A dream of eland: an unexplored component of San shamanism and rock art

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For many years the San (Bushman) rock art of southern Africa (Fig. 1) was considered to be principally narrative and decorative, with a small admixture of 'mythological' depictions. This explanation was deemed sufficient to cover all the art in a general way. Writers therefore took individual paintings to 'mean' what they appeared to depict, and 'interpretation' was no more than identifying (or guessing at) subject matter. Although a few writers still maintain this position, the shamanistic nature of the art is today widely...
 recognised (Lewis-Williams 1981, 1982, 1983, 1984; Huffman 1983; Maggs and Sealy 1983; Manhire et al. 1986; Yates et al. 1985). This new understanding has transformed our approach to southern African rock art. Researchers now interpret specific panels in terms of well-documented symbols of potency, metaphors of trance experience, significant human and animal postures, entoptic phenomena, and hallucinations experienced by San shamans. As this work proceeds, we learn more and more about the 'syntax' and 'vocabulary' of the art and are thus able to 'read' increasingly complex painted texts. Each elucidation deepens our understanding of San thought and religious experience and so provides hitherto unattainable insights into the ideology of the now-extinct painters. Nevertheless many archaeologists still do not fully appreciate the potential of this kind of analysis. To illustrate something of this potential, I lead our discussion, via a hitherto unnoted component of San shamanism, towards one of the most remarkable painted panels in southern Africa. By taking this route, I hope to show that the shamanistic interpretation of San rock art is an open-ended, heuristic 'paradigm' which can be extended to embrace a variety of shamanistic practices and to explain paintings of great complexity.

Discussions of the art as part of shamanism have all emphasised the central role of the San trance, or curing, dance (for extensive accounts of this dance see Lee 1967 and 1968, Marshall 1969, Biesele 1975 and 1978, Guenther 1975, Katz 1982). At a trance dance in the Kalahari today, women sing and clap the rhythm of medicine songs believed to contain supernatural potency. They sit around a central fire, also believed to contain potency, while the men, half of whom may be shamans, dance around them. As the dance intensifies, the men, usually without the aid of hallucinogens, tremble violently, stagger and finally enter trance. In a state of controlled trance, they move around laying their trembling hands on all the people present and drawing known and unknown sickness out of them. In a deeper level of trance, the shamans collapse and experience hallucinations such as out-of-body travel. Some rock paintings depict similar circular dances, while others show dancers circling a patient (Fig. 2) or surrounded by clapping women. In yet other compositions the participants are arranged in no apparent order. In these less 'realistic' paintings the men are often attenuated to express some of the sensations of trance, and others have extraordinary hallucinatory head forms and other distortions (Fig. 3).

Having acknowledged the importance of the trance dance, I now turn to a component of San shamanistic experience that has so far not received attention. The nineteenth century Bleek collection of southern San (/Xam) ethnography records verbatim accounts of shamans experiencing dreams very similar to the hallucinations associated with the trance dance (for accounts of the Bleek Collection and its relationship to modern Kalahari San ethnography, see Lewis-Williams and Biesele 1978 and Lewis-Williams 1981: 25–37). One of these accounts says that, when people hear a shaman shivering at night, they believe him to be combatting dangerous shamans (Bleek 1935: 13; see also Bleek 1936: 142–143). Lloyd, Bleek's collaborator, seems to have taken the passage to mean that the man was shivering as if from the cold. Because neither Bleek nor Lloyd had ever seen San shamans in action, they had only a vague understanding of what they did. Moreover, it is probable that neither had any conception at all of trance and its role in San shamanism. In any event, when Lloyd translated this passage she did not know
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Figure 2 San rock painting of a curing dance. In the centre a kneeling shaman places his hands on a recumbent patient. The containing line may represent a hut or some unexplained concept. The scatter of arrows in the lower part of the panel may represent 'arrows of sickness' that malevolent shamans were believed to shoot into people. Natal Drakensberg. Colours: red and white. Scale in centimetres.

that !khauken, the word she gave as 'shiver', means to beat or to tremble, but especially to tremble in trance (Bleek 1956: 425). Thus, the informant was not referring to shivering from cold but to a shaman's physical reaction to an altered state of consciousness comparable to that experienced in the trance dance. The essence of the passage is that a shaman could protect the people in sleep just as he did in trance.

