



Warriors, probably Sotho, with assegais of an exaggeratedly large size.

Source: National Museum, Free State.



Crudely-painted Sotho shields.

Source: National Museum, Bloemfontein.





Sotho shields, possibly painted by Sotho rather than San.

Source: Lucas Smits.

Identifying Nguni and Sotho farmers in the art outside a context characterised by conflict is often difficult, particularly when they are not associated, and can be compared, with the more slightly built San. Nevertheless, in the light of the long history of symbiotic contact between some San groups and Bantu-speakers we can expect the San to have painted not only their enemies amongst the farmer communities but also their trading partners, relatives, friends and age-mates within these societies - with whom they interacted socially and ritually. In some cases we can identify Nguni or Sotho people in the art by their characteristic dress - such as knee tassels or inflated gall bladders attached to the top of the head. And paintings that appear to relate to ritual interaction between Nguni and Sotho farmers and San will be discussed when we consider the ways in which the symbolic content of the art changed as a result of both conflictual and harmonious contact between the San and these farming communities.





An Nguni or Sotho man, with knobkierie and knobbed headdress (either an inflated gall bladder or a topknot) and with dots, probably representing supernatural potency, painted below him.

Source: Woodhouse Collection, UP.





Another Nguni or Sotho man from the same panel.

Source: Woodhouse Collection, UP.



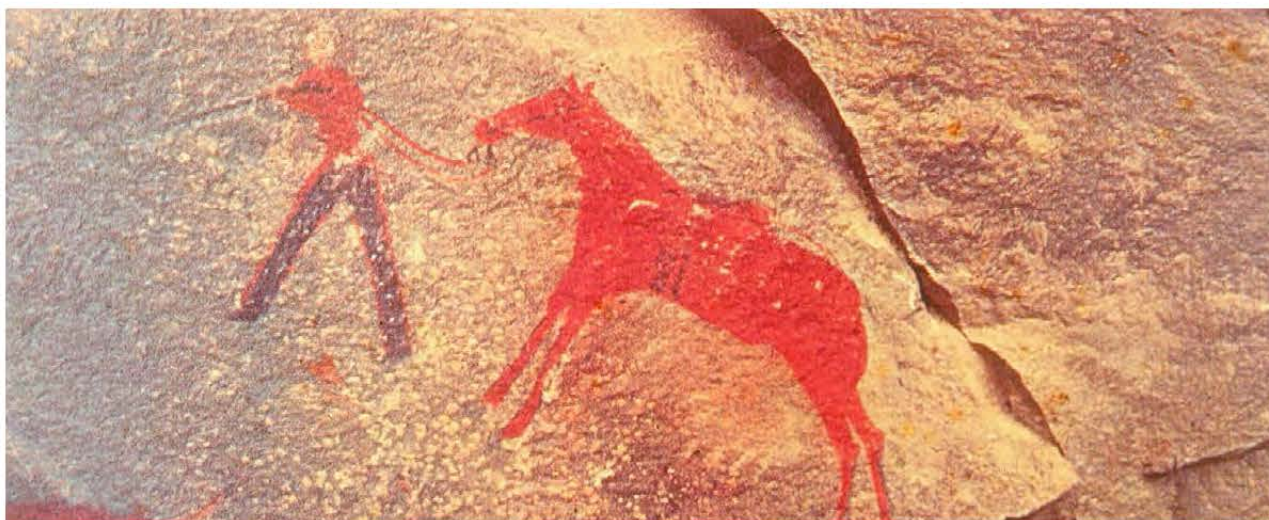
## Paintings of Europeans and their associated weaponry and equipment

Paintings of this genre, which are relatively rare, include male figures with wide-brimmed hats and heeled shoes, mounted and unmounted men with their hands on their hips and often with guns, women in long crinoline dresses, wagons, and, in the Western Cape, at least one painting of a galleon. The Colonial era paintings in the western Cape are generally crudely painted, almost always with the finger, and are quite easily distinguishable in their technique from the fineline paintings of the older tradition.



A man shoots and kills an antelope. Note the smoke emitted upwards from the pan of the gun, the white line issuing from the end of the gun's barrel, depicting either smoke or the line of the bullet, and the dead antelope with its legs in the air and its head facing downwards.

Source: Lucas Smits.



A dismounted soldier shoots his rifle. Note the reins looped over his arms, with the horse trained to remain stationary.

Source: Woodhouse Collection, UP.





An ox wagon depicted with its rider holding a whip and another man on foot behind it shooting game.

