

CHAPTER 7

SAN ROCK ART AFTER CONTACT

The prominence given to the eland (in the rock art) seems to correspond with the place it occupied in the Bushman imagination. It was to them what the ox is to the pastoral Bantu - not only their principal food-provider, but in some sense also a sacred animal.

Alice Werner



A "blocked" style painting of an Nguni warrior with his shield superimposed on a painting of an eland in the earlier, fine-line style.

Source: Woodhouse Collection, University of Pretoria (hereafter UP).

The migration of Khoe, Nguni, Sotho and Europeans into southern Africa brought about marked changes in the environments, social organization, cultures, and, in turn, the artistic traditions of many of the San communities who occupied the areas into which they moved. In this chapter, some of the ways in which the overt content and underlying symbolism of San rock paintings changed as a result of both harmonious and conflictual contact between the San and immigrant herders and agro-pastoralists will be discussed. Before we do this, however, it will be useful to look briefly at the main features of those paintings that are not obviously related to the contact period.

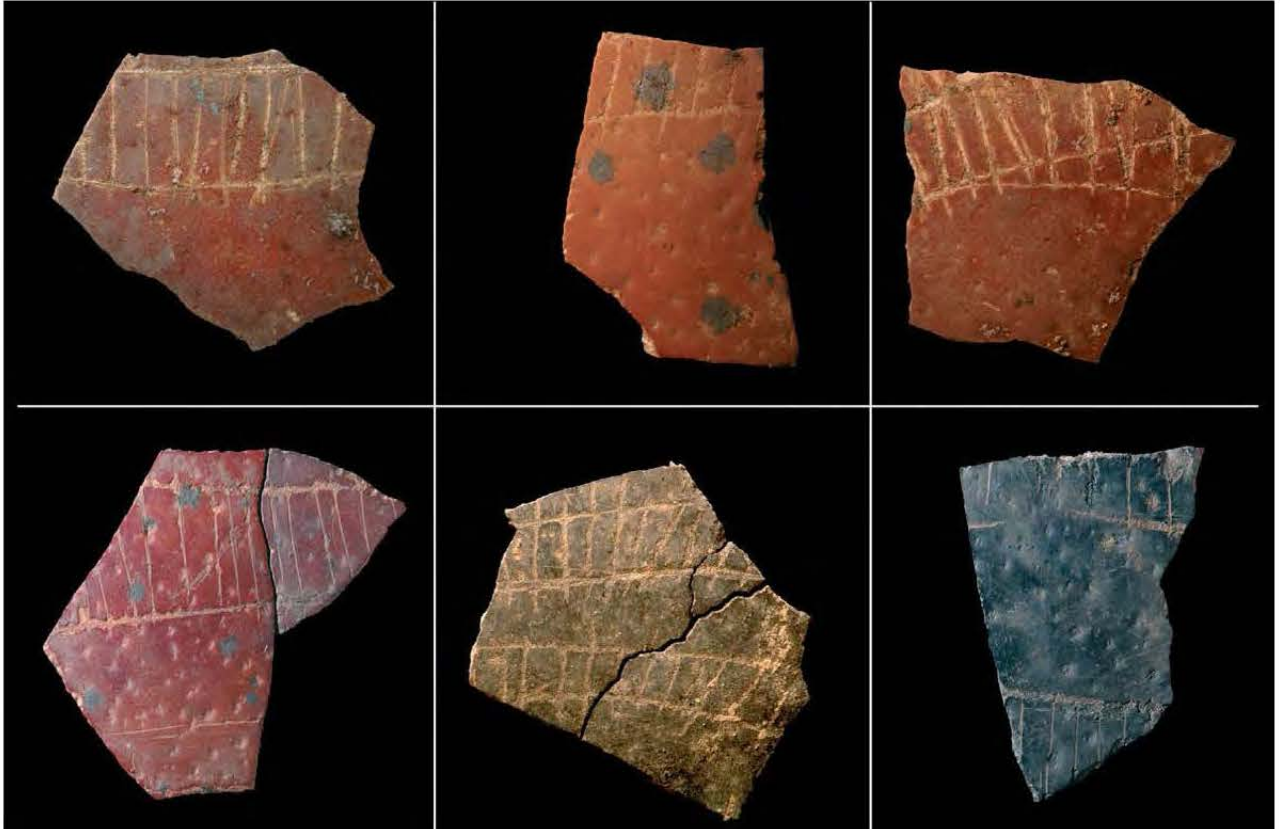
"TRADITIONAL" SAN ROCK PAINTINGS

The rock art tradition in southern Africa is an extremely old one. Paint mixtures containing ochre and other substances found in perlemoen (abalone) shells at Blombos on the south-eastern Cape coast, which have been dated to about 100,000 BP, may just possibly indicate the existence of some form of rock art tradition, other than body painting, at this time. Certainly, one form of the art tradition, the engraving of abstract patterns, is represented at a very early period. A date of at least 99,000 B.P. has recently been claimed for some of the engraved ostrich eggshell excavated at Diepkloof shelter in the western Cape, and engraved ochre excavated from Blombos has been dated to about 78,000 BP.



A grindstone used for processing ochre and a perlemoen shell containing ochre and other substances. They were found together at the site of Blombos.

Source: Chris Henshilwood.



Engraved ostrich eggshell from Diepkloof Shelter.

Source: Pierre-Jean Texier.

The earliest dated San paintings, however, the tradition with which we are concerned in this chapter, are those found on portable stones from the Apollo 11 shelter in southern Namibia. These have been dated by association with the deposit in which they were found to about 28,000 years BP. From at least this time, therefore, hunter-gatherers, in all probability the ancestors of the San, were painting on the rocks of southern Africa, and this custom continued to be practised by San into the later years of the nineteenth century in the south-eastern mountains, and, in a few cases, even into the twentieth century.



