

Rock art researchers in the uKhahlamba Drakensberg

by Elwyn Jenkins

The uKhahlamba Drakensberg mountain range has a very large number of rock paintings, including some of the most beautiful in the world. Some date back possibly thousands of years and others were still being painted by San people late in the nineteenth century. Since the nineteenth century, they have fascinated visitors. People have searched for them and recorded them in various ways. They have recorded their location; counted them; made freehand copies, traced and photographed them; excavated around them; vandalised them; and removed them. Many people have written about the paintings, attempting to date them, describing them and analysing them. In this article I give a personal view of the most notable of these personalities, at the same time recounting in broad outline what I believe to have been

the development of an understanding of the art.

The first serious analysis of the meaning of a Drakensberg painting came about in 1873, when Joseph Orpen, who was the British Resident in Nomansland, was sent at the head of a Sotho contingent to pursue Langalibalele. He found as a guide Qing, a young San survivor, who was working as a hunter for a Sotho chief (Nquasha, of Qacha's Nek). Orpen had already copied paintings, and he now copied paintings he saw along the way. He requested Qing to give him explanations of the paintings. Qing spoke in sePhuti, which was translated by a Sotho interpreter into English, and Orpen recorded his explanations. One of his copies, made in Sehonghong shelter, shows people interacting with strange animals. The copy was not accurate, but

it has become very well known and is still often reproduced (Figure 1).

Orpen sent his copies to the editor of the *Cape Monthly Magazine*, who forwarded them to Dr Wilhelm Bleek, a German linguist living in Cape Town. Together with his sister-in-law Lucy Lloyd, and later his daughter Dorothea, Bleek had undertaken a project to transcribe the lore of some San people who were living with them in Cape Town. The extensive Bleek records are now housed at the University of Cape Town.¹

Bleek showed Orpen's copies to Diä!kwain and asked him to explain them – thus his explanation was independent of any other. Diä!kwain said that the strange painting depicted rain animals. Lucy Lloyd's transcription of his account is the first record of San beliefs in rain animals and rain making. The painting is now understood to show shamans leading rain animals, while two of them are thought to be holding buchu plants, which were used to subdue the rain animal. Orpen wrote an article for the *Cape Monthly Magazine*

that included Qing's explanations for two sets of paintings, to which Bleek's notes, which included Diä!kwain's comments, were published as an addendum.²

The first researcher to have been commissioned by a professional prehistorian was Louis Tylor, a nephew of Sir Edward Tylor, curator of the Pitt-Rivers Museum in Oxford. In 1893, at his request, Louis went to the Drakensberg, where he located 30 sites and copied about 80 groups of paintings freehand. He also removed slabs, of which six are on display at the Pitt-Rivers. Many of the shelters he located have since been claimed to have been found by people who have named them after themselves. One of the paintings he copied, in what is now called Willcox Shelter, was of an enigmatic figure which is also to be seen at two other sites (Figure 2).³ We will return to it later. Tylor's interest in it shows that from the outset observers saw that the paintings included ones that must have a 'magical' or supernatural explanation.



Figure 1: Orpen's copy of the rain animals panel



Figure 2: *The figure in Willcox Shelter copied by Tylor*

While Tylor was working at Main Caves, a farmer, Mark Hutchinson, told him that he had copied paintings eighteen years before at the request of Sir Henry Bulwer. His copies are housed in the KwaZulu-Natal Museum, and two of them were published in 1905 in the *Natal Agricultural and Mining Record*. At the same time, Brother Otto Mäder from Mariannhill, an artist, removed slabs – one is at Mariannhill – and he made copies, mostly on the Kei River.

Subsequently, many enthusiasts have written about the paintings, copied them and removed them. The KwaZulu-Natal Museum has many records and original paintings. An early contributor was

Trooper A.D. Whyte, who in 1905 was instructed to locate all the paintings in the Bushman's Nek district. He located 37 sites. Patricia Vinnicombe reports that 'As a result of his recommendations, about 20 groups of paintings, some comprising more than one stone, were removed from various sites by an expert stone mason, R. Clingan, and deposited in the Natal Museum.'⁴ William Anderson, government geologist in Natal, published a report in 1907 that included the first photographs of paintings.⁵

Jeremy Hollmann and Lawrence Msimanga, of the KwaZulu-Natal Museum in Pietermaritzburg, reported in 2008 on a sad case of vandalism and the removal of rock art:

uMhlabane Shelter (also known as eBusingatha Shelter) is a rock art site alongside the eBusingatha River in the amaZizi Traditional Authority Area. It is one of KwaZulu-Natal's problem rock art sites. Today it still contains at least 50 hunter-gatherer paintings but there used to be many more. As with other easily accessible rock art sites that have no access control, the art has suffered from vandalism. Authorities responded by removing some 31 painted rocks at the time of the visit of the British royal family to South Africa in 1947. The institutions entrusted with their care subsequently neglected the art. Action is now being taken to conserve and display the removed rock art.⁶

This intervention shows how valuable the growth of professional archaeology has been in providing an overview of the situation regarding rock art in the Drakensberg and minimising ill-informed interaction with the art.

