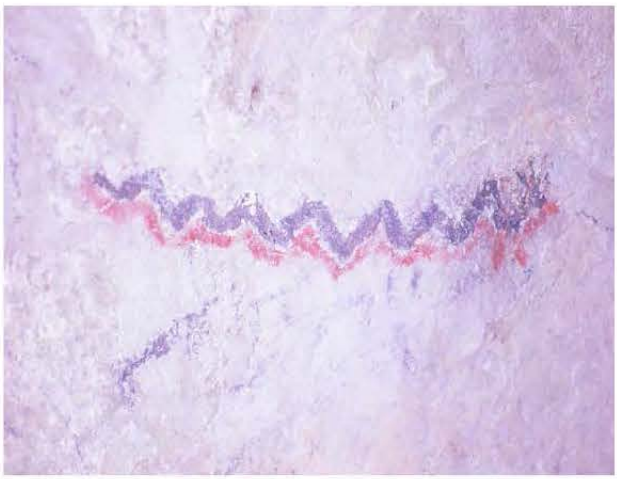
Similarly, paintings of fantastic serpents and rain animals are extremely rare in the western Cape (where the Nguni and Sotho did not settle), but are relatively common in areas occupied by the south-eastern San, where many San interacted intensively with the Nguni and Sotho. Mythical serpents have great religious significance for Bantu-speakers. Snakes had been present in the Maloti-Drakensberg for the entire time the San occupied these mountains and they would almost certainly have had symbolic significance for the San before contact. However, it is likely that the symbolic importance of these creatures increased, and their religious meaning changed, as San were increasingly exposed to the strong religious beliefs of Bantu-speakers regarding serpents - causing them to be depicted much more frequently in the art of some of the south-eastern San groups. It has been suggested that serpents, as well as rain animals which were bound up with rainmaking rites conducted by the San for some Bantu-speakers, acted as a natural conduit for communication between the San shaman artists and Bantu-speakers. These elements of the traditional San rock art repertoire probably came to be emphasised in the later art as a means of expressing the close relationships that came to be established between some San and Bantu-speaking groups.

A serpent with the head of a cow/ox/bull shown emerging from the rock face. Copy by Patricia Vinnicombe.

Source: KwaZulu-Natal Museum.

A serpent in association with Sotho warriors.

Source: Woodhouse Collection, UP.



Some examples of serpents in the art.

Source: the author.

A therianthropic shaman, shown emerging from the rock face, in a ritual relationship with a serpent. The feathered lines of supernatural potency entering or emerging from both of their heads emphasize the relationship that exists between them.

Source: the author.