Source: Woodhouse Collection, UP.



Men with wide-brimmed hats accompany an ox wagon and cattle. Copy by Patricia Vinnicombe.

Source: KwaZulu-Natal Museum



A galleon painted in the Groot Winterhoek mountains, a considerable distance from the sea. Note that the flags on the masts are not all flying in the same direction!

Source: the author.

## INTERPRETING THE CONTACT ART

### The San of the western Cape

Some researchers who have studied the art of the western Cape San have suggested that the arrival of Khoe pastoralists had a strongly negative impact on the societies of many San groups, which in turn translated into changes in the content and tempo of the fineline tradition in this area. According to this hypothesis, the threat posed by Khoe herders to the way of life and culture of the San caused an increase in the performance of rites such as the trance dance that expressed core values of San culture and identity. This was a way both of coping with the stress caused by the incursion of the Khoe into their native lands as well as of ensuring the continuation of their threatened culture. These researchers point to the high incidence of complex, symbolically rich trance scenes at the painted sites that were located in the mountains, where San would have taken refuge from their Khoe foes. It also appears that the fineline tradition associated with traditional hunter-gatherer societies persisted longer in these mountainous refuge areas than they did in the areas occupied by the Khoe.

With a few exceptions, the fineline tradition of painting appears to have ended well before the arrival of European settlers in the western Cape. However a tradition of crude finger painting developed at a late date and probably over a brief period of time. Most of the very few sites where these paintings occur are in a relatively restricted area - the Koue Bokkeveld. The paintings are mainly of geometric forms, wagons, horses or mules, and men and women with Colonial dress and accoutrements - wide-brimmed hats, trousers, boots, guns, pipes, crinoline dresses and kappies (hats worn by Boer women). Finger dots and handprints, although different to the main elements in this tradition, nevertheless appear to be directly associated with some of the paintings. Analysis of patterns of superpositioning reveal that the Colonial paintings always postdate the fineline paintings and the handprints, and the style of the women's dresses and the kinds of wagons painted suggest that some of the art was created later than 1850, probably as late as the 1870s.





Finger-painted images from the western Cape of horse- or mule-drawn wagons.

Source: Simon Hall.



Finger-painted images from the western Cape of women in crinoline dresses encircled by dots (of supernatural potency?).

Source: Simon Hall.

The art here seems to have been done by Khoe-San who had been incorporated into the rural proletariat, and the element of caricature in many of the paintings of men and women, who do not appear to have been members of the artists' communities, suggests that some of it may have served a satirical purpose. It is very unlikely that the crudely painted paintings produced by the nineteenth



century western Cape rock artists would have been connected in any way to the earlier more richly-symbolic fineline paintings – although there are elements in this tradition that hint at symbolic intent, and perhaps even trance experience.

### **The south-eastern San**

Some paintings belonging to the period after the arrival of other groups in the south-eastern areas appear simply to record the presence of these people and events associated with contact between them and the San. It is also quite possible, however, that some apparently narrative contact paintings also had a deeper, symbolic dimension to them. The introduction of domestic stock and foreign goods and weaponry is likely to have had a considerable impact on the San, who could well have believed that these animals and objects, and their owners, were imbued with supernatural power of some kind. How else could one explain the power that the Nguni, Sotho and European farmers were able to exercise over their domestic animals, which they controlled at will, as well as the mysterious ability of the Europeans to kill people and wild animals from afar simply by pointing at them with wood and metal sticks? Supernatural powers such as these were possessed only by shamans who were able to control the movements of game, and it is likely that the first immigrant farmers were attributed with similar powers.



Therianthrop Nguni warriors, with characteristic ear-rings.

Source: Woodhouse Collection, UP.





A therianthrope Sotho warrior engaged in battle.

Source: National Museum, Free State.





A cow/ox/bull, a man in Colonial dress armed with a gun, and dots, probably representing supernatural potency.