Increased overseas awareness of the art led to visits by two prominent prehistorians. The Frenchman Abbé

Henri Breuil dominated ideas about rock art around the world in the first half of the twentieth century. He first visited South Africa in 1929, and took shelter in the country during the Second World War. He promoted two theories about rock art: that it was motivated by sympathetic magic, painted to aid the hunt (though there are actually few hunting scenes in southern African rock art); or that it was art for art's sake – a philosophical view of the nature of art dating from the early nineteenth century – consisting of 'pictures that resulted from a universal, innate desire to express oneself and from a simple delight in capturing daily life'.⁷ His utterances on southern African rock art were unhelpful, as he believed the artists were ancient Minoans, Cretans or Phoenicians. He claimed to have identified paintings of Phoenicians in the Drakensberg.⁸

Professor Leo Frobenius, who undertook expeditions from Germany to South Africa, Southern Rhodesia and other parts of the world that made vast numbers of copies, brought out a team in 1928–1930 that copied among others 55 paintings from western Lesotho and 45 from the Drakensberg. They are housed in the Frobenius Institute in Frankfurt-am-Main.

The most prominent South African to popularise awareness of the art was the artist Walter Battiss, who frequently acknowledged the influence of southern African rock art on his own work. He published two books on rock art, *The Amazing Bushman* (1939)⁹ and *The Artists of the Rocks*, which appeared in a handsome limited edition of 500 copies in 1948.¹⁰ He was a pioneer in the use of photography to record rock art, and included monochrome photographs in his books in addition to

his coloured copies. He had a serious aim: to cut through the 'maelstrom' of theories and find a 'sober approach'. This was an artistic one, not a rational, logical procedure: it was what he called 'pure aesthetic enjoyment'. Though he said he was putting aside preconceived ideas, his approach was subjective and Western. He did not refer to San beliefs because he said the significance of the art was 'self-evident'.

Battiss's mentors were Abbé Breuil and the government archaeologist C. van Riet Lowe, who wrote the preface and foreword respectively to *The Artists of the Rocks*. He thought South African rock art could be divided into three periods. He could not believe that the most beautiful and skilled art was painted and engraved by the San; he believed the 'little Bushmen' were naïve and primitive and incapable of great art. Therefore the 'Early' art, which was the most beautiful, was probably done by unidentified artists. He wrote approvingly that 'in Game Pass Valley in the Natal Drakensberg there are very clear hooded and cloaked figures with white monkey faces. Professor van Riet Lowe, who has made a special study of them, considers they are foreigners' (Figure 4).¹¹ His 'Middle' period was problematic, and the 'Last' period – consisting of scenes – was by the San.

A different approach to investigating the art was taken by Marion How, who was born in Basutoland. Her father and grandfather had an intimate knowledge of the Basotho and their history. She drew on their records and the help of many other people in publishing her book, *The Mountain Bushmen of Basutoland* (1970).¹² The illustrator, James Walton, lived in Basutoland for thirteen years, during which time he copied paintings from hundreds of

rock shelters, many of them previously unknown. How heard of an old man, Mapote, aged 74, who had half-San step-brothers. He had learned to paint with the San, of whom there had been many where he lived as a young man. He explained to her how the paint was made and demonstrated how he painted with his brushes. Mapote used a pigment called *Qhang Qhang*, which How learned was a ‘powerful medicine’ for the Basotho.¹³ This, one of the few first-hand accounts of how the paint was prepared, contributed to an awareness among scholars that the physical properties of the paintings and the act of painting are integral parts of their total meaning and significance. Further

information of this kind was uncovered in the 1980s by Pieter Jolly¹⁴ and David Lewis-Williams,¹⁵ who interviewed an old Xhosa woman of partial San descent whose father had been a shaman rain-maker and painter. She gave some important information about the potency of the paintings: touching the paintings and dancing while facing them imparted power.

