

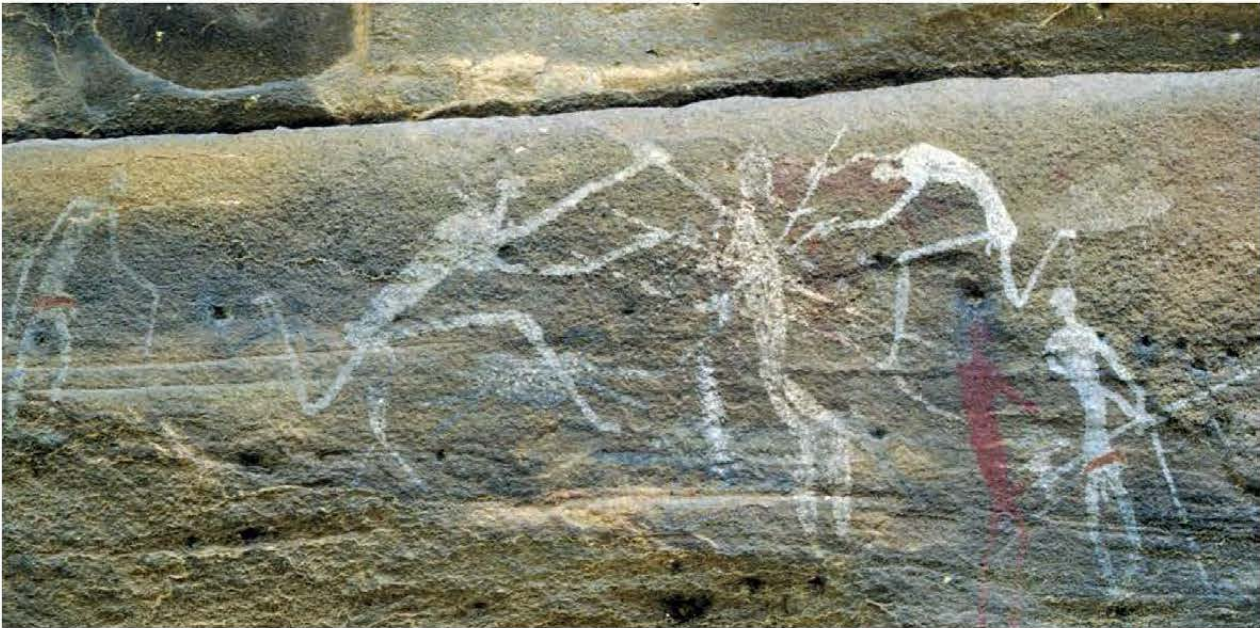
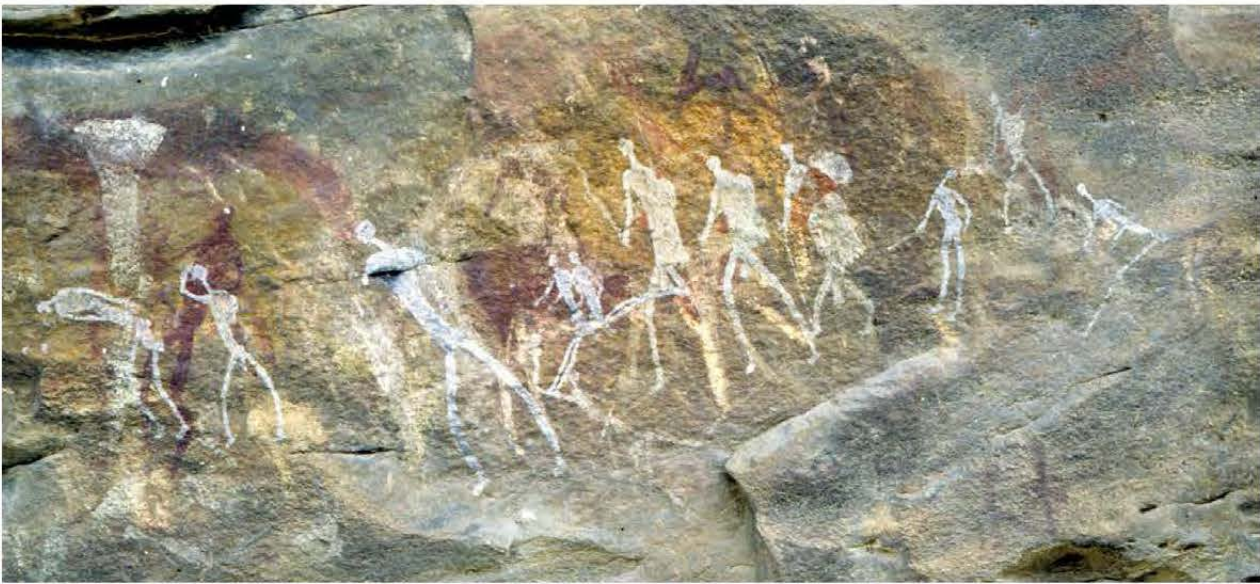
When in trance, modern Kalahari San experience an altered state of consciousness during which they sometimes have the experience of leaving their bodies and travelling to the realm of the dead - sometimes on magical ropes known as “threads of light”. It is believed that the trance state is equivalent to death, and that shamans actually die while in trance. In the realm of the dead they often do battle with evil spirits who are believed to be responsible for bringing misfortune and illness to the group or to individuals within it. Bizarre, often grotesque, spindly white figures in the art, termed the Eldritch images, may represent evil spirits of the dead.