A slab from the Apollo 11 shelter with a painting of an indeterminate animal. Its hindlegs, which are more human than animal in form, may have been painted at a later date than the rest of the body.

Source: National Museum of Namibia.



A re-creation of a scene from the past in Main Caves, Giant's Castle, Drakensberg.

Source: the author.



A model of a San painter at work in Main Caves, Giant's Castle.

Source: the author.

There are both similarities in the style and subject matter of San paintings as well as local and regional differences. Paintings of animals and humans predominate in all regions, but they display varying degrees of complexity in terms of technique and symbolic content. Some paintings were done using only one colour while others are composed of two or more paint colours. Still others are composed of several colours, sometimes finely shaded into one another. Red and brown are the most durable, and perhaps for that reason, the most common paint colours, but yellow, white, black and orange were also used, as well as blue and grey, which are much rarer in the art.

Pigments were obtained by various means. Ground iron oxides, some of which appear to have been heated to produce different shades, were used for red and brown paint. Yellow was obtained from

limonite, white from silica, china clay and gypsum, black from charcoal or manganese, and orange from a mixture of red and yellow pigments. Water, blood, sap, animal fat, and perhaps eggwhite, appear to have been used as binders. Although we cannot be absolutely sure what the San used for brushes, as none has ever been found, there is good ethnographic evidence that they used thin reeds with trimmed feathers or the tail and mane hairs of the wildebeest or horse attached to the end of these reeds. Pieces of grass or twigs may also have been used.

The subject matter varies greatly in content and complexity and includes depictions of animals, people in isolation or part of processional and dance scenes and in a variety of postures, and strange hallucination-derived or mythical creatures.



Men with bows and arrows.

Source: the author.



A rhybuck.

Source: the author.



Running figures, men in procession, and eland.

Source: the author.



Elephants.

Source: the author.



Women's bags.
Source: the author.



A rhinoceros and antelope, one of which carries a quiver, bow and possibly also arrows.

Source: the author.



A cheetah.

Source: Lucas Smits.



Lions.
Source: the author.



A mythical/hallucination-derived bird with extended talons.
Source: the author.