The 1950s saw the emergence of prominent non-professional archaeologists who dedicated themselves to recording rock art through colour photography. Alex Willcox, a quantity surveyor who lived in Bergville, wrote the first book to be entirely devoted to the rock art of the Drakensberg, *Rock*



Figure 3: Examples of trance-buck traced by members of the Rock Art Research Institute (RARI)

Paintings of the Drakensberg, Natal and Griqualand East (1956),¹⁶ and he was the first person to record paintings by means of colour photography. He wrote several other books on rock art as well as papers, which he illustrated with his slides. The caption to a photograph in *The Rock Art of South Africa* (1963) captures the homely nature of Willcox's writing: 'Alex and Nancy Willcox painting-hunting in the Drakensberg. Baby daughter Sandra is being carried by our Hlubi maid. This excursion was successful, some fine and previously unknown paintings being found in the rock shelter seen in the photograph.'¹⁷

Willcox wrestled with questions that nowadays are regarded as unimportant, such as how the artists could depict animals so accurately. He looked at depictions of clothing, and speculated about painting materials. He believed that the art did not have symbolic meaning. However, he invoked psychology, talking of 'eidetic imagery'. He was aware of the San ethnography recorded by the Bleeks, but was not helpful in saying of the San stories of the rain bull, 'One is reminded that Jupiter in his character as the giver of rain, the thunderer, was portrayed riding upon a bull.'¹⁸

Like other early recorders of the art, he enjoyed making up stories about the pictures, as in his caption to a painting in Nuttall's Shelter: 'A pig hunt that went wrong. The pig is chasing some of the hunters.'¹⁹ This propensity for story-making went with seeing all the paintings on a rock face as comprising one composed panel – something which is demonstrably debatable, as anyone who has stood in front of the painted wall of a rock shelter will know. Furthermore, we now know, thanks to research in which Adelphe Bonneau has been the

lead researcher, that in some rock panels various individual images were actually painted years apart.²⁰

Willcox's books gave detailed instructions on how to reach the shelters, whereas today the locations of shelters are never made public in order to protect them. He also wrote books on South African archaeology and shipwrecks. He made a valuable literary contribution when he co-authored with Joan Nockels a sensitive and moving children's story called *Kabo of the Mountain*, the first work of fiction about the San of the Drakensberg that was historically accurate.²¹ The life of this pioneer in rock art studies came to an end when he was murdered in his home by intruders.

Bert Woodhouse and Neil Lee were wealthy Johannesburg businessmen who could afford to devote their spare time to the discovery and recording of rock art. They worked mainly in the eastern Free State, discovering many paintings, and left records of the precise location of each one. They followed Willcox by taking colour slides of the paintings and produced a joint book, *Art on the Rocks of Southern Africa* (1970),²² which resembles Willcox's books. The equally gossipy frontispiece shows the authors camping in a rock shelter, surrounded by the detritus of their untidy campsite. The book includes many Drakensberg paintings. They also jointly and severally wrote a number of papers for academic journals, and Woodhouse wrote other books on rock art.

Although amateurs, they achieved high public status as experts on rock art, Woodhouse in particular. His copies were exhibited in seven European cities, and at home, where he received official recognition. He was commissioned to

write the brochure that accompanied a set of four postage stamps on rock art that the South African Post Office issued in 1987. They were the first stamps on this theme to be issued in South Africa.²³ In 2006 he was awarded the Order of Ikhamanga (Silver), which honours excellence in the creative fields of arts and culture. He is the only person to have received this award for rock art studies.

Like Willcox, Woodhouse and Lee could not make up their minds as to what theoretical paradigm to employ in analysing the paintings. They were still tied to Western ways of looking at art, such as determining styles of painting and hoping they would provide a chronology. Though aware of other paradigms, they frequently resorted to European imagery: 'There is every kind of picture: genre, portraits, still life, narrative, imaginative, epic, abstract – even landscape.' They speculated that the motives for the paintings were sympathetic magic, decoration of the shelter, denoting of ownership, illustrating of folktales, recording of contemporary life, and, by analogy with Australian aboriginal paintings, initiation or other ceremonial rites. They explained that the many half-human, half-animal figures depicted dancers wearing 'sophisticated examples of the art of mask-making'.²⁴ None of this is supported by the ethnography of San people. Consequently their work was rejected and ignored by professional archaeologists.