One informant developed this concept of a sleeping shaman’s protective powers:

Although he is asleep, he is watching the doings that occur at night, for he wants to protect the people from the things that come to kill them. Because of these things he watches over the people, for he is aware that other shamans walk by night to attack people at night. Therefore he protects them from these (Bleek 1935: 26–27).
Figure 3 A complex group of shamans dancing with bows and sticks. Anatomical distortions and other features suggest the panel is hallucinatory. A large figure to the left has a line of dots along its back. This probably represents the 'boiling' of potency in a shaman's spine. To the right, an eland, only partially preserved, has been superimposed on some of the dancers. Harrismith district. Colours: red and white. Scale in centimetres.

Such extracorporeal protecting and marauding was often accomplished in animal form, and the /Xam spoke of shamans turning themselves into creatures such as jackals (Bleek 1935: 15–17), birds (1935: 18–19) and lions (Bleek 1936: 131–133). One informant gave a long account of a female shaman becoming a lioness and visiting his camp 'to see whether we were still well where we lived'. He insisted that 'fighting was not the reason why she had gone out' (Bleek 1935: 43–44). The modern !Kung San of northern Botswana believe that leonine marauding shamans can be seen only by other shamans (Katz 1982: 115, 227). Out-of-body travel is so closely associated with lions that the !Kung use the word for 'pawed creature' (jum) to mean 'to go on out-of-body travel' (Biesele, pers. comm.). Both malevolent and benevolent shamans are often depicted in feline form in the art (Lewis-Williams 1985).

The means by which /Xam shamans accomplished these transformations and out-of-body journeys was also described by one of Bleek's informants: 'He lies asleep by us, his magic walks about while we sleep here' (Bleek 1935: 30). The /Xam word Bleek translated as 'magic' is //ke:n; it means the supernatural potency San shamans possess and activate to enter trance. To dance the medicine (or trance) dance was 'to do //ke:n'. Dancing and sleeping shamans thus harnessed the same power. For the shamans, sleep was like the dance and therefore an active rather than a passive condition. Because the dreams I have described are so closely linked lexically (/khauken, //ke:n) and by substance (protection, out-of-body travel) to trance I call them trance-dreams.

A still closer link was described by /Hanǂkasso, one of Bleek's informants. He spoke
of /Kannu, a shaman who had control of rain. The /Xam distinguished four overlapping categories of shamans, one of which comprised the /khwa-ka gi:ten, or ‘shamans of the rain’. Their best-known technique was to enter trance and capture a hallucinatory ‘rain-animal’, which they killed where rain was most needed (Lewis-Williams 1981: 103–116). One of /Kannu’s rain-making techniques was to strike on his bow-string while the other members of his band were asleep (Bleek 1933: 391). The vibrating bow-string recalls the trembling of trance, but /Han=kasso also said /Kannu and his friends dreamed ‘that rain would fall. Then they told the other people that they had dreamt that rain would fall. Then the rain came up’ (1933: 389). This may, at first glance, appear to be a dreamed premonition or revelation, for these are also part of San belief (e.g., Bleek 1932: 326; Biese 1975: (1) 4, (2) 118, 123), but other accounts of dreaming suggest it was more than that. The /Xam word for dream //kabbo, could be used in an active, transitive way in the sense of causing things to happen. This purposeful dimension is particularly clear in a statement given by //Kabbo, one of Bleek’s most prolific informants. His name, Dream, is significant in the light of what he had to say. When he was staying with the Bleek family in Cape Town in 1871, he found gardening hard work. He therefore caused it to rain: ‘I dreamt that I told the rain to fall for me, for my arm ached, my chest ached. I therefore dreamt that I spoke. The rain assented to me, the rain would fall for me’ (Bleek MS: L.II.6.625). Both //Kabbo and /Kannu were trance-dreaming to make rain. It is indeed possible that //Kabbo earned his name through such accounts and that he was himself a shaman and so a particularly valuable informant.