San shamans, one of whom is in a “arms-back” trance position, ascend and descend a “thread of light” that connects the world of the living with the realm of the dead.

Source: Woodhouse Collection, UP.





Eldritch images.  
Source: Woodhouse Collection, UP.

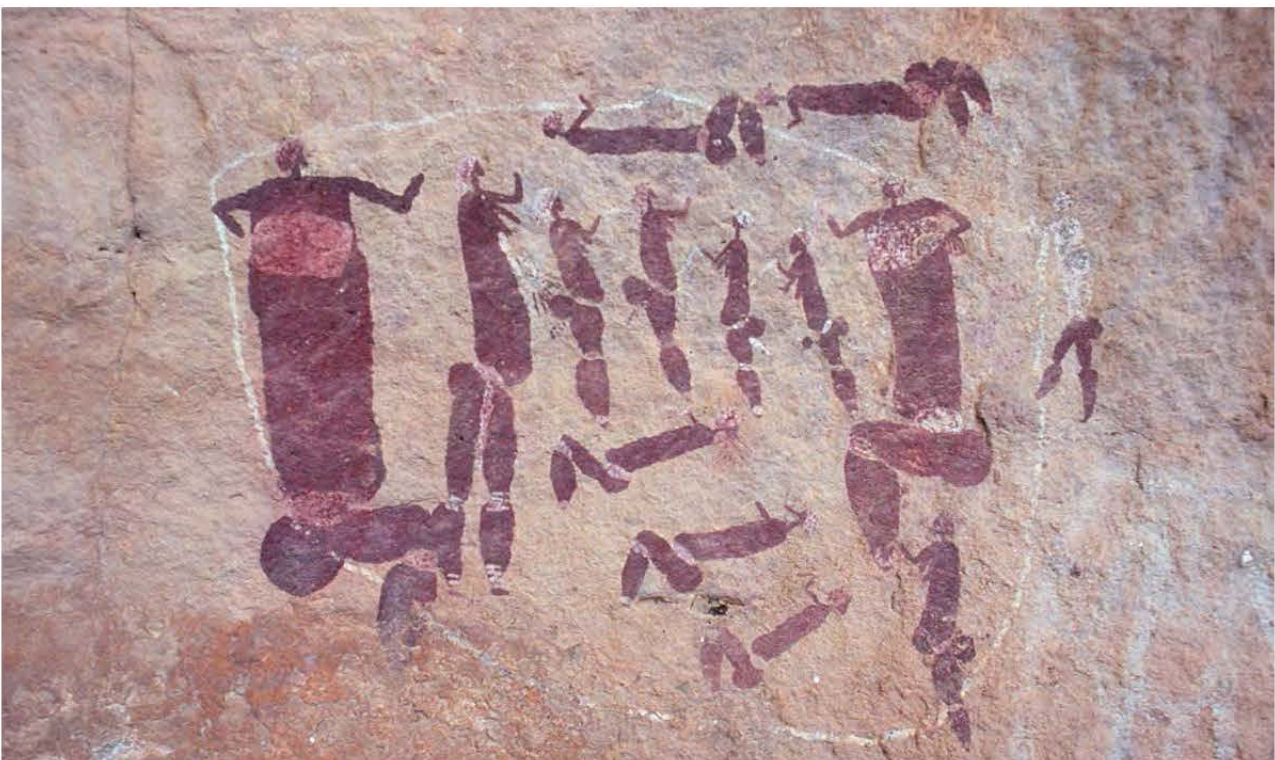




Eldritch figures holding their hands to their noses, a posture indicative of nasal bleeding/trance.

Source: the author.

The trance state is believed to imbue those who experience it with a supernatural power, or *n/um*, that enables them to cure people. This potency is sometimes represented by thin lines or dots. They may also travel in trance to other San camps to communicate with people living there, and the shamans of some San groups were believed to travel to places occupied by a mythical rain animal, which, once captured, was led to areas where rain was required.



A line of magical force held by one person encircles a group of women.

Source: the author.





Parallel lines of magical force connect the people in this scene. Zoom in to see the lines coming from the bow of one of the people in the cave, and the person at top left who appears to be reeling in the lines.

Source: the author.



An eland, with dots, probably representing supernatural potency, painted on its breast and forelegs.

Source: Woodhouse Collection, UP.





Eldritch images and dots, probably representing supernatural potency.

Source: the author.



A shaman "taming" a water bull/rain animal.

Source: the author.





Capture of a rain animal.

Source: the author.



One of the figures in the previous scene.

Source: the author.



The hallucinatory experiences associated with the trance state are very powerful and San trancers, like trancers in other cultures, liken it not only to a state of death, but also to the feeling of being underwater. Various physical sensations, such as the feeling of potency “boiling” and rising up the