In their descriptions of the paintings they tried to make the San come alive in the imagination of the modern Western viewer. Unfortunately, their humour was often facetious – as in the punning title of their book, *Art on the Rocks* – and in fact degrading to the artists. This can be seen, for example, in a chapter on

'Heads and head-dress', illustrated by a page of photographs. Like other early recorders of the art, they had to guess which features of the paintings were significant. Modern research has shown that the details need to be explained according to a variety of principles, both historical and anthropological, but their captions are mostly facetious, such as 'With a face reminiscent of a character from a painting by Toulouse-Lautrec', 'An unusual full-face portrait with a Napoleon-like air', and 'With a cap to suit Davy Crockett'.²⁵

A new era in the study of the art arrived with the advent of Harald Pager and Patricia Vinnicombe, who readily acknowledged the supernatural element in rock art and at the same time introduced a new rigour to their recording and analysis of the paintings. Pager was an Austrian commercial artist. He published two books on the Drakensberg art, the massive and spectacular volume *Ndedema* (1971)²⁶ and *Stone Age Myth and Magic* (1975).²⁷ He pioneered a new method for copying rock art in which he photographed paintings in black and white and then took the prints back to the sites and coloured them in oils. He lived in the shelters for months on end, suffering hardship in the field, sometimes shared by wife Shirley Ann. He explained that he had to be in the shelters at all times of the day, as the changing light would bring out subtle details in the paintings that were not always visible. The resultant copies show meticulous recording of every detail, but they are criticised for making the colours unrealistically bright. He worked to the highest professional standards of archaeology: measuring and drawing ground and wall plans of the shelters, showing the positions of the paintings.

Pager also tried to interpret the meaning of the paintings, as there was an increasing realisation among commentators on rock art that the paintings could not be taken at face value. Like Woodhouse, Lee and Willcox, he noticed similar motifs and thought that by collating and comparing them he might unravel their meaning. For example, he brought together in one plate various depictions of what he called ‘winged antelope’ or *alites*.²⁸ He thought they might represent spirits of the dead (Figure 3). He assumed that variations in the details of these figures were important. (I present a different interpretation later.)

Pager went on to record and publish the paintings in the Brandberg in Namibia, where he lived in even more extreme conditions, and he later died of kidney failure .

Patricia Vinnicombe grew up on a farm at Underberg, where she first encountered rock art. She trained as an occupational therapist, but went on to obtain her doctorate on rock art and become a distinguished professional researcher. She started making copies of paintings in 1953 and developed the method of tracing paintings using transparent polythene sheeting and

prepared watercolour paints mixed with a detergent as fixative. Her brushstrokes followed the strokes of the artists. This method, with modifications, complemented her photography. In her copies she lessened the effect of the rock background in order to highlight the images (whereas some people think that in Pager’s copies the background is intrusive). Her tracing made clear details that earlier commentators on the art and photographers had missed, such as the hooves on a human figure.

A limited edition of 1 000 copies of Vinnicombe’s magnum opus, *People of the Eland*, was published in 1976,²⁹ and it was republished by Wits University Press along with a festschrift in 2009.³⁰ The first 110 pages covered as much as she could find out about the history of the San in the Drakensberg, followed by a chapter on previous research, before she went on to report her own research. She was the first to apply a methodical, quantitative approach to the recording of rock art. In reaction to archaeologists who up to then had considered rock art as ‘arty’ and impossible of scientific study, she wanted to be ‘scientific’. Each image was analysed according to twenty categories. (The amount of work



Figure 4: The dying eland panel in Game Pass Shelter traced by members of RARI

involved in putting this all on cards and then analysing the cards is astounding.) It was a determined attempt to throw the net wide in case something might be significant. Of course, the very act of devising distinct categories is subjective, no matter how objective her quantitative data might seem.

Her template combined asking questions about anthropological evidence with seeking clues to meaning. Some of her categories (such as weapons and human dress) are attempts to use paintings as historical and anthropological evidence. Some other categories (style, colour, manner of execution, superpositioning) are an attempt to date or put paintings in historical sequence, using the approach of earlier researchers. Further random categories included the relationship of colours to subject matter, the direction in which human figures faced, and enigmatic details such as hooves on human bodies. Most of these lines of inquiry have proved dead ends. Like close-up photography, the downside of quantitative analysis is that it fragments and breaks up the complexity of panels. She was aware of the records of the Bleeks and the oral traditions of modern San, but could not apply them to her fragmented data to produce a coherent theory. In retrospect, Vinnicombe's analyses made a limited contribution to an understanding of the meaning of the art.