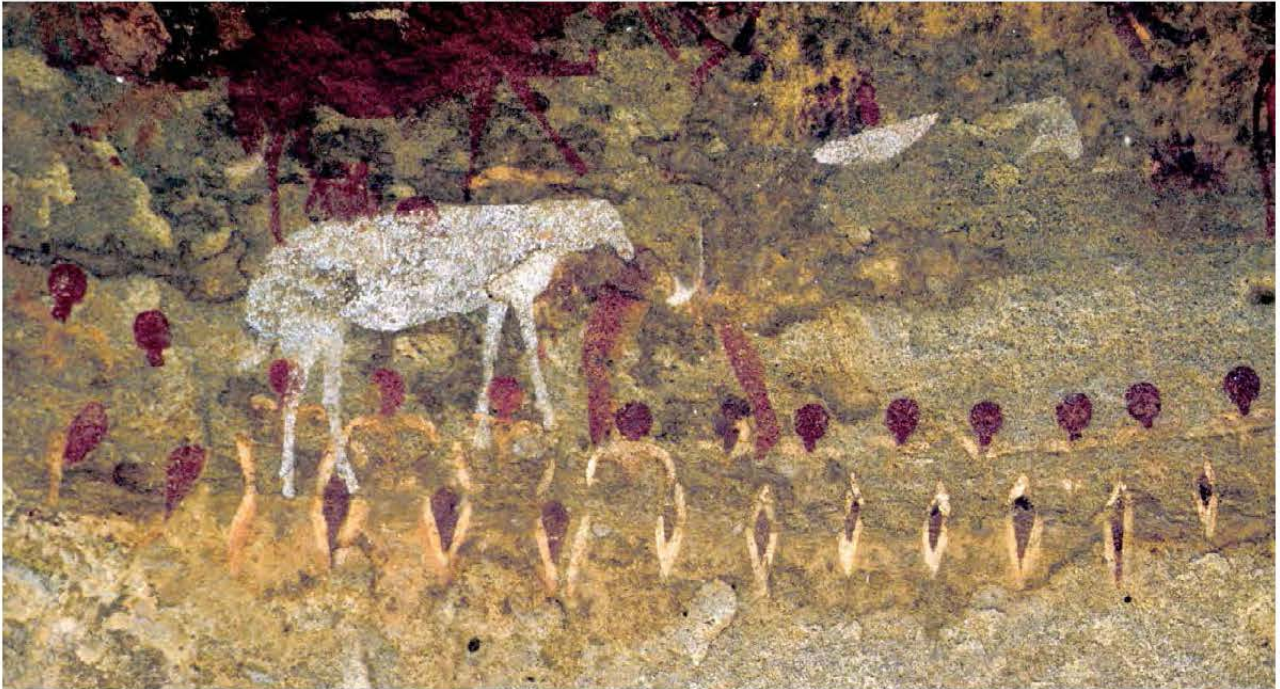
Source: Woodhouse Collection, UP.



Sotho warriors driving cattle.

Source: Woodhouse Collection, UP.





A sheep superimposed on an earlier scene which appears to depict a ritual of some kind.

Source: Woodhouse Collection, UP.

The reaction of San people to European wagons, for example, indicates the mixture of incomprehension and fear that they evoked. The nineteenth century trader, James Chapman, recorded the amazement with which San of present-day Botswana greeted his train of five wagons, one large and four small. They believed them to be strange animals, a female with her four calves. Some San thought wagons were ships that had come out of the sea. Still others imagined they were predatory beasts.

European galleons, too, were incorporated into the creolised religious beliefs of later San groups exposed to a degree of Christian influence. When missionary Schmelen, who worked amongst Namaqualand San groups in the early years of the nineteenth century, asked San what they believed happened to them after death, they replied: "The dead go over the water to where the Devil is. You shall see all our people who have died over there in the ships".

We can expect, therefore, that, in many cases, when the San painted Colonial imagery, such as wagons, galleons, cattle, and men with horses and guns, these paintings had a greater significance for them than merely the recording of their presence or specific events associated with these foreign people and the strange animals and objects that they brought with them. We cannot be sure exactly what their significance was, but it is likely that they were considered symbols of power in some sense. By painting them this potency was harnessed and expressed in the art, in a similar way to that in which some paintings of eland symbolised, in part, a particular power with which these animals were believed to be imbued and which could be drawn upon by San shamans.





A European man in trousers and a woman in a crinoline dress associated with a hallucinatory form.

Source: Museum Africa.





A (very rare) geometric form, apparently representing a European woman in a crinoline dress with her hands on her hips. This probably symbolises the transformation of entoptic geometric forms, seen by the shaman painter in the first stages of trance, with his vision of a European woman in Colonial dress.