spine to explode in the head, and sometimes a sense of attenuation of the limbs and body, are experienced by present-day San trancers. Sensations of flight also occur and the trancer may feel himself transformed into a bird, or an animal, so that to all intents and purposes he or she becomes that creature. All these body postures and experiences associated with trance, as well as more complex metaphors such as the association made between the eland bleeding from the nose at death and the shaman bleeding from the nose in the “death” of trance, are depicted in the art.



Men depicted underwater, with fish around them, and with elongated bodies - features of trance experience.

Source: the author.



Hartebeests, possibly transformed shamans, with very elongated legs.

Source: the author.





A man, probably a shaman, depicted in a ritual relationship with an eland that is at the point of death and is bleeding from the nose.

Source: the author.

While altered states, specifically those associated with trance, are by far the most important feature of the art's symbolism, other aspects of San culture and society are also represented, and some researchers have focused on subjects in San art that are unrelated, or only indirectly related, to trance experiences. For example, a rite which appears to be depicted and symbolised in the art, and with which the eland is directly connected, is that of male initiation.

According to a San creation myth, men first became hunters after killing the eland, the most-loved and first-created being of /Kaggen. Killing an eland was an integral part of the initiation rites of many San groups, and it was through this act that San youths became men who could contribute in a meaningful way to the survival of the group. San initiation rites marked the transition from boy to adult hunter and appear to have provided ritual sanction for the destruction of the creator's favourite animal.