Several researchers (such as Tim Maggs in the western Cape) followed Vinnicombe in applying quantitative analysis to the art. David Lewis-Williams and David Pearce have summed up their work:

One of the achievements of the quantitative work that a number of researchers conducted in the late 1960s and early 1970s was a precise

appreciation of the selectivity of the subject matter. They found that the art was not a simulacrum of multi-functional Western image-making, as many researchers imagined it to be. Rather, it was a specific, ritualised practice in its own right with its own aims, concerns, conventions and social consequences.³¹

Between 1979 and 1986 Lucas Smits, a Hollander who was a lecturer in human geography at the National University of Lesotho, took leave to establish and head the Analysis of Rock Art in Lesotho (ARAL) project at the university, for which he obtained international funding. He worked on locating and copying paintings in Lesotho. Back at the university, he projected the photographs onto sheets which students then outlined and coloured in. As the students knew nothing of rock art, the sheets are very inaccurate. His concern was recording, not analysis, so he published very little. He took all his material back to the Netherlands with him in 1987. However, the Rock Art Research Institute (RARI) at the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of Lesotho now have digital copies of all his records, which may be seen on the RARI website.

David Lewis-Williams became interested in rock art in the 1950s, when he was living in the Cape. He intensified his interest in the 1960s and 1970s while teaching at Kearsney College, which gave him the opportunity for field work in the Drakensberg, and he produced a groundbreaking doctoral thesis on the subject, which was published in 1981.³² On the strength of this he was offered a lectureship at the University of the Witwatersrand, where he remained until his retirement. He is still professionally active as an emeritus professor. He

founded RARI at the university, which led in turn to the establishment of the Origins Centre, the country's most important rock art museum. RARI has nurtured many young rock art scholars. It now holds important collections of original rock art and copies, including those of Pager, Vinnicombe and Lee. In 2008 Battiss's son Giles donated his rock art archive, which 'consists of some 700 pieces comprising a variety of materials, including tracings and drawings in paint on cellophane, copies and drawings on paper, photographs, prints, notebooks and a variety of other items'.³³

Lewis-Williams has published many books, including books on the palaeolithic art of Europe and neolithic cultures in the Near East. His studies of southern African rock art became known to the general public through *Images of Power* (1989), co-authored with Thomas Dowson,³⁴ while two more recent and fuller studies are *A Cosmos in Stone* (2002)³⁵ and *San Spirituality* (2004).³⁶ He has also written and co-authored simplified popular guides, such as *San Rock Art* (2011).³⁷ He has received many awards, both local and overseas, including honorary doctorates from the Universities of Cape Town and the Witwatersrand and the Order of Baobab (Gold), the highest honour the State can bestow for 'exceptional and distinguished contributions in service to the community, business and the economy, science, medicine and technological innovation.'

He began his intensive research with statistical recording. Already we can see a difference between his and earlier records. A feature of the art that had puzzled researchers is the deliberate painting of images over other images. Early commentators on

San art believed that artists simply ignored what was already on the rock face, and painted where they liked, but this is easily demonstrated not to be true, because often large expanses of suitable rock face in a shelter are left blank while superpositioning occurs elsewhere. Some researchers used the sequence of superpositioning to work out successive styles and hence dating. As more became known of rock art around the world, researchers realised that superpositioning like this is found everywhere, and it was generally thought to have some 'magical' significance. Lewis-Williams set out to see whether, instead of speculation and broad generalisations, quantitative analysis could detect any pattern of deeper meaning to the superpositioning. Although he did not pursue this line of inquiry, he provided some tentative evidence of patterns in what was painted on top of what. In both the Giant's Castle and Barkly East districts, human figures are shown to be mainly underneath other subjects, while animals are on top.

Lewis-Williams left quantitative analysis behind, and set out to interpret the art through detailed analysis in the light of information he believed to be relevant. He developed his interpretation of rock art from three sources:

Historical ethnographic records

He first drew on the nineteenth-century information collected by the Bleeks and Orpen, believing it was helpful because it was contemporary with the last known painters. His critics argued that the Bleeks' San teachers were mainly from the northern Cape and northern Namibia, and there was no proof they shared their beliefs with the people who painted the art in the Drakensberg.

Contemporary ethnographic studies

The expeditions of Lorna Marshall and later Megan Biesele to the Kalahari in the 1950s and later provided a lot of information about San beliefs and customs. For example, the San have been photographed, filmed and interviewed about performing trance dances. Lewis-Williams realised that the new information, systematically organised according to anthropological principles, was also a fit for many of the paintings. However, he encountered criticism from those who say that there is no proof the modern people of the Kalahari share their beliefs and practices with the earlier artists, and that there is no such thing as a pan-Bushman system of beliefs and practices. Nevertheless, in many extraordinary details he has shown how this information illuminates understanding of the art. We have already seen how a /Xam man from the northern Cape immediately saw the meaning in the paintings of shamans and rain animals that Orpen sent to Cape Town.