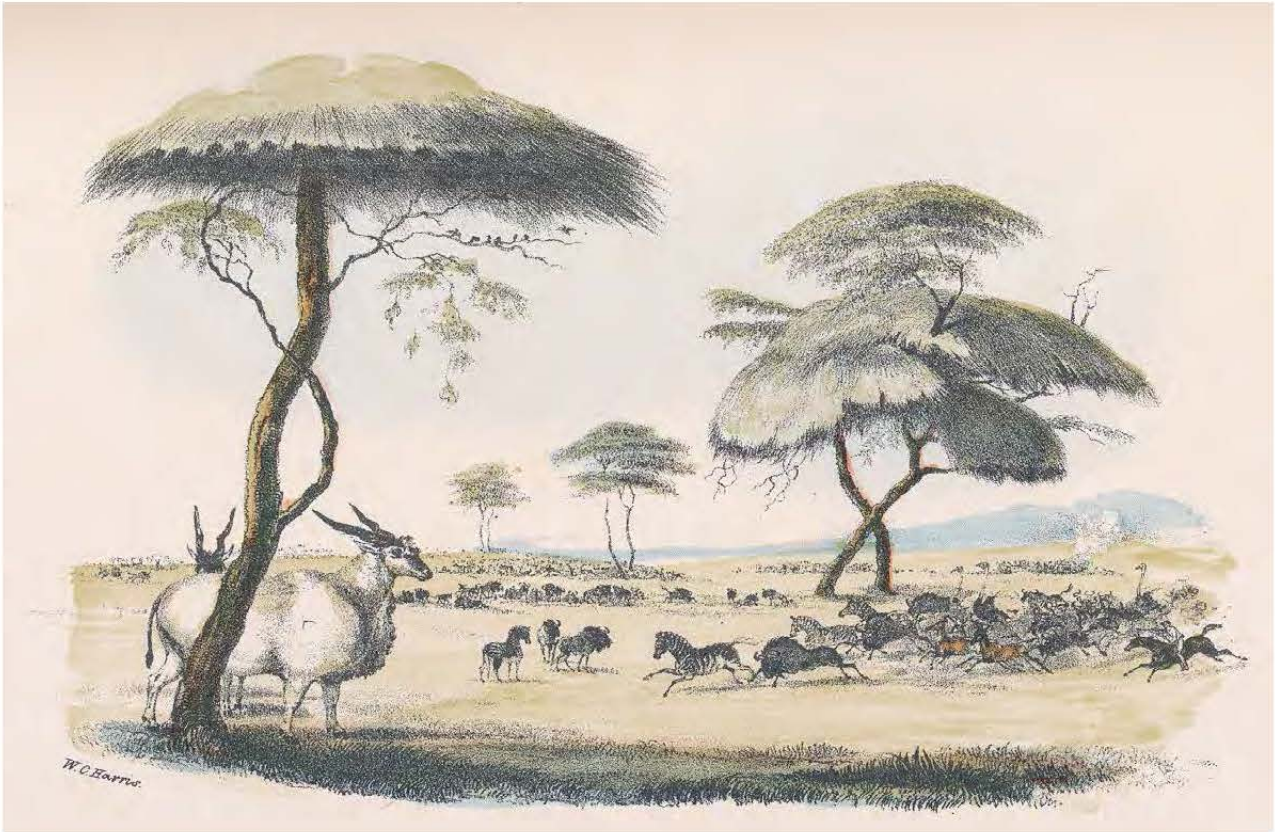


A mythical/hallucination-derived beast emerging from the rock face. The visible part of its body is about one metre long.

Source: the author.

Despite this variation, patterns can be discerned which provide clues to the meaning of the art for the San. Certain animals are singled out for special attention in terms of the frequency with which they were painted or the way they were painted. This suggests that these animals had special significance for the painters. The eland, for example, is the most commonly painted animal in several regions, including the Maloti-Drakensberg and the Western Cape. In general, it was treated more elaborately than other animals by the artists in terms of colour, shading and perspective and, even allowing for its great bulk, its size relative to other animals is often exaggerated in the art. In contrast, many other animals, such as the wildebeest and hartebeest, which were present in large numbers in the Maloti-Drakensberg and were hunted and eaten by the south-eastern San, are much less commonly painted. Some animals commonly eaten by the San, such as dassies and tortoises, as well as plant foods which formed an important part of their diet, are almost entirely absent from the art.