Some paintings of male figures cloaked in eland skins, including those that form processional scenes, may symbolise initiation rites, concepts associated with initiation rites, and the related symbolism of eland in particular. The solidarity of initiated San men may be expressed in this painting (see below) through their being covered by one kaross, so that they appear to share a single torso. It appears as if they are linked by a single eland kaross. Like the eland, the shape is very large and it is very similar to that of conventionalised depictions of eland torsos in the art. In both cases, the kaross-clad figures and the eland, legs and head emerge from an undifferentiated mass or torso.





Two groups of people, each covered by a single kaross.

Source: the author.

The meaning of the kaross, it has been argued, may thus be the “wearing of the eland” - a form of transformation into an eland. Viewed in conjunction with beliefs concerning the creation and killing of the first eland, as well as the San custom of hunting an eland during the puberty ritual, the painting can thus be interpreted as symbolising a range of concepts associated with initiated men. These include group solidarity, the identification of the men with the eland (the animal through which they become men and husbands/sexual beings) and hunting (with its links to sexual penetration as well as to highly desirable fat, not only of the hunted eland but also of sexually active women). A good argument can also be made for the existence of female initiation rites in the art. Scenes of women in procession, as well as the wide-spread motif of a spread-legged figure, almost always female in form, which appears in the art have been interpreted in these terms.



A women's dance.

Source: the author.





Women painted sitting in a circle with bags, hung up on pegs, on the cave wall.

Source: the author.



A spread-legged female figure, with antelope ears and holding a bow, who is probably associated with female initiation rites.

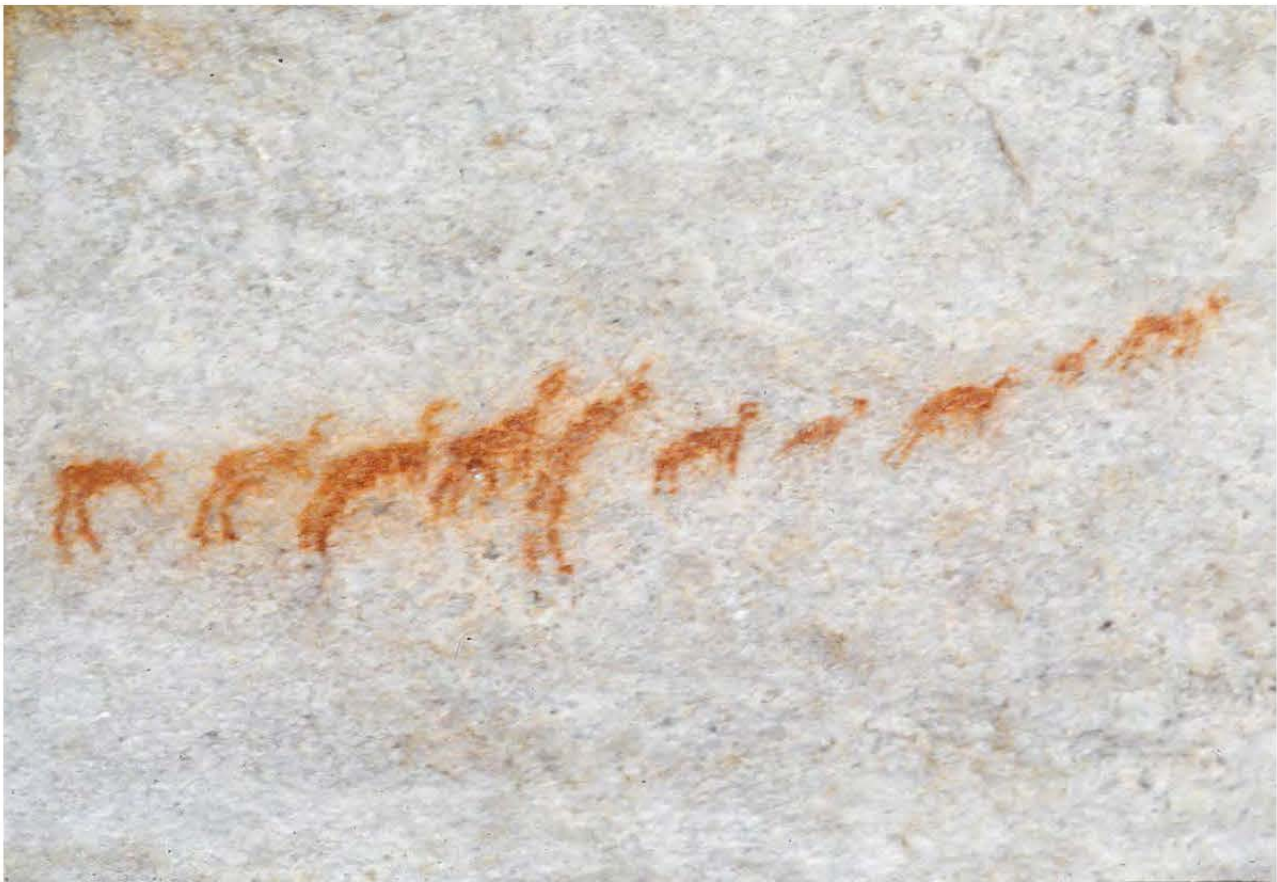
Source: the author.