Neuropsychology

Once the ethnography had shown that the art was shamanic in origin, Lewis-Williams turned to neuropsychology, which has demonstrated that people entering altered states of consciousness all over the world can have similar experiences and visions, which they interpret according to their culture, beliefs and rituals. He and his colleague Thomas Dowson, who worked on rock engravings,³⁸ showed that the rock paintings and engravings of the San record their trance experiences which are induced by their rhythmic dancing, for which we have historical and contemporary oral accounts. This understanding helped explain some of the non-figurative im-

agery such as dots, zigzags and nested u-shapes.

Lewis-Williams' dictum is: 'The best that researchers can hope for in all archaeological explanations beyond the trivial is that they provide a persuasive account that articulates at the finest level possible with the available evidence.'³⁹ For example, he has pointed out that various figures Pager had called 'winged antelope' and could not explain include the following typical features of San trance: 'nasal blood, antelope heads and hoofs, arms in the backward position, hairs [erect], lines from the top of the head, and trailing streamers. Often they are in a kneeling posture that recalls the position into which some dancers fall when they enter trance' (Figure 3). He therefore dubbed them 'trance-buck'. Where Pager had recorded and collated every detail of the creatures in case the differences were significant, Lewis-Williams sees variation in the details as immaterial: 'The wide variety within what is clearly a category of painting ... may be attributed to the idiosyncratic nature of Bushman religion. Because each trance-buck represents a shaman's hallucination, each is a unique variation on a theme.'⁴⁰

The trance-buck paintings show only some of the features of altered consciousness that are to be seen in the art. For these and some other features, Lewis-Williams singled out as specially revealing – he called it the Rosetta Stone of South African rock art – the panel in Game Pass Shelter in the Kamberg Nature Reserve that Van Riet Lowe and Battiss believed was painted by 'strangers' (Figure 4). It depicts a dying eland, with shamans in close attendance, half transformed into eland, with one holding its tail and imitating its dying stance by crossing his legs. Since

shamans often liken entering trance to dying, it would appear that the shaman figures are closely associated with the dying eland.

The national significance of Lewis-Williams' work on valuing the heritage of the San people has been recognised. The South African coat of arms has at its centre a figure from a San painting that RARI provided at the request of the Presidency. The same painting featured subsequently in a series of postage stamps issued in 2006 that illustrated some of the most significant images that Lewis-Williams had identified and explicated. Another of the stamps reproduced the now famous dying eland scene from Game Pass Shelter (Figure 4).⁴¹

There are many challenges to Lewis-Williams, and the arguments on both sides are too complex to go into here. For the sake of illustration, I shall name four of his critics. Willcox said that Lewis-Williams was 'metaphysical', and that he disagreed with Lewis-Williams' theories on the grounds that they were more elaborate than necessary to explain the existence of the art. Although Woodhouse accepted in later years that the paintings 'can best be understood by reference to the recorded folklore and ethnography of the San',⁴² his obituary in the *Sunday Times* says that he 'strongly disagreed' with Lewis-Williams and presented his collection of about 22 000 slides to the University of Pretoria, which has no specialisation in the study of rock art, rather than to RARI.⁴³ George Hughes, former CEO of the Natal Parks Board, who had worked as a ranger at Giant's Castle and submitted a numerical inventory of sites to RARI, dismissed the neuropsychological explanation as 'fevered speculation'.⁴⁴ He suggested

that its proponents claimed it applied to all paintings, whereas Lewis-Williams and Pearce had previously been at pains to make clear that 'this broad explanation does not claim that *all* San images derived from specific visions of a supernatural realm' (their emphasis).⁴⁵ Lewis-Williams was engaged in a long-running dispute with Anne Solomon, author of many publications on the San and rock art such as *The Essential Guide to San Rock Art* (1998).⁴⁶ Simply put, she interpreted the art in mythological terms. This can be illustrated by reference to the figures that are partly human and partly animal (therianthropes) and which are common in the art. According to Lewis-Williams, they are records of the experiences of shamans in trance who feel themselves transformed into animals, but Solomon argued that they represented mythological or spiritual beings.⁴⁷

Research has also taken other lines of approach. Before Lewis-Williams undertook the bulk of his research, the work of John Wright while he was an historian at the University of Natal proved a dead end. He undertook research into the history of the San and published his MA dissertation as the classic book *Bushman Raiders of the Drakensberg 1840-1870* (1971).⁴⁸ In it he provided an authoritative account of the interaction between the San and people of other races, and dispelled many misconceptions about the nature of the interaction and the fate of the San, but he saw the rock art simply as an historical record.

