

REENEN VAN REENEN'S (1884-1935) ATTEMPT TO CHANGE THE AFRIKANER'S VIEWS OF SAN ROCK ART

Alex Duffey

Department UP Arts, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, 0002

Reenen van Reenen (1884-1935) se poging om die Afrikaner se beskouing van San-rotskuns te verander

Die doelwit van dié artikel is tweevoudig: eerstens is dit 'n poging om aan te dui dat kulturele seleksie van wat betekenisvol en wat van geen belang is nie, 'n direkte invloed het op die insameling van historiese data oor kulturele bates. Dit is ook 'n poging om die vooroordeel van die verlede ongedaan te maak en rig 'n waarskuwing aan die gemeenskap in die algemeen om die kultuur en geloof van ander in die gemeenskap te respekteer. Tweedens toon dit aan dat daar in rotskunsliteratuur selde na Reenen van Reenen verwys word, ten spyte daarvan dat hy 'n belangrike vroeë boek oor San-kultuur geskryf het en dat hy die eerste navorser oor San-rotskuns was wat presiese aftreksels in die San-rotskunsterreine in die Oranje-Vrystaat gemaak het.

Sleutelwoorde: Abbé Henri Breuil, Afrikaanse kortverhale, Erich Mayer, George William Stow, Helen Tongue, Hoërskool Ficksburg, Jacob Hendrik Pierneef, Johannes Schumacher, rotskuns-aftrekkings, San rotskuns, Spin- en Weefskool van die Vrystaat

The aim of this article is twofold: first it is an attempt to show that cultural selection of what is significant and what is not important, has a direct influence on the collection of historical data on cultural assets. It also attempts to undo some of the bias of the past and holds a warning to society in general to respect the culture and beliefs of others in society. Secondly it shows that Reenen van Reenen was seldom mentioned in rock art literature in spite of the fact that he had written an important early book on San culture and that he was the very first researcher of San rock art who made exact tracings in the San rock art sites in the Orange Free State.

Key words: Abbé Henri Breuil, Afrikaans short stories, Erich Mayer, Ficksburg High School, George William Stow, Helen Tongue, Jacob Hendrik Pierneef, Johannes Schumacher, rock art tracings, San rock art, Spinning and Weaving School of the Free State.

Introduction

The recording of rock art in South Africa, which is a necessary preliminary to its study, began with Colonel Robert Gordon and his draughtsman servant Johannes Schumacher in 1777, but their copies were never published. Even the remarkable tracings which George William Stow made during his travels almost a hundred years later, from 1869 onwards, were not published until 1930.¹ The learned world at large only became aware of the extraordinary quality and quantity of South African Rock Art with the appearance of a handful of books in English and German between 1909 and 1930 such as Helen Tongue's *Bushman paintings* of 1909, Otto Moszeik's *Die Malereien der Buschmänner in Südafrika* of 1910, Joseph Zelizko's *Felsengravieren der Südafrikanischen Buschmänner* of 1925, Miles Burkitt's *South Africa's past in stone and paint* of 1928 and the publication of George Stow's *Rock paintings in South Africa* as late as 1930.

San rock art research

In all sources² which deal with the history of rock art studies in southern Africa no mention is made of the contribution of one of the forgotten early pioneers of rock art studies, namely Reenen J. van Reenen, who not only published the very first book on San rock art and culture in Afrikaans, but also did some very excellent field studies with his documentation of rock art sites in the Free State before 1920. This article attempts

¹ It is significant to note that in spite of the fact that the Stow drawings were only published publicly in 1930, they were well-known to the South African artists, Erich Mayer and Jacob Hendrik Pierneef as early as 1898 and 1916 respectively. See A. Duffey, A. Pierneef and San rock art, *De Arte* 66, 2002, pp. 20-41.