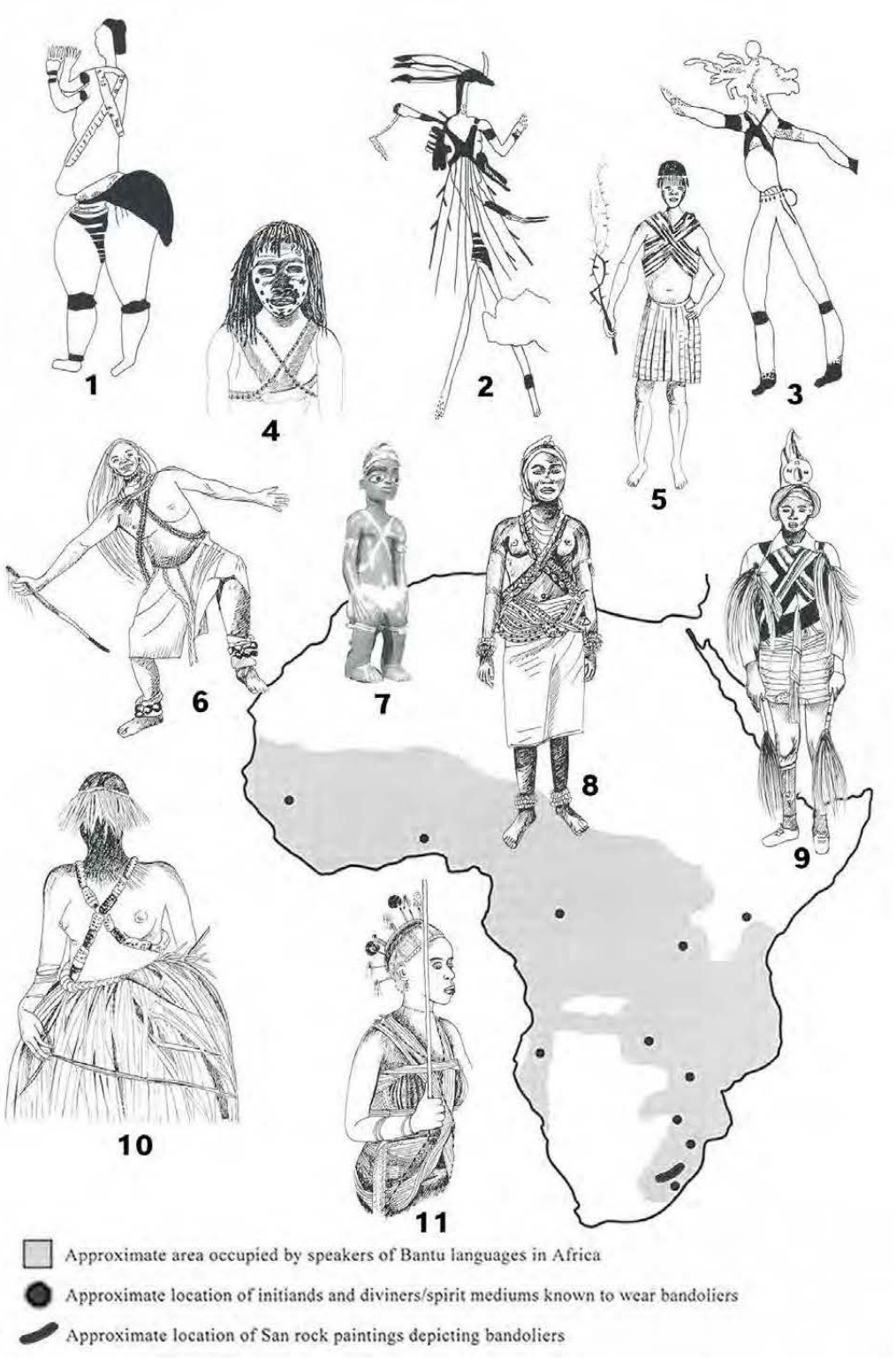
A rain animal captured by Nguni men, or men of mixed/creolised Nguni-San cultures. Two of the men are bleeding from the nose while in trance.

Source: KwaZulu-Natal Museum.

Another way for the San to have expressed these relationships was to adopt the dress of their Bantu-speaking neighbours. Thus some south-eastern San groups have been shown to have adopted the ritual dress of their Nguni and Sotho neighbours, adherents and fellow villagers. An item of ritual dress that is redolent with symbolism amongst the Nguni and Sotho groups, as well as amongst Bantu-speakers throughout much of Africa, is a bandolier made of skin, cloth or beads. It represents the power and presence of the ancestors, and is worn both by traditional healers as well as by adolescents during their initiation ceremonies. The context in which it is worn suggests that it is associated with the state of liminality that characterises these two "ritualised" groups. The traditional healer mediates on behalf of society between the world of the spirits and the living, straddling these worlds, and the initiand occupies a liminal space between the world of the child and the world of the fully-socialised adult. In both cases, strong spiritual powers are associated with this inbetween state. The existence in the Maloti-Drakensberg of San paintings of shamans wearing bandoliers, as well as the presence of bandoliers in a wide range of Bantu-speaker societies far removed from possible San influence, strongly suggests that south-eastern San healers adopted this form of ritual dress, together with aspects of ancestral symbolism with which it was imbued, from those Bantu-speakers who migrated from the north into the territories of the south-eastern San.

Female Sotho initiands, some of whom are wearing bandoliers.

Source: Irene Staehelin.



Map showing the distribution of bandoliers in areas occupied by Bantu-speakers together with examples of bandoliers worn as ritual dress.