Wright was one of the first historians of Natal to realise that its history was incomplete without an account of its prehistory. He therefore subsequently collaborated with Aron Mazel, an archaeologist, in co-authoring *Tracks*

in a *Mountain Range* (2007), in which Mazel dealt with the rock art.⁴⁹ Mazel began searching for rock art sites in the Drakensberg on behalf of the Department of Forestry in 1979, and later worked for the Natal Museum. He excavated a number of caves in the Drakensberg. In Collingham Shelter he found a painted slab in an 1 800-year-old deposit. He recorded and analysed 19 000 paintings. RARI has over 13 000 of his colour photographs.

Some researchers nowadays are looking at regional differences in the art of the Drakensberg mountain range according to subject matter rather than style. Using quantitative methods, Mazel showed that there is a difference in the distribution of paintings of different kinds of antelope between the northern and southern regions. His analyses added to the quantitative data assembled by other researchers, but on the whole did not advance research very much. Mazel accepted Lewis-Williams' interpretation of the art, and the illustration on the cover of *Tracks* can be seen as a tribute to him because of the choice of the 'dying eland' panel from Game Pass that Lewis-Williams had singled out (Figure 4). Mazel left South Africa to become an archaeologist at the University of Newcastle in Britain.

A new line of research was introduced in the 1990s when Pieter Jolly argued that hunter-gatherers had borrowed religious concepts and ritual practices from the African farming groups with whom they had been in close contact for an extended period.⁵⁰ Several other recent rock art researchers have investigated this cultural interaction, including some of Lewis-Williams' former students. Sam Challis has worked on the archaeology of contact between hunter-gatherers, pastoralists and farm-

ers, attempting to decipher San art using ethnographic analysis and working with and training local collectives.⁵¹ These researchers reinforce the understanding that the interaction between the Bantu-speaking immigrants and the indigenous San was not mainly a violent one, but one of intermarriage and co-existence, with a transfer of beliefs and practices in both directions. They have identified many paintings that illustrate details of this cultural sharing.

Different approaches to the art continue to proliferate. For example, a student from RARI has written his Master's dissertation on identifying the work of the same individual artist in various shelters in one area of the Berg. The art continues to elicit differences of opinion among archaeologists, art historians and other interested parties. One dispute was between Thembi Russell and David Pearce over the use of the Harris Matrix to interpret superpositioning. The Harris Matrix (actually a lattice, not a matrix) was developed to interpret layers in archaeological deposits. It has been used on rock art by Johannes Loubser, Alain King and Joanè Swart. According to Pearce, all it could do was confirm the episodes or artistic periods already identified through the use of criteria such as style and colours of paints. Russell first used it in Giant's Castle Main Caves to confirm the seven 'styles' of Pager and the four 'phases' of Vinnicombe. Then she used it to identify sequences for individual paintings within a single tradition. However, Pearce argues that her categories are ill-defined and it is not possible to use the matrix for individual paintings in a single tradition, but only for contexts of multiple traditions.⁵²

The use of photography in recording the art has gone through several stages and continues to develop. Kevin Crause

took advantage of the development of digitised, computer-enhanced photography to use a technique he called the Capture Process Enhance Display (CPED) Toolset, with which he took colour photographs in the Drakensberg that gave fine definition and brought out hitherto invisible details in the paintings.⁵³ Most recently, Jeremy Hollmann has described the use of the digital programmes Adobe Lightroom, Adobe Photoshop and DStretch.⁵⁴

The rock art continues to surprise. In 2011, Jeremy Hollmann and Carolyn Thorp successfully removed a painting from the Vaalekop Shelter that was due to be inundated by the new Spring Grove Dam on the Upper Mooi River.⁵⁵ In the shelter they made a find that takes us back to the painting in Willcox Shelter first copied by Mark Tylor in 1893 (Figure 2). In a provocative address to the South African Archaeological Society, Thorp reported that they had found skeletons of frogs in the cave, leading her to postulate that the mysterious figure and its duplicates were based on frogs.

The rock paintings in the uKhahlamba Drakensberg are fading. Thanks to the diligence of so many people, much of the art has been preserved in copies. Like all academic studies, understanding of the art has developed through building on the work of earlier writers, collaboration, and disputation. We shall never know everything about the art, but we know a lot more than when Orpen and Tylor trudged into those spectacular fastnesses.