² Significant sources which deal with the history of Rock art studies in southern Africa, but do not mention Reenen van Reenen are: H.C. Woodhouse & D.N. Lee, The rock art of the Orange Free State and Eastern Cape, in M. Schoonraad (ed), *Rock paintings of Southern Africa* (Johannesburg, 1971), pp.20-21; A.R. Willcox, *The rock art of Africa* (Cape Town, 1984), pp. 1-5; J.D. Lewis-Williams & T.A. Dowson, *Images of power* (Johannesburg, 1989), pp. 13-18; R. Yates, et al., *Pictures from the past. A history of the interpretation of rock paintings and engravings of southern Africa* (Johannesburg, 1990), pp. 1 & 20-23; J.D. Lewis-Williams & T.A. Dowson, Aspects of Rock Art research. A critical retrospective, in T.A. Dowson & J.D. Lewis-Williams, *Contested images: diversity in Southern African rock art research* (Johannesburg, 1994), pp. 201-221; D. Coulson & A. Campbell, *African rock art. Paintings and engravings on stone* (Johannesburg, 2001), p. 80. Very brief mention of Van Reenen is made in the following three sources: J.D. Lewis-Williams, Ethnography and iconography: aspects of southern San thought and art, *Man* 15, 1980, pp. 467-482, J.D. Lewis-Williams, *A cosmos in stone; interpreting religion and society through rock art* (Walnut Creek, 2002) and W.P. Koorts, The nature of the Dawn's Heart Star, *MNASSA* 65(5 & 6), 2006, pp. 66-73.

to reconstruct the contribution of this worthy pioneer and to show how he endeavoured to transform the Afrikaner's views of the San and of their art in South Africa.

In the eyes of most white South Africans, until as late as the 1940's, it was believed that the rock art found in the rock shelters throughout southern Africa, could never have been the work of the San, because they were considered as "savages" or "children of nature" devoid of any artistic abilities. In the years preceding 1930 the general consensus in South Africa was that although Bushmen were inferior beings, they did possess remarkable observational skills³. Bushmen were stereotyped as "children of nature" whose art and belief system was considered naïve and simple. Most of the early descriptions of rock art, therefore, focussed on the astonishing naturalism of the art. The general belief was that San rock art was principally concerned with day-to-day activities such as hunting, dancing and fighting.

In such an environment Reenen van Reenen's views of the San are all the more astonishing. He is one of the very few early Afrikaner pioneers who recognized the intelligence of the painters, respected their customs and folklore and admired their artistic abilities. These sentiments are clearly reflected in his book *Iets oor die Boesmankultuur* (Something about the Bushman culture), which was published after he had delivered the content in a paper to the "Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie" in Stellenbosch in January 1920⁴ and the numerous articles he wrote on San Rock Art in the Afrikaans magazines *Die Brandwag* and *Die Huisgenoot* of 1921 and 1922 respectively. Many of his very progressive views about the San were undoubtedly influenced by the views of Erich Mayer. These views were introduced to Van Reenen by Pierneef, whom he had met in Bloemfontein in September 1917, when Pierneef stayed with him before presenting a lecture there on indigenous art. Mayer, who had access to the theoretical documents pertaining to modern art's views of primal art, was familiar with the new status given to "primitive" art as an art form by Modernism in Europe before he came to South Africa for the second time in 1911, and he eagerly conveyed this new approach to Pierneef when he met him in Pretoria in 1913 for the first time.⁵ It was Erich Mayer who had shown Pierneef the George Stow drawings in Dorothea Bleek's possession in Cape Town in 1916.⁶ Both Mayer and Pierneef

³ A typical example of the current views with regard to indigenous art at that time was the reaction and angry opposition which J.H. Pierneef received from Jacques Bosman, a local artist, at an art lecture he gave to members of "Onze Taal" in Bloemfontein in November 1919. Bosman's view was that the inclusion of what he perceived as inferior Bushman and African art elements into a national South African art style would impoverish and not improve it, because such a step, in his opinion, would mean belittling the great art achievements of the Western world. See Anon., Lesinge van de heer Pierneef, *Die Volksblad* 1919-11-14, p.1.

⁴ A. Duffey, Pierneef and San rock art, *De Arte* 66, 2002, p. 23

⁵ A. Duffey, Pierneef and San rock art, *De Arte* 66, 2002, p. 22

marvelled at the San artist's visual memory, but realized that what lifted their art high above the level of mere recording was a selective ability, a discernment in looking, by which they seized only the essential characteristics of the subjects they wanted to represent, stripping them of their particularity, leaving them generalized, economically stated, and in many ways what Mayer and Pierneef believed true art should be. It was these ideas that Pierneef conveyed to Van Reenen, who was the head of the Public Works Department in the Orange Free State at the time and with whom Pierneef stayed when he lectured on indigenous art to members of the Onze Taal movement in September 1917. In a way their propagation of, and identification with, the art of the Bushman and African can be seen in the context of the Afrikaner's conceived role of his special position in Africa,⁷ but this warrants another article in itself.