1) San rock painting of a clapping woman with bandolier. Lesotho. 2) San rock painting of a therianthrope with bandolier. Eastern Cape.3) San rock painting of a fantastic figure with bandolier. Eastern Cape. 4) Male Zulu initiand with goatskin and bead bandoliers. 5) Female Tswana initiand with bandolier of grass or reeds. 6) Rwandan dancer with bandolier. 7) Bandoliered wooden "spirit spouse" figure, representing a Baule trance diviner, from the Ivory Coast. 8) Female spirit medium from Togo with bandolier. 9) Female Okiek Dorobo (hunter-gatherer) initiand in Kipsigis (pastoralist) initiation dress, including bandolier. Kenya. 10) Female Bassari initiand from southern Senegal with bandolier. 11) Female Ngebende initiand from the northern Congo with bandolier.

Source for all the above images: Jolly, P. (2005). *Sharing symbols: a correspondence in the ritual dress of Nguni and Sotho farmers and the south-eastern San*. South African Archaeological Bulletin Society Goodwin Series 9: 86-100.

Analysis of rock paintings in this manner, in terms of the ideological influence of other societies on San people, can help us to understand both the way in which the art changed through time, as well as to throw light on regional diversity in the art. The many similarities in San paintings in different regions reflect certain shared values and religious ideologies of the artists who made these paintings. Regional differences, on the other hand, are likely to stem, in part, from the differing relationships established between various San groups and other societies, and the varying influence these societies had on San religious beliefs and rites.

Recent research on the contact period rock art

In the last few years there have been several studies that have focused on the development of regional traditions in the contact period rock art of the south-eastern mountains and adjacent areas. These studies have produced analyses of late San groups, enmeshed in multi-cultural/ethnic matrices, who expressed their changing identities and the radical social changes that they were experiencing through the medium of their paintings. All these studies have built on the realisation (achieved through previous in-depth, historical analyses of interaction between southern Nguni and Sotho groups) that the extent of symbiotic interaction between, and overlap of, the societies of the south-eastern San and the southern Nguni and Sotho was much greater than had previously been thought to be the case. This insight has important implications for studies of contact period rock art. It has led a number of San rock art researchers in recent years to shift their thinking from a theoretical paradigm which almost exclusively emphasizes uniformity and continuity in the art to a paradigm which views the contact period art and its underlying symbolism as a complex and dynamic mosaic of beliefs, shaped and changed by contact with a variety of different cultures - and by the contact experience itself. It has also provided a historical dimension to San rock art and its religious symbolism, which was largely absent from the earlier paradigm.

It is now recognised that the social fragmentation of later San groups whose hunter-gatherer way of life was becoming increasingly unviable, combined with intensive symbiotic interaction between the San and Nguni, Sotho and other groups, produced a range of ethnically-mixed, sometimes creolised bands - each painting within one or other of the later traditions that reflected and expressed its particular historical circumstances and ethnic composition. In this way new identities, and short-lived associated art traditions, came into being which reflected the history of fracture and creolisation experienced by these groups.