NOTES

- 1 There are many publications about the Bleeks and their San teachers. For example Andrew Bank, *Bushman in a Victorian World* (Cape Town, Double Storey, 2006); Neil Bennun, *The Broken String: The Last Words of an Ex-*

- inct People* (Johannesburg, Southern, 2004); and Janette Deacon and Thomas A. Dowson (eds), *Voices from the Past: /Xam Bushmen and the Bleek and Lloyd Collection* (Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 1996).
- 2 For an account of this episode, see J.D. Lewis-Williams, *Images of Mystery: Rock Art of the Drakensberg* (Cape Town, Double Storey, 2003), pp. 17–26.
- 3 Patricia Vinnicombe, *People of the Eland: Rock Paintings of the Drakensberg Bushmen as a Reflection of their Life and Thought* (Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal Press, 1976), figure 87, p. 160.
- 4 Vinnicombe, *People of the Eland*, p. 123.
- 5 The activities of Tylor, Hutchinson, Mäder, Whyte and Anderson are recorded by Vinnicombe in *People of the Eland*.
- 6 Jeremy Hollmann and Lawrence Msimanga, “‘An extreme case’: the removal of rock art from uMhlabane (eBusingatha) rock art shelter, Bergville, KwaZulu-Natal’ *Southern African Humanities* 20(2) 2008, pp. 285–315.
- 7 Lewis-Williams, *Images of Mystery*, p. 15.
- 8 H. Breuil, ‘Some foreigners in the frescoes on rocks in southern Africa’ *South African Archaeological Bulletin* 4 (1949), pp. 39–50.
- 9 Walter Battiss, *The Amazing Bushman* (Pretoria, Red Fawn Press, 1939).
- 10 Walter Battiss, *Artists of the Rocks* (Pretoria, Red Fawn Press, 1948).
- 11 *ibid.*, p. 93.
- 12 Marion How, *The Mountain Bushmen of Basutoland* (Pretoria, Van Schaik, 1970).
- 13 *ibid.*, pp. 34–35.
- 14 Pieter Jolly, ‘A first generation descendant of the Transkei San’ *South African Archaeological Bulletin* 41 (1986), pp. 6–9.
- 15 J.D. Lewis-Williams, ‘The last testament of the southern San’ *South African Archaeological Bulletin* 41 (1986), pp. 10–11.
- 16 A.R. Willcox, *Rock Paintings of the Drakensberg, Natal and Griqualand East* (London, Max Parrish, 1956).
- 17 A.R. Willcox, *The Rock Art of South Africa* (London, Nelson, 1963), p. 19.
- 18 *ibid.*, p. 34.
- 19 A.R. Willcox, *The Drakensberg Bushmen and their Art* (Winterton, Drakensberg, 1984), p. 28.
- 20 A. Bonneau et al., ‘Comparing painting pigments and subjects: the case of white paints at the Metolong Dam (Lesotho)’. *Proceedings of the 39th International Symposium for Archaeometry*, Leuven, 2012, p. 321.
- 21 Joan Nockels and Alex Willcox, *Kabo of the Mountain* (Winterton, Drakensberg, 1986).

- 22 D.N. Lee and H.C. Woodhouse, *Art on the Rocks of Southern Africa* (Cape Town, Purnell, 1970).
- 23 Elwyn Jenkins, 'Showcasing South African rock art on postage stamps' *Critical Arts* 26(4) 2012, p. 473.
- 24 Lee and Woodhouse, *Art on the Rocks*, pp. 16–17, 96.
- 25 *ibid.*, pp. 127, 130, 131.
- 26 Harald Pager, *Ndedema* (Graz, Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1971), p. 40.
- 27 Harald Pager, *Stone Age Myth and Magic* (Graz, Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1975).
- 28 Pager, *Ndedema*.
- 29 Vinnicombe, *People of the Eland*.
- 30 P.J. Mitchell and B.W. Smith (eds), *The Eland's People: New Perspectives on the Rock Art of the Maloti-Drakensberg Bushmen: Essays in Memory of Patricia Vinnicombe* (Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 2009).
- 31 J.D. Lewis-Williams and David G. Pearce, 'Framed idiosyncrasy: method and evidence in the interpretation of San rock art' *South African Archaeological Bulletin* 67(195) 2012, p. 76 (slightly paraphrased).
- 32 J.D. Lewis-Williams, *Believing and Seeing: Symbolic Meaning in Southern San Rock Paintings* (London, Academic Press, 1981).
- 33 David G. Pearce, Lara Mallen and Catherine Namono, 'Walter Battiss and South African rock art' *Digging Stick* 34(2) 2017, pp. 7–8.
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- 40 Lewis-Williams and Dowson, *Images of Power*, pp. 72, 73.
- 41 Jenkins, 'Showcasing South African rock art on postage stamps', pp. 477–479.
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- 43 Chris Barron, 'Bert Woodhouse' *Sunday Times*, 27 November 2011. Another source puts the number of slides at about 44 000.
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