Reenen Jacob Van Reenen

Reenen Jacob van Reenen (**Figure 1**) was the son of Albert Johannes van Reenen and Susanna de Villiers and was born in Calvinia on 15 April 1884.⁸ In 1886 his family moved to Seapoint near Cape Town, where he completed his schooling. In 1902 he went to the South African College and obtained a BA degree and a land surveyor's diploma. With a Queen Victoria Scholarship he went to the U.S.A. in 1906 to study civil engineering at Lehigh University in Pennsylvania. He then spent a year gaining practical experience of large irrigation projects in Nebraska, before returning to South Africa in 1907. Initially he worked for the Cape Irrigation Department and in 1908 was appointed Superintendent of Roads and Public Works in the Orange Free State. It was while he was in this post that he arranged for Pierneef to decorate the walls of the new school hall at the Fickburg High School with murals showing San rock art in 1922.⁹

⁶ A. Duffey, Pierneef and San rock art, *De Arte* 66, 2002, p. 22

⁷ With regard to this issue, consult: N.J. Coetzee, *Pierneef, land and landscape. The Johannesburg Station Panels in context* (Johannesburg, 1992), pp. 22-30.

⁸ P.J. Nienaber, Reenen Jacob van Reenen (1884-1935), in D.W. Kruger & C.J. Beyers (eds), *Dictionary of South African Biography III* (Johannesburg, 1977), p. 816.

⁹ A. Duffey, Pierneef and San rock art *De Arte* 66, 2002, p. 24. Van Reenen requested the builder of the sandstone school hall, a Mr Todd, to change his plans to include eight recessed wall panels measuring about 1,2 x 2,9 metres in the interior of the hall, so that Pierneef could fill them with rock art murals. See S. Ouzman, Lessons from the old masters: San rock art and Pierneef, *Culna* 48, 1995, p. 25.



Figure 1: Reenen Jacob van Reenen

From P.J. Nienaber, *Hier is ons skrywers! Biografiese Sketse van Afrikaanse skrywers* (Johannesburg, 1949), p. 344.

From an early age Van Reenen was greatly interested in painting, music and literature. He studied drawing with a Mrs Buyskes in Cape Town in 1898 and also completed art courses at the South African College and at Lehigh University.¹⁰ Consequently, from 1915 onwards he did a great deal of illustrative work for well-known Afrikaans periodicals and newspapers of the time such as *Die Brandwag*, *Die Huisgenoot*, *De Burger*, *De Volkstem*, *Die Landbou-Weekblad* and *De Kerkbode* (**Figure 2**). Between 1917 and 1921 he also did much writing, at a time when Afrikaans literary achievements were still almost negligible. He was the first author who deliberately practiced the short story form in Afrikaans, producing books such as *Die Agtertrekkers en hulle reis deur die Vrijstaat en Natal* (1917), *Riena Reinet: die storie van 'n Afrikaanse pop* (1917), *Celestine en ander spookstories* (1919), *Verborge skatte: die avonture van professor Erts* (1920) and *Die lokaas* (1921). He was also a pioneer writer of ghost stories in Afrikaans.

¹⁰ R. van Reenen, Herlewing van die Boesmankuns, *Die Brandwag*, 1919-12-24, p. 207.

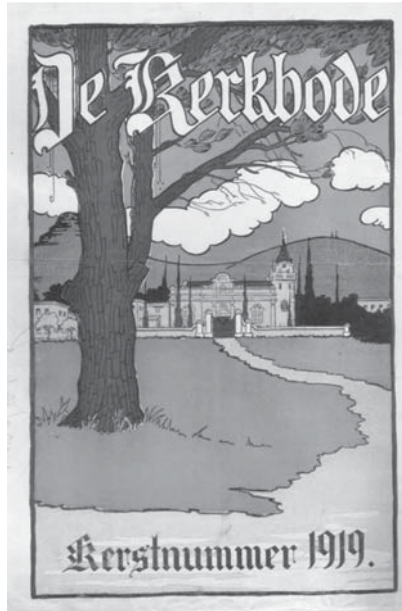


Figure 2: Van Reenen's design for the cover of *De Kerkbode* in December 1919.

