lion had been the one who had made rain for him..." – suggesting that the lion had rainmaking powers which it used to bring the man to shelter in its cave. As recently as the 1960's Silberbauer (1965:101) recorded that the G/wi Bushmen of Botswana talk of the rain as a huge leopard and of the lightning as its flashing eyes. There are several paintings involving felines that could be interpreted as concerned with rain. In the Fouriesburg District two lionlike felines (Illustration 25) are driven across the rockface (Lee & Woodhouse 1970: pl. 52), but they have tusks and the lines which radiate from their mouths could be regarded as symbolising rain. At a site in the Clocolan District there is also a tusked feline connected to a herd of eland by a white "line of magic force" (Woodhouse 1975). It is part of a scene (Illustration 26) in which there is a seated therianthrope with wings and porpoise-like fish and thus it seems very likely to be connected with rainmaking.

The huge rain leopard reported by Silberbauer was said to drive the clouds across the sky so that they could drink at the place where the sun went at night to get cool. An interest in clouds was probably widespread among the artists and it would be surprising if they were not depicted somewhere in the art. In fact there is a particularly realistic picture (Illustration 27) of clouds with rain falling from them in the Wodehouse District and in Barkly East (Illustration 28) a fierce rain animal appears to be doing more or less what Silberbauer recorded. Certain other paintings could well be modelled on the distinctive mammalian cumulous clouds.

CONCLUSION

This review of some of the pictures of rain animals should be adequate to establish the importance of the theme and its relationship to both the social and individual aspects of motivation. What is not yet established is the circumstances in which the paintings were

produced: Were they part of a rainmaking ceremony or were they the product of an intensely private experience subsequently made available to the gaze of others? Some of the scenes are in large shelters with deep archaeological deposits that were obviously living areas, and this favours the ceremonial explanation. Other scenes are in small and awkward places, thus favouring a private or religious explanation. Both theories can thus be supported and the widespread distribution indicates the importance of the rain animal in San culture, which is understandable as rain played a central role in their economic life.

NOTE

This article is based on a paper delivered at the Rand Afrikaans University in 1987 during an academic conference on rock art in southern Africa.

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