We can draw at least two conclusions from these facts. Firstly, the art does not simply represent a checklist of the animals present and eaten in the various areas occupied by the San. There were other criteria than their diet involved when they decided what to paint. Secondly, the eland had special significance for the San and was an extremely important symbol for them. That this was the case is indicated not only by the obvious prominence of the eland in the art but also by ethnographic studies, which show that the symbolism of the eland permeated almost every aspect of the religious life of many San groups. It was, for example, the first animal created by the mythological San trickster deity, /Kaggen or Cagn, who is said to have loved the eland more than any other of his creations.



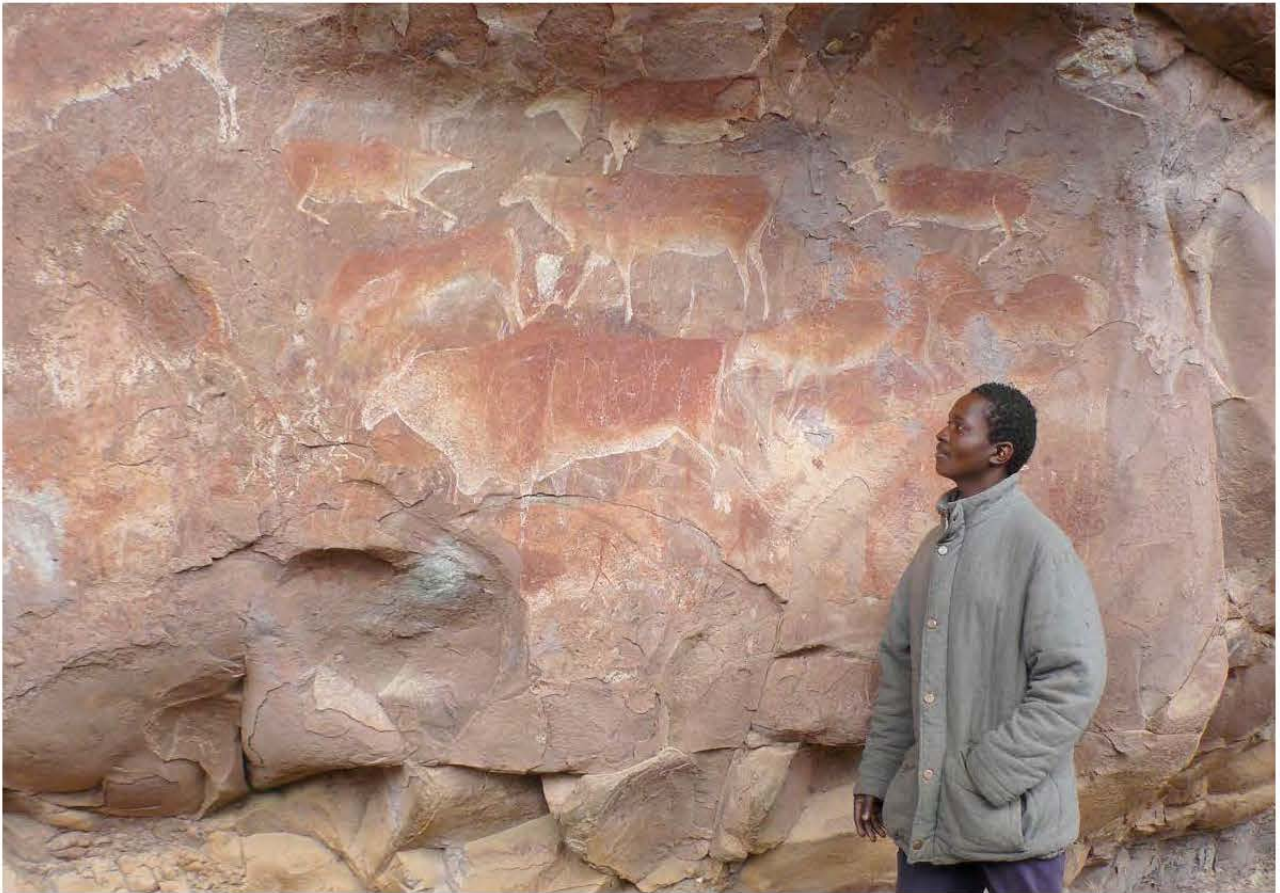
A large bull eland.