For the purposes of this article, it is, however, his book, *Iets oor die Boesmankultuur* (**Figure 3**), which is of greater importance. Van Reenen saw the book as a preliminary report on the San, in which he tried to create interest in, and change existing negative perceptions about the “little people”. The book was the first publication about the San in Afrikaans and brought together past and present information about them, as well as the personal experiences of the writer. The book is illustrated with San paintings by Helen Tongue, George Stow, Joseph Orpen and the author himself (**Figure 4**). In the book he considers the San to be the earliest people of southern Africa and discusses all contemporary theories concerning their origin, their customs, their folklore, their beliefs and their art and he pleads for a new understanding of these creative people. From numerous passages in his text one gathers that he must have had conversations regarding the San with Dorothea Bleek and other informed people of that time. He clearly proves that he knows the writings of the Abbé Henri Breuil, Dr W. Sollas, palaeontologist of Oxford, Dr Gustav Fritsch and the Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd manuscripts.

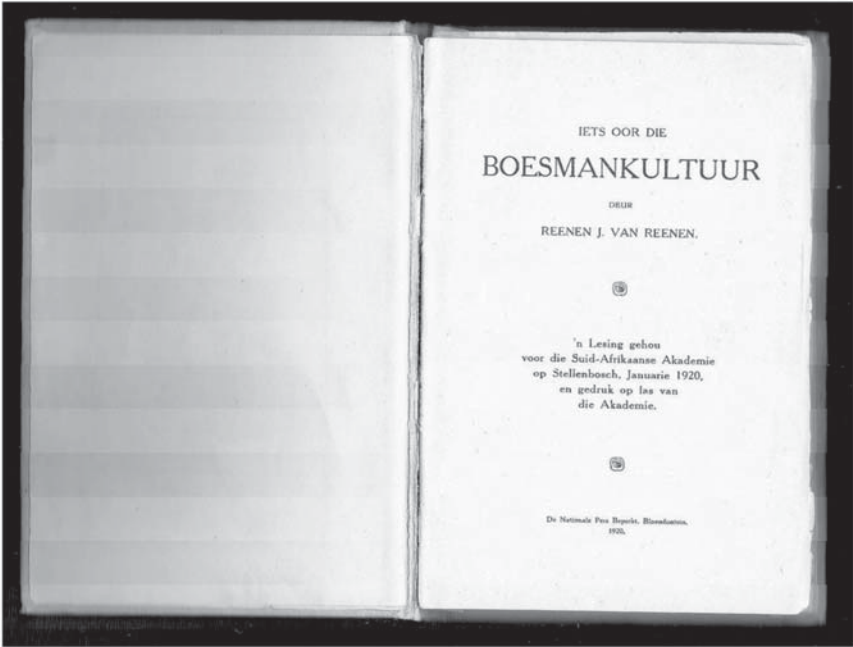


Figure 3: The title page of Van Reenen’s book *Iets oor die Boesmankultuur*. (De Nationale Pers Beperk, Bloemfontein, 1920)

He marvels at the San’s artistic abilities and the skill with which they could capture the essence of an animal. He reveals that he is aware of their use of foreshortening and of the natural shape of the rock surface in their paintings. He makes reference to the extermination of the San by the white man and asks whether there were any valid reasons for exterminating them. In this regard he quotes Mark Twain, who noted that with regard to the relationship between colonists and aborigines: “More promising materials for a tragedy could not have been gathered together.”¹¹ The significance of this

¹¹ In his book *Iets oor die Boesmankultuur*, p. 22, Reenen van Reenen makes the following comment on the atrocities committed by the colonials: “Die Blankes het maar hier te werk gegaan soos in Australië en ander lande waar Europeane ’n lae ras kleurlinge tref ... Ons kan maar herhaal wat Mark Twain, in sy ligsinnig geuite, maar raak en fyn-uitgedagte sinne geskrywe het in sy skets van die verhouding tussen die eerste Australiese Koloniste en die inboorling: ‘More promising materials for a tragedy could not have been gathered together’”(“The Whites went to work here like in Australia and other countries where Europeans came into contact with a lower race coloureds..... We can only repeat what Mark Twain wrote in his light-hearted, but well-thought-out, sentences where he sketched the relationship between the first Australian colonists and the aborigines: ‘More promising materials for a tragedy could not have been gathered together.’”

publication however, lies in the impact it had on Afrikaner policy makers with regard to the San. For this very reason Van Reenen initially presented the text as a lecture to members of the “Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie” in Stellenbosch in January 1920.