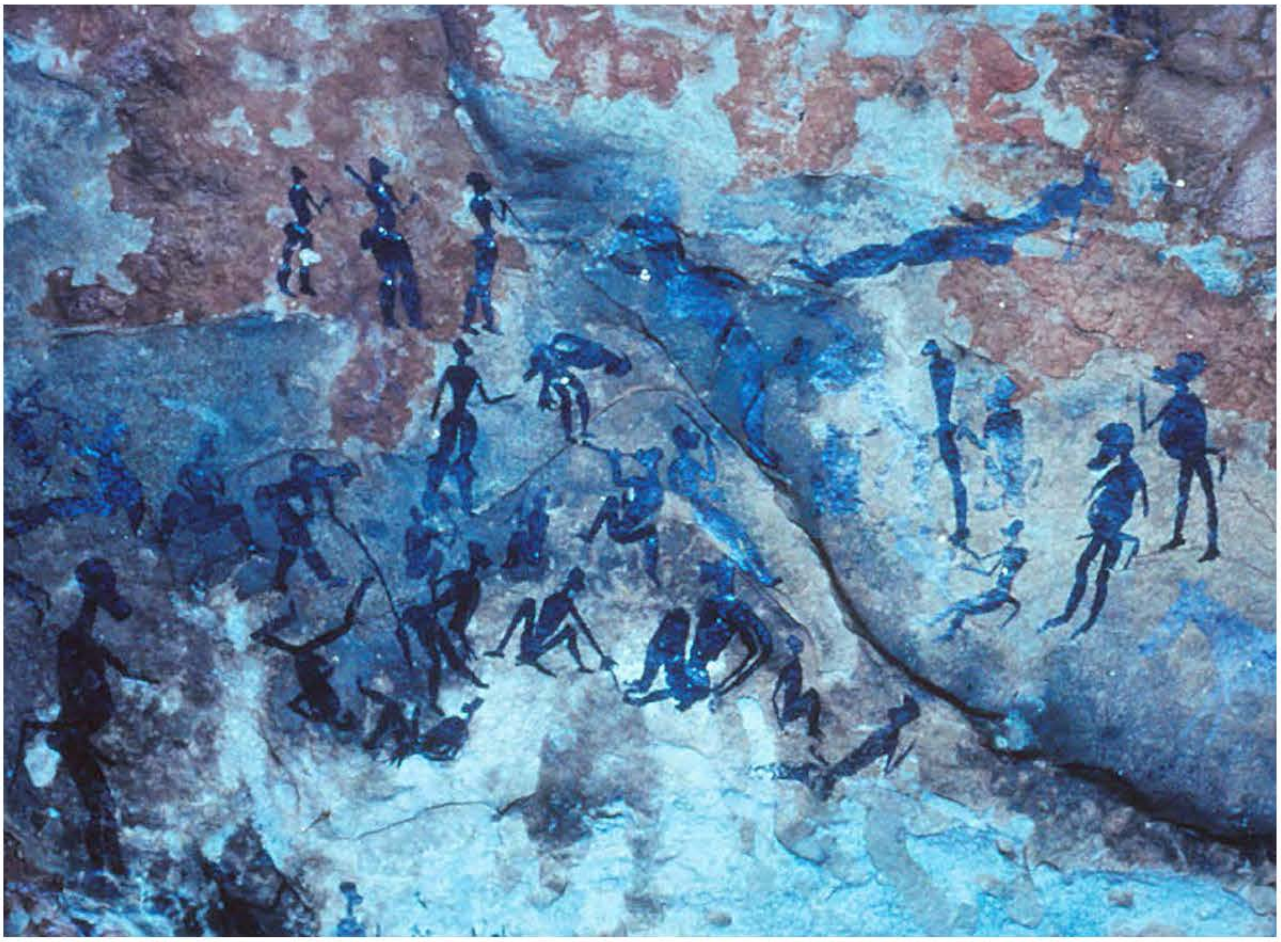
It seems that these newly-formed and uniquely-constituted multi-ethnic groups may have coalesced around new symbols of identity and power, "totem animals" of a kind, such as the baboon and the horse. The Thola, a particularly diverse and ethnically-fluid group of nineteenth century raiders, who roamed parts of the Maloti-Drakensberg, may have created a new identity and culture centred on their shared religious and magical beliefs concerning baboons and horses - on whose powers they drew when accessing the spirit world through the trance dance. One of the factors that helped to create the new identity of the Thola, it has been suggested, was that San, Khoe, Nguni and Sotho, the main ethnic groups from which these mixed "bands" were drawn, all had certain beliefs in common as a result of some of their members having established close ties with members of other ethnic groups well before the arrival of European farmers.

A typical mounted raider, perhaps a member of one of the late creolised bands such as the Thola.

Source: the author.

Another painting of a typical late raider-rider, perhaps from one of the ethnically-composite late groups that had forged new, syncretic, ethnic identities. Copy by Patricia Vinnicombe.

Source: KwaZulu-Natal Museum.



A trance dance with baboon therianthropes.
Source: KwaZulu-Natal Museum.;

The objective correlative of the process of ethnic mixing and creolisation that characterized mid- to later nineteenth century south-eastern San group who were living in "Nomansland", a region that formed part of the north-eastern Cape, can perhaps be found in the way that they portrayed their body forms in the art. According to this theory, the so-called "death of the post-cranial body", facial features became much more prominent in the art of a late, heavily-creolised group under the San leader, Nqabayo. This occurred, it has been proposed, for two main reasons. Firstly, it is through the face rather than the body that ethnic differences are recognized. Secondly, with progressive acculturation, these later groups' healing practices changed to accord more closely with those of their Bantu-speaker members and neighbours. The decline in the importance of traditional San curing practices, which are focused on the sucking of illness directly out of the body, and the increased belief in, and practising of, Bantu-speakers' healing rites, which place much more emphasis in the causation of illness on agents external to the body (the ancestors), resulted, it has been suggested, in what has been termed "the decline in the postcranial body" in the art of this group. Figures portrayed in the later art that are depicted with racially-mixed facial features, over-sized heads and small bodies, or even heads painted without the body (Significantly Differentiated Figures – aka SDFs) may express this shift in identity and cosmology. They may, at the same time, also represent "portraits" of pre-eminent shamans who, in the later period, "owned" specific sites where they conducted rainmaking rites for Bantu-speakers.