Source (original): Cornwallis Harris (1852). *The Wild Sports of Southern Africa*. London: H.G. Bohn.



A very large painting of an eland - about two metres in length.

Source: the author.



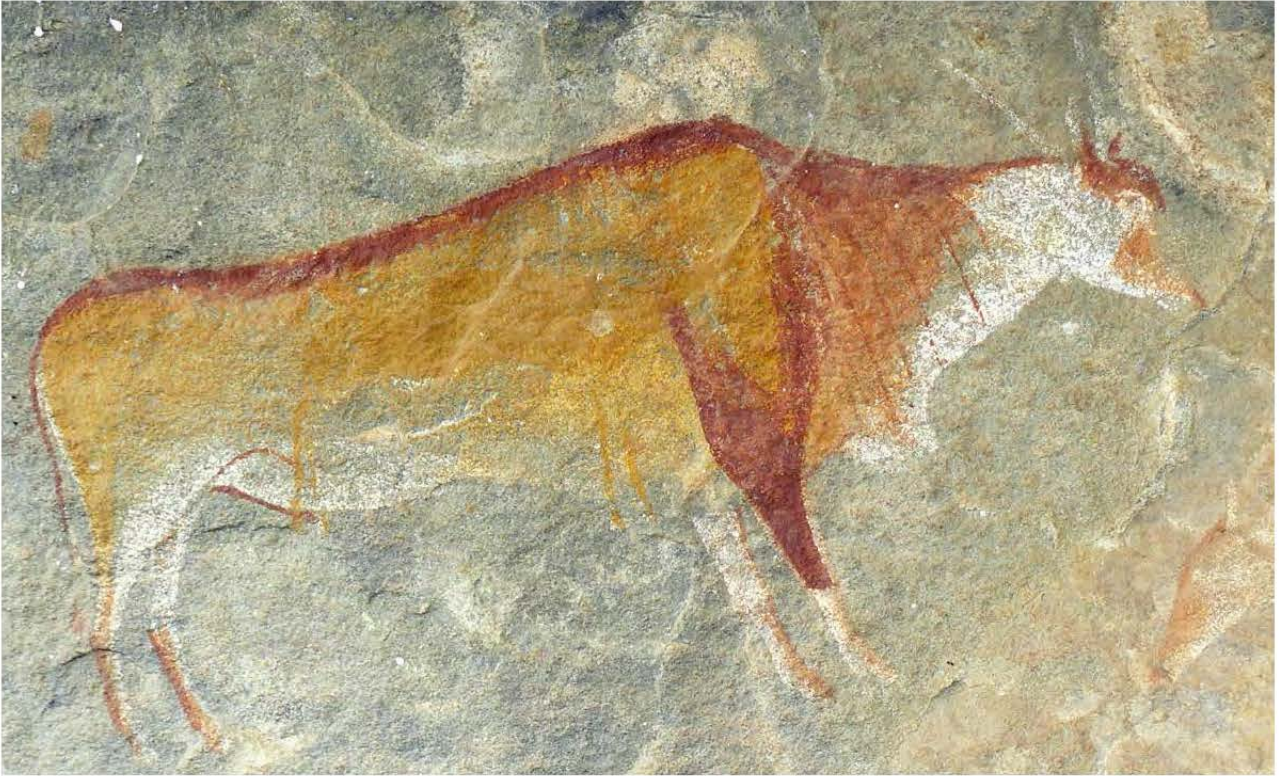
A large panel of eland paintings.