Figure 4: Illustration of Orpen’s drawing of the Rain animal in the Grey collection in the Public library, Cape Town on page 31 of Van Reenen’s book.

Van Reenen tracings

Apart from an original copy of Van Reenen’s book *Iets oor die Boesmankultuur*, the Art Archive of the University of Pretoria also possesses a portfolio of original tracings which Van Reenen made of San paintings at various sites in the Free State in September and October 1919.¹²

Five sites in the southern Free State were visited and selected images from these sites were traced. The portfolio contains 21 plates on which 72 tracings of a wide

¹² The cover of the portfolio is illustrated with rock art paintings, the title “Boesman Tekeninge” and the figure of a westernized San artist in front of an easel containing the words “Aan Boesman I van Boesman II, versamel deur R.J.v. R. 19.” The document was found among the possessions of the artist J.H. Pierneef by Dr David de V. du Buisson and donated to the Art Archive of the University of Pretoria.

variety of images appear (**Figure 5**). All the tracings are carefully documented with a date, the place and indications of colours of the images and places where the rock surfaces were damaged.

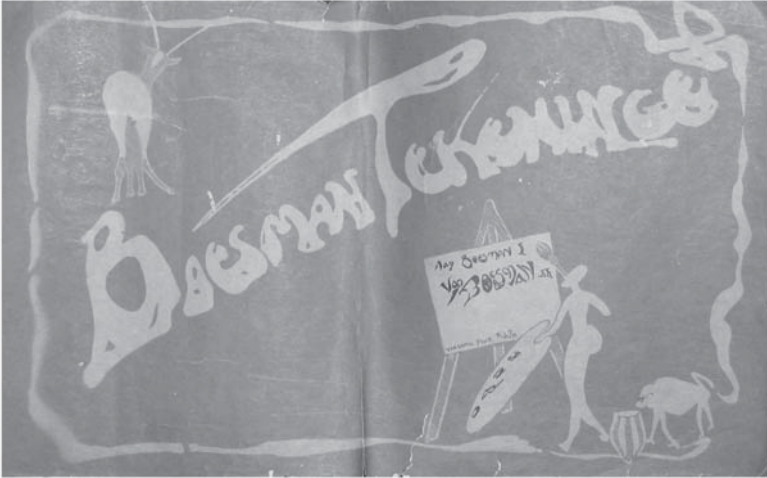


Figure 5: Cover of Van Reenen's portfolio containing 21 plates recording 72 tracings of San rock art paintings in the southern Free State.

(Art Archive, University of Pretoria)

Van Reenen's first four plates are images traced from a site on the farm "Brightside" in the Ladybrand district on 12 September 1919. A comparison of these tracings with photographs of the images in the actual sites shows how accurate Van Reenen was in his recordings. Figure 4 of the first plate represents four figures that are daringly enticing a rain snake from a recess in the rock surface.

Figures 5 and 7 of plate 2 show elongated entwined figures without heads or lower extremities (**Figure 6**). These figures are all most likely associated with rain ceremonies since rain animals are recorded in their proximities. Figure 14 on plate 4 shows a highly unusual geometric shape painted in black and white in a hollow recess in a rock at "Brightside." This enigmatic image is most likely the representation of a raincloud or possibly something associated with rainclouds and rainmaking.