Causing things to happen by dreaming also occurs in myths about the Mantis, the /Xam trickster-deity. For instance, in one of the many tales about him, the Mantis was anxious for dawn to break: “The mantis dreamed the morrow, “O day quickly break for me”” (Bleek MS: L.II.5.556; the published version, Bleek 1924: 20, obscures this literal translation). The Mantis was causing day to break, not just dreaming about it. In another narrative the Meerkats (a type of mongoose) killed the Mantis’s eland. Greatly distressed, he returned home, leaving the Meerkats cutting up the eland and hanging its meat on the branches of a tree. Then the informant, again //Kabbo, said,

He sleeps. He trembles as he lies. Then the tree comes out of the ground on which the eland meat is placed. The tree comes out of the ground, rises up, with all the things hanging on it. It goes through the heavens and comes down near the Mantis’s head. When it descends near his head, it grows there making a home for him as he lies (Bleek MS: L.II.4.511, 510 rev.).

Here the word translated ‘tremble’ is again /khauken, to tremble in trance. By trance-dreaming, the Mantis caused the tree to uproot itself, and he thus regained possession of his antelope.

These and other accounts suggest that trance-dreaming was, for the /Xam, an important part of shamanistic practice and that they did not draw a clear distinction between it and the hallucinations of trance as experienced in the trance dance: trembling, manipulating potency, transformation into animals, rain-making and extracorporeal journeys were all part of both. On the other hand, the !Kung San speak of a variation on the /Xam experience. A !Kung shaman told Katz (1982: 218) that a shaman dreams of spirits trying to kill people. He then wakes up, enters trance and kills them. In other
societies too the distinction between dreams and shamanistic visions is not always clear (Eliade 1972: 33–66). Knoll (1985: 444) mentions the deliberate induction and manipulation of dream imagery in REM sleep, and it appears that this was part of /Xam shamanism. The shaman did not experience his dream passively; he actively engaged its imagery and manipulated it towards a desired end.

Unlike the medicine dance which has a range of distinctive postures and associations, trance-dreaming is hard to depict. Nevertheless, the foregoing discussion of trance-dreaming places us in an advantageous position to elucidate the remarkable paintings with which this paper is principally concerned (Fig. 4). Apart from two slightly flaked eland, the panel comprises two almost identical parts, each of which has three elements: a standing eland, a superimposed hallucinatory form known as a trance-buck (also ‘flying buck’, Woodhouse 1971, and ‘alites’, Pager 1971), and, as it were between these two, a curled up eland.

The order in which these paintings were executed is significant. The standing eland

Figure 4 A highly complex combination of eland and shamanic hallucinations. Harrismith district. Colours: red and white. Scale in centimetres.
were painted first; then the trance-buck; and finally the two curled up eland were added in halves to give the impression of being underneath the trance-buck. The horns and ears of the curled up eland protrude from behind the humps of the trance-buck. Thus the artist tried, by painting the halves of curled up eland, to give the impression of superpositioning. Quantitative analyses of southern African rock art have suggested that superpositioning was a form of graphic syntax and that the painters favoured certain combinations of subject matter and avoided others (Lewis-Williams 1972, 1974; Pager 1976). This conclusion has been challenged (Willcox 1978) and debated (Lewis-Williams et al. 1979). Whatever the merits of quantitative studies of superpositioning, this panel surely vindicates the view that San artists recognised superpositioning as a way of relating one painting to another. But to approach the meaning of the composition we must examine the twofold role of eland in San shamanistic beliefs.

In the first place, painted eland are symbols of the potency shamans harness to enter trance (Lewis-Williams 1981: 75–101). In the Kalahari today this potency and its associated medicine songs are named after various ‘strong’ things of which eland are particularly important. Eland are considered so potent that hunters like to ‘dance eland potency’ next to the carcass of a freshly killed eland; they believe the place to be suffused with released potency (Lewis-Williams and Biesele 1978). A similar idea is contained in the /Xam myth about the Mantis and the Meerkats (Bleek 1924: 4). When the Mantis found the Meerkats cutting up his eland, he shot arrows at them, but the arrows flew back and he had to dodge them. The narrator said the Mantis intended ‘to fight the eland’s battle’. Again because she did not understand /Xam beliefs about shamanism, Lloyd took this to mean that the Mantis was fighting on behalf of the eland. It is, however, doubtful if /a, the /Xam word translated as both ‘fight’ and ‘battle’ (Bleek MS: L.V.1.3650), can, as a verb, mean anything other than ‘fight against’. As a noun, /a also means an extreme, perhaps dangerous, concentration of potency. Lloyd sometimes translated it ‘curse’, the closest she could get to the San concept. The passage should read: ‘The Mantis intended to fight against the eland’s potency.’ But the eland’s potency, harnessed by the Meerkats, proved too strong, and his arrows were deflected. This potency also explains why /Xam hunters had to perform certain rituals when they approached a dead eland (Bleek 1932: 237–238). The man who had shot the fatal arrow had to remain in the camp until his fellows had cut out the animal’s heart which was believed to possess a dangerous amount of potency. They then ‘beat’ the carcass with its severed tail. Trance is suggested here by another use of /kauken (beat).