The ideas discussed above introduce notions of gender and sexuality into the meaning and function of the art, without denying the importance of the “trance hypothesis”. Still other aspects of the art have been studied by rock art researchers. Some have looked at the relationship between paintings and the landscape and sites in which they are placed, and the style, colour and form of paintings have also been studied for clues which can throw light on their significance for the San who created them.

Finally, an interesting feature of the art is the category of therianthropes or “were-animals”. By far the most common form of therianthrope depicted in San rock paintings is the antelope therianthrope, a being with the body of a man and the head, and sometimes the hooves and limbs, of an antelope. Other animals are depicted in therianthropic form, but are much less common. All these beings, it is generally accepted, are shamans transformed into animals while in trance, or symbols of the relationship between the shaman and a particular animal - often the animal with which he, possibly she, is considered to be magically associated. Shamans of the game, for example, were believed to have the ability to control particular animals and draw on their potency.

There are a number of features that link paintings of therianthropes to shamans in trance. They may bleed from the nose, they may be in an arms-back position, lines of potency may be seen entering or leaving their bodies, parts of their bodies may be attenuated, or other bizarre, unrealistic features may be associated with them.



An antelope-human transformation scene

Source: the author.





A shaman in a ritual relationship with a stumbling, dying eland. Both the eland and the shaman have crossed legs and erect hairs on their bodies, and the shaman also has an antelope head and hooves.

Source: the author.



An antelope therianthrope holding a line representing supernatural potency.

Source: Woodhouse Collection, UP.





A finely-painted antelope therianthrope.

Source: the author.





An antelope therianthrope with blood streaming from its nose.

Source: the author.





Baboon therianthropes.  
Source: KwaZulu-Natal Museum.



A shaman grows feathers and transforms into an antelope-headed bird.  
Source: the author.





A shaman transformed into a bird.

Source: the author.