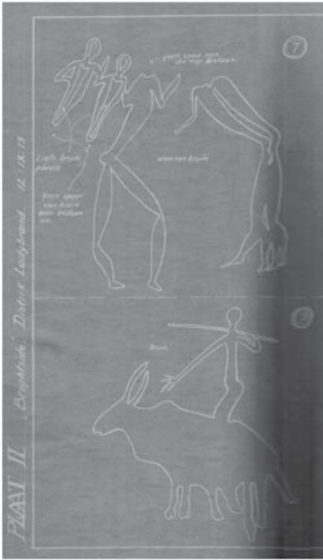


Figure 6: Plate 2, figures 5 and 7 of Van Reenen's tracings at "Brightside", Ladybrand and the actual painting today.
(Art Archive, University of Pretoria)

The next six plates are images from the site "Modderpoort" located between Ladybrand and Clocolan and all the plates are dated the same day as the ones made at "Brightside", namely 12 September 1919. Figure 23 of plate 6 shows a group of five elongated large hunter figures with weapons confronting a much smaller figure. Figure 21 of the same plate shows a rain antelope with a very thin neck. Figure 24 on plate 7 represents a rain bird in white.¹³ **(Figure 7).**

Van Reenen later used this bird, together with other images, in a design for a carpet which was made by the Spinning and Weaving School of the Free State¹⁴. Pierneef used the same image as an upper border in all eight his panels for the Ficksburg High School hall in 1922.¹⁵ **(Figure 8).** Plate 8, also from "Modderpoort",

¹³ In an article in *Die Brandwag* entitled "Herlewing van die Boesmankuns" and dated 24 December 1919, Van Reenen notes the following about this bird: "Die voël in die boonste hoek is ook 'n Boesman-tekening en werd ingevoer met die oog op die Bantoe geloof, dat die weerlig 'n voël is." (The bird in the upper corner is also a San drawing and was introduced with a view to the Bantu belief that lightning is a bird). See R. van Reenen, Herlewing van die Boesmankuns, *Die Brandwag*, 1919-12-24, p. 207.

¹⁴ R. van Reenen, Herlewing van die Boesmankuns, *Die Brandwag*, 1919-12-24, p. 207.

¹⁵ A. Duffey, Pierneef and San rock art, *De Arte* 66, 2002, p.25.



Figure 7: Van Reenen's tracing of the Rain bird at Modderpoort.



Figure 8: Rain bird used by Pierneef in panels in the Ficksburg High School hall.

shows tracings of a number of stalking San figures, some with tails, bearing shields and unusually large weapons. On this sheet Van Reenen notes that “Die ses figure kom almaal (sic) uit een groot toneel van 30 tot 40 figure. Hulle is almaal (sic) swart.” (The six figures all come from a large scene of 30 to 40 figures. They are all black). Plate 9, from the same site, shows tracings of two large rain lions galloping to the left of the picture field. The last of the “Modderpoort” tracings, plate 10, shows two large eland and a rain bird.

Plates 11 to 18 are tracings Van Reenen made the next day, 13 September 1919, in a large and small cave on the Ladybrand Commonage, which he calls the “Boomkwekerij”. Figure 33 of Plate 11 shows a very unusual tracing of a horse from the side. The next plate is the largest in the portfolio and shows the tracing of a very large convoluted rain snake¹⁶ with a striding figure beneath it. This image was first reproduced by Helen Tongue as plate 32 no. 52 in her book *Bushman paintings* (1909), where she captioned it as “a snake or ornament.” Figure 41 of Plate 15 from the same site shows two rain animals, a rain antelope and a rain lion enveloped by a

¹⁶ Van Reenen used this image in his design for a carpet in 1919 and in a description of the image says the following about it: “Die swaai in die drie hoeke is tot onlangs algemeen aangeneem als ’n Boesman voorstelling van weerlig, en met dié idéé ingevoer in die ontwerp. (Nadat hij die oorspronklike tekening besigtig ‘t, het van Reenen begin sterk twijfel of dit kan weerlig wees).” (The entwined motifs in the three corners were until recently considered to be Bushman representations of lightning and included in the design with this idea in mind. (After he viewed the original drawing Van Reenen has had serious doubts that it can be lightning). See R. van Reenen, Herlewing van die Boesmankuns, *Die Brandwag*, 1919-12-24, p. 207. In his book *Iets oor die Boesmankultuur* (1920) Van Reenen calls the image a “Boesman-teken” (Bushman sign). See R. van Reenen, *Iets oor die Boesmankultuur* (1920), p. 51.

large rain snake. Rows of dotted white lines encircle the rain snake. Figure 42 of this same plate shows the tracing of a dying eland in a typical stumbling posture.