Source: the author.



Finely-painted eland, and other subjects.

Source: the author.



An eland.
Source: the author.



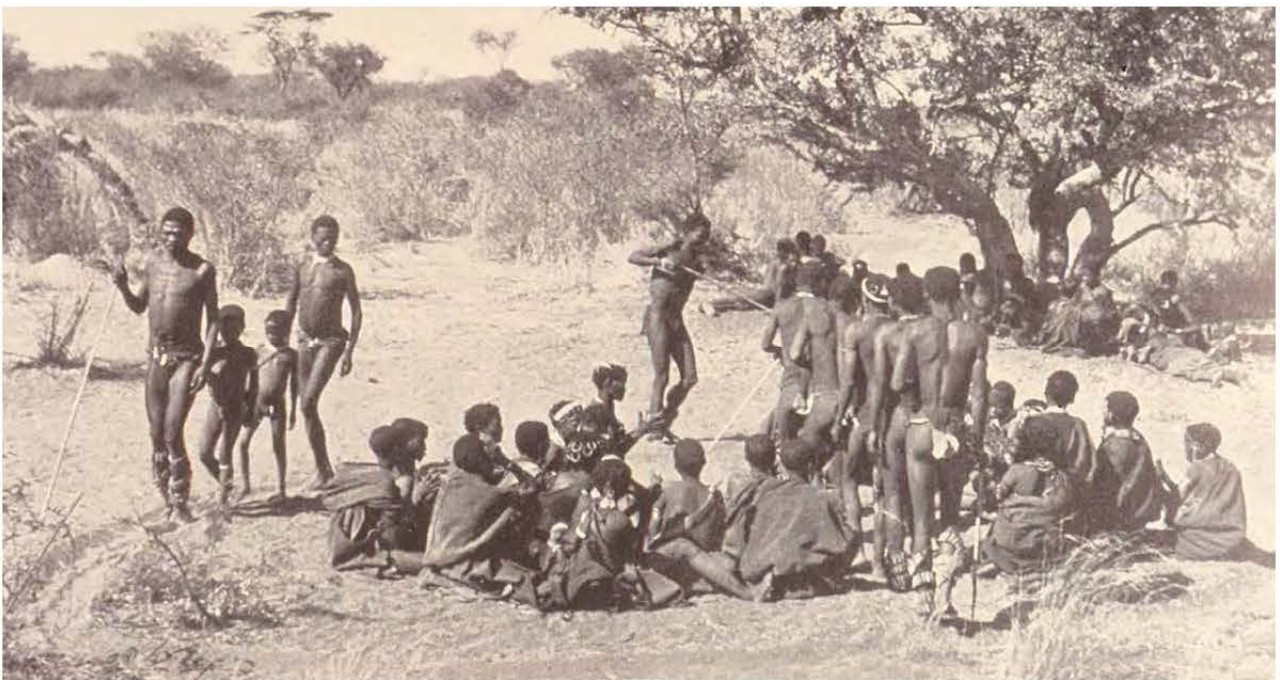
A recumbent eland.
Source: the author.



An eland painted with its head twisted away from the viewer.

Source: the author.

According to the now widely accepted “trance hypothesis”, the visionary experiences and religious symbolism associated with the trance dance, the most important San rite, are also frequently depicted in the art. During this dance, which all San groups appear to have performed, a trance state is induced through rhythmic circular dancing and the clapping of women who usually stand or sit on one side of the dance circle. In the early stages of trance, dancers may see geometric patterns, which sometimes transform into the people, creatures and objects that are seen in the fullblown state of trance.