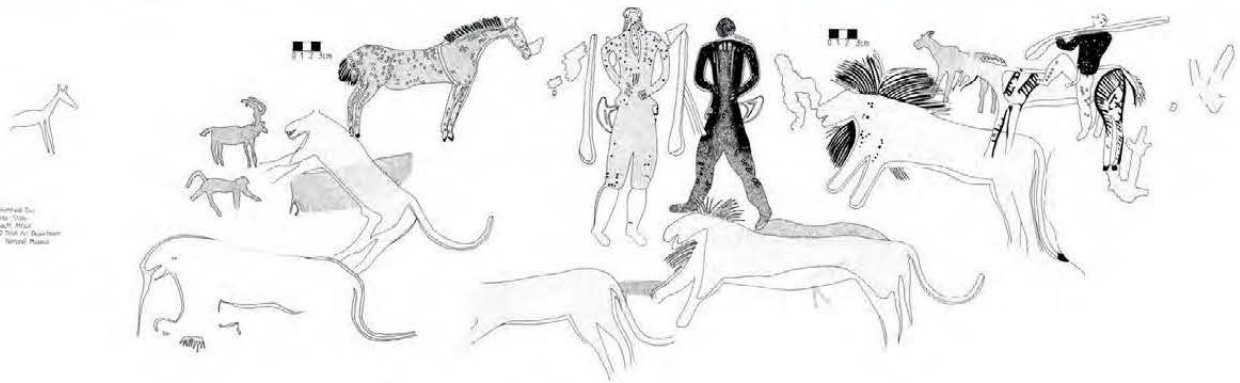
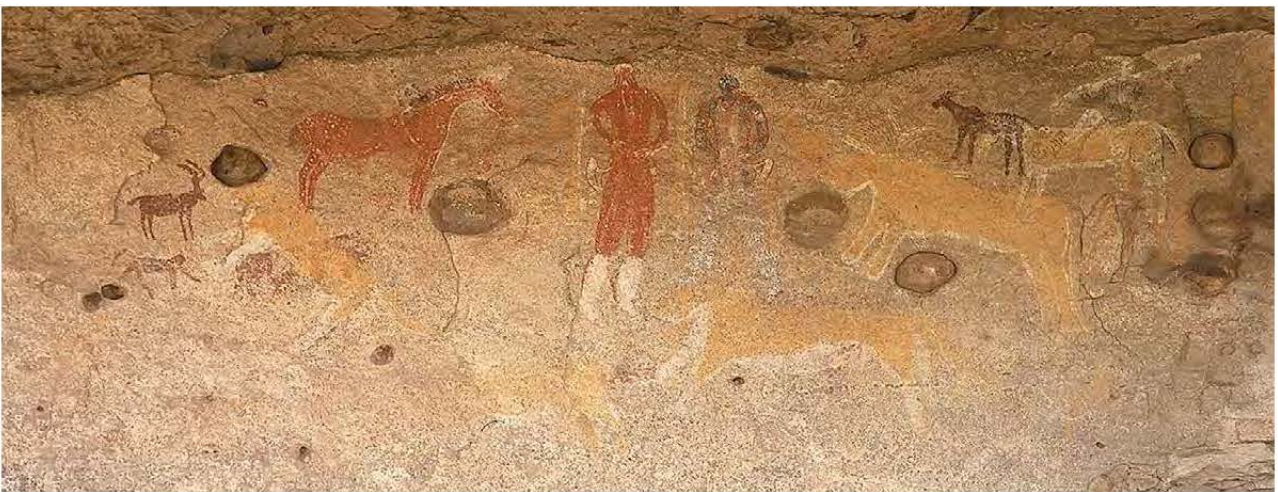
Source: Woodhouse Collection, UP.





Two figures, probably associated with trance experience, in front of what appear to be wagon wheels.

Source: Woodhouse Collection, UP.



A panel, and a tracing of this panel, showing horses and Colonial figures in European dress with lions - animals with the power to harm and into which evil sorcerers transform.

Source: National Museum, Free State.





Inverted (dying/trance) horse.

Source: Woodhouse Collection, UP.