Some paintings of SDFs.

Source: the author.

An SDF bleeding from the nose, an indicator of trance.

Source: the author.

An SDF (top left) painted together with a variety of Eldritch images.

Source: Woodhouse Collection, UP.

It has also been suggested by a number of researchers that a range of "sub-traditions" or "sub-categories" can be detected in the art of some of the later groups occupying the south-eastern mountains and adjacent areas, each acting as identity markers for the respective groups. None of these paintings are done in a fine-line style.

One such category in the art, termed Type 2, consists of crudely-painted images done in a thin, powdery paint and depicting, to a large extent, contact period subject matter, such as horses and cattle. They are typically either monochrome or unshaded bichrome. When found at sites that also have fine-line paintings, they are always painted in areas apart from the fine-line paintings.

Another category of contact period paintings, Type 3, consists of finger-painted images predominantly done with a coarse pinkish red, or white, paint. The overwhelming majority of the paintings in this tradition are of humans, often shown in Colonial dress and often holding weapons (but not guns). Unlike the Type 2 tradition, these painting are often superimposed on fine-line paintings, but, like Type 2 paintings, they were probably done by later nineteenth century groups that included people who were not of San descent.

Recently, yet another late, non-fine-line tradition has been identified. It is similar to, yet also different from, the Type 2 and Type 3 art. One difference is that it is found at a lower altitude than the Type 2 and 3 traditions, on the Maclear-Tsolo inland plateau in East Griqualand, and it is usually painted over and amongst fine-line images. It is varied in subject matter, pigment colour and pigment texture, but is typified by paintings of horses with riders.

Local conditions unique to the authoring groups played a definitive role in the formation of these rock art traditions. However, the general social context of manufacture of these traditions was similar, and the similarities in the style and content of these non-fineline traditions are also strong. This suggests that the three traditions are related, though in some cases in contestation with each other. They probably constitute a cluster of traditions born out of the often turbulent conditions that characterized the later nineteenth century in the more remote areas of the Maloti-Drakensberg and, in different ways, acted to construct and reinforce the identity of late, creolised San and non-San groups that roamed the mountains at that time.

In conclusion, it is clear that the impact of immigrant herding and farming communities on San cultures and artistic traditions differed in a number of ways. In some cases, the impact of these communities was disastrous for the San, and those that survived battles with the advancing farmers may have attempted to shut out an alien and destructive world that threatened their ancient way of life. The art of these San communities probably increased in tempo and complexity and may have been a medium through which traditional values and beliefs were maintained and reinforced in the face of external threats to their culture and their very existence - perhaps culminating in a final, apocalyptic phase in the paintings they created. A class of imagery represented by grotesque and strange figures may form the core of this hypothesised phase in the art, and these images may depict the nightmare trance visions of San shamans faced with the genocide of their people.

Giant therianthropic Sotho or Nguni warriors hunt down San in this apocalyptic scene.

Source: Lucas Smits.

In other cases, and in contrast, trading relationships, marriage ties and friendships were formed between San and Nguni and Sotho farmers over hundreds of years. The context of the art produced by painters from these San societies would have been very different from those who were seeking to escape the destructive aspects of contact. The art born of these conditions very likely expresses the overlap of the cultures and societies that were interacting with each other - and, in particular, the overlap and syncretisation of their religious beliefs and rites.

Whatever the precise effects of these new cultures may have been on San society and art, the fact that a significant number of the paintings in the south-eastern mountains would have been executed within a social context affected in some way by contact suggests that its effects are likely to have been important in the development of the later San artistic tradition. These effects still need further exploration and hypotheses concerning the cultural influence of Nguni and Sotho farmers on San art are likely to be refined in the coming years as greater attention is given to this area of southern African rock art research.