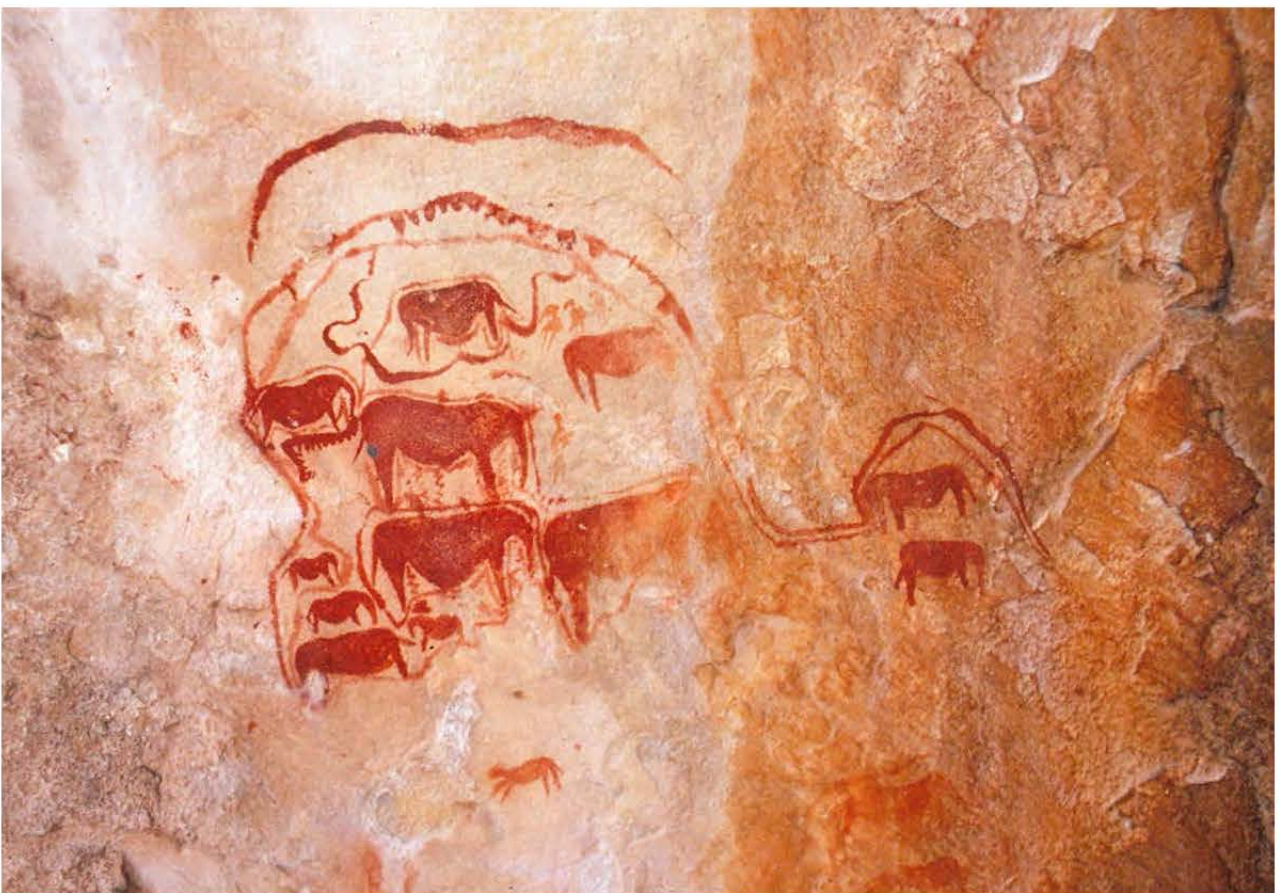
A trance dance in the Kalahari.

Photograph: Lorna Marshall.



Merging of human and crenellated entoptic forms seen in the first stages of trance.

Source: the author.



Elephants painted in association with crenellated entoptic forms.

Source: the author.

There are a number of characteristic postures and features associated with this dance and the various stages of trance. The dancers may hold their arms backwards and parallel to their bodies; they may bend forward with their torsos parallel to the ground; blood may come from their noses; and, in the final stages, they may lose consciousness and collapse.



A trance dance. Note the characteristic trance features - bending forward at the hips, in some cases supporting the body at the same time with sticks, and nasal bleeding present, but not clearly visible in this photograph.

Source: the author.



Two men in a classic arms-back trance position.

Source: the author.