The last three plates of this valuable portfolio, plates 19 to 21, show images traced on the farm “Minnehaha” near Zastron on 9 October 1919. Plate 19 shows three anthropomorphic figures with staffs across their shoulders, a white ostrich-like figure and parts of the forequarters of a rain lion with a sharp lower tusk. Minnehaha is a well-known site for excellent representations of foreshortened antelope and figures 63, 64 of plate 20 and figures 68, 71 and 72 of Plate 21 are excellent examples (**Figure 9**). Other unusual images on these plates are the kangaroo-like antelopes figure 67 on plate 20 and figure 69 on Plate 21.

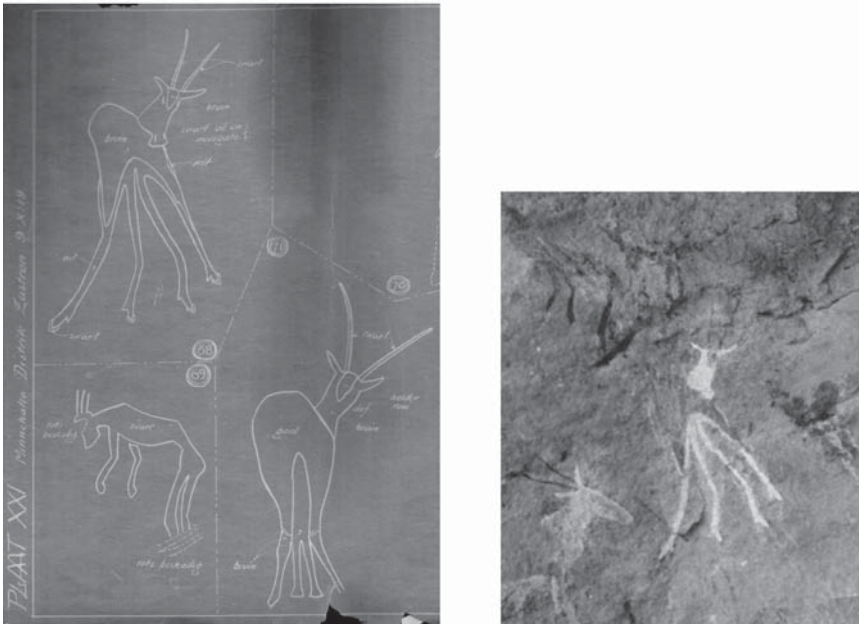


Figure 9: Plate 21 figures 68 and 71 of Van Reenen’s tracings at Minnehaha, near Zastron and the actual painting of figure 68 today.

(Art Archive, University of Pretoria)

From a comparison of Van Reenen's tracings with Bert Woodhouse's photographs of the paintings at the various sites at present in the Africana section of the University of Pretoria's Academic Information Service (Library), we can learn the following:

- a) Van Reenen did not make tracings of all the paintings in the sites he visited, but selected only certain outstanding images to record.
- b) Many of the images which Van Reenen recorded in 1919 have deteriorated considerably over the past 87 years.
- c) Van Reenen was not always quite sure of the meaning of the images, as in the case of the rain snake at Ladybrand which he saw as a San representation of lightning.
- d) Since most of the images in this portfolio are copied in the original size and are in all respects similar to the originals, it is most likely that Van Reenen traced them directly from the rock face.

Conclusion

Although Van Reenen clearly indicated in his book that San rock painting necessitates a proper investigation and an extensive publication which would connect it to their culture in general,¹⁷ he himself did not do anything in this regard after 1921. Could it be possible that Van Reenen was present at Pierneef's second lecture for the "Onze Taal" in Bloemfontein in November 1919, when a local artist, Jacques Bosman, vehemently attacked Pierneef for including San and African art elements into his views of a national South African art style? It was Bosman and other delegate's opinion that inclusion of what they perceived as "inferior Bushman and African art elements" into such a style would mean belittling the great art achievements of the Western world. The attack did halt Pierneef's enthusiasm for indigenous art and could have done the same to that of Van Reenen. Van Reenen, however, had made a very brave attempt, at a very early stage, to transform the Afrikaner elite's views of the San and to show them that the San were clearly intelligent and resourceful people with a deep vision and a rich social life.

¹⁷ R. van Reenen, *Jets oor die Boesmankultuur* (1920), p. 71.