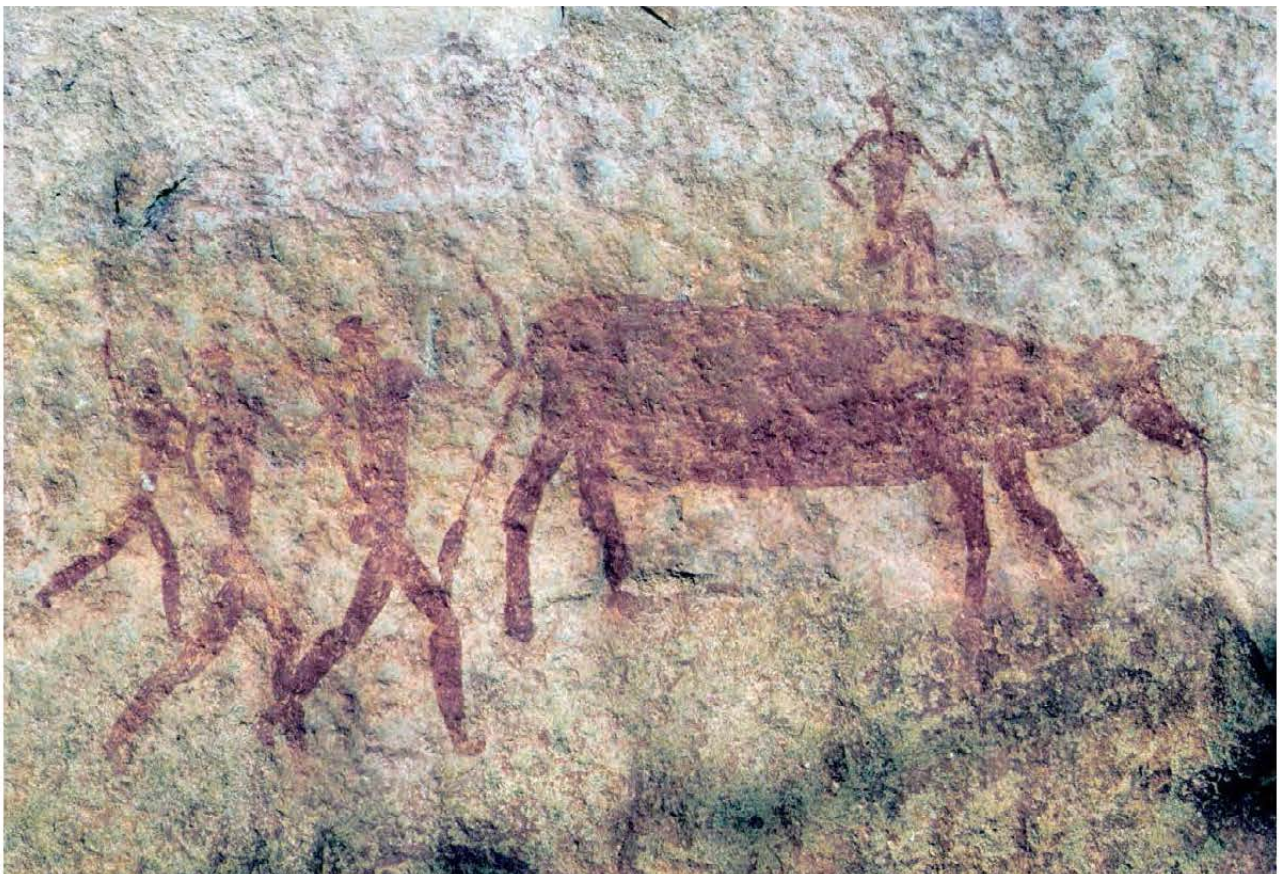
Inverted (dying/trance) eland painted above a "normal" eland.

Source: the author.



Cattle and horses, in particular, appear to have become important symbols for the later south-eastern San, and are sometimes associated with trance imagery in their art. Although some paintings of cattle and horses probably simply represent animals stolen in stock raids by the San who recorded these events in their paintings, it has been suggested that where symbolic weight was given to these animals in the art it derived from the increased prestige and wealth of San shamans after contact with Nguni, Sotho and European farmers. The discussion that follows refers to the south-eastern San and their art.

With the development of San stock raids on farmers, San shamans are likely to have been called upon to use their powers to assist the raiders, in a similar manner, for example, to that in which warriors in Nguni and Sotho society were provided with medicines by their traditional doctors before raids or battles in order to prevent their being killed by their enemies. And it was probably the shamans who were responsible for enacting the rainmaking rituals that some San were asked to perform for some Bantu-speakers, and for which they were often paid in cattle. In both cases, through their magical assistance in cattle raids and their performance of rainmaking rituals for Nguni farmers, they were directly or indirectly able to capture or acquire domestic animals through the use of their reputed supernatural powers. They may well, therefore, have come to be seen as “controllers” of cattle and horses in a similar manner to that in which certain shamans were believed to be able to control game magically.



A cow/ox/bull being driven by men, probably San raiders, armed with bows and arrows.

Source: Woodhouse Collection, UP.