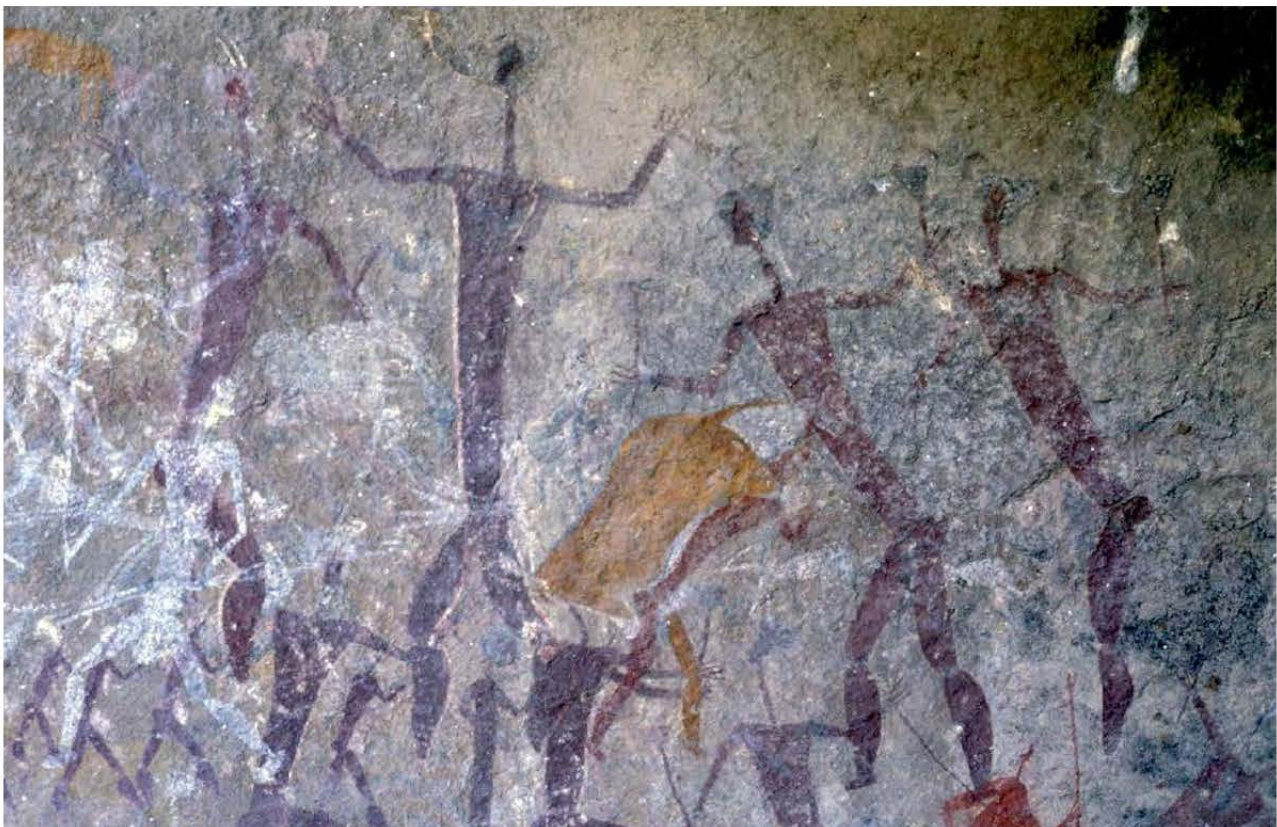
It is likely that, in the great majority of cases, transformation into an animal was achieved without the use of animal masks. However, we know that at least some of these therianthrope beings represent masked shamans, who are almost certainly in a trance state. The idea that animal masks are represented in some paintings is supported both by the ethnography and by certain paintings themselves. We know, for example, that some San wore full animal masks, as well as the more common skin caps with “ears”, and in the last century San north of the Okavango were observed dancing clothed in the skins of a large number of different kinds of animals, including the skins of antelope and the skin of an elephant’s head, complete with trunk. Some of the figures depicted with animal heads in the art are shown wearing masks made of the entire skin of an antelope’s head. As in many other societies that are known to wear or have worn full animal masks, the mask is likely to have symbolised the special relationship between a particular animal, whose spirit is believed to enter into the mask, and the wearer who is in communication with the animal spirit and draws on its power in order to enter trance.





A copy by George Stow of a San painting of people wearing masks and transforming into animals in trance.

Source: Stow, G.W. and Bleek, D.F. (1930). *Rock Paintings in South Africa*. London: Methuen.



A man, covered with the skin of an eland, transforms into this animal while in trance. The colour of one of the legs of the man has changed to that of the eland's legs.

Source: Woodhouse Collection, UP.