The eland’s potency is one of the reasons why it is the most frequently depicted antelope in many parts of southern Africa. It is also the antelope on which the artists lavished the most care: it is painted in shaded polychrome and in a variety of postures more frequently than any other antelope (Maggs 1967; Pager 1971; Lewis-Williams 1972, 1974; Vinnicombe 1975, 1976). According to a descendant of the southern San, these eland paintings also contained potency. When shamans danced, she said, they turned to the depictions in the rock shelter to increase their potency (Lewis-Williams 1986).

At a further level, shamans believed they actually became eland. Transformation into an animal seems to have been an essential part of /Xam shamanism. The Mantis, who was himself a shaman, could cause eland to escape hunters by entering into that antelope’s bones; he also had a special affection for eland (Bleek 1924: 12). In another
myth, he actually becomes 'a large bull eland' (Orpen 1874: 5, 8). Prior to turning into the bull eland, the Mantis 'descended into the ground three times'. Going underground and underwater is so common in San and other shamanism that we may assume the Mantis effected his transformation while in trance.

In the art, transformation into an eland or other antelope is sometimes shown by blending human and antelope forms. These confluences fall into two broad categories: erect figures generally known as therianthropes and, secondly, kneeling trance-buck. The therianthropes have been interpreted as hunters wearing antelope masks, but numerous features count against this view (Pager 1975; Lewis-Williams 1981: 75–101). For instance, they often carry flywhisks, an important accoutrement of the trance dance (Lee 1967: 31; Marshall 1969: 358), and have hoofs in place of feet. In addition, many bleed from the nose. When a shaman entered trance he or she often bled from the nose and then rubbed the blood on a patient in the expectation that it would afford protection from evil and sickness. Nasal blood is indeed one of the most diagnostic features of painted shamans (Lewis-Williams 1981: 75–101). In therianthropes the transformation of shaman into animal is sometimes at a half-man half-animal level, but in other paintings the transformation is complete or virtually complete and thus harder to detect. For example, some otherwise 'realistic' paintings of eland have one or more red lines across the face (e.g., Vinnicombe 1976: Figs. 102, 109, 247, 249), as paintings of shamans often do (e.g., Lewis-Williams 1981: Figs. 19, 20, 28, 38). Moreover, these lines are frequently associated with nasal blood in paintings of both eland and shamans. A less common link between shamans and eland is the flywhisk. At least one painting shows an otherwise 'naturalistic' eland with a flywhisk protruding from the top of its head. Another painting shows a similarly realistic eland with a spray of lines curving from its hump (Fig. 5), a spot equivalent to a shaman's n//au, the 'hole' in the nape of the neck through which sickness is expelled. Two small figures in a clapping posture also indicative of the trance dance are associated with the curving lines. The group of eland of which this one is part comprises two with lines on their faces and others that are apparently realistic. Compositions such as this lead one to suspect that all painted eland may be shamans as well as symbols of potency: in some cases the artists included extra features that confirm the antelope are transformed shamans, but in others they omitted these features. The 'realistic' eland in Figure 4 may thus be transformed shamans even though they lack non-realistic features.

In addition to non-realistic features the artists depicted specific aspects of animal behaviour to suggest the intimate relationship between eland and shaman. San shamans are said to 'die' when they enter trance, and the artists depicted an analogy between 'dying' shamans and dying eland: both tremble, sweat profusely, lower their head, stagger, bleed from the nose and finally collapse unconscious. In addition, a dying eland's hair stands on end. These behavioural characteristics of dying eland were used in the art to identify the many painted dying eland as shamans entering trance. Some paintings juxtapose dying eland with 'dying' shamans who share some of their features (e.g., Lewis-Williams 1981: Fig. 28). The depiction of animal behaviour was thus an important means of expressing concepts at the heart of San shamanism.

Behavioural symbolism of this kind is, I argue, also the key to understanding something of the meaning expressed by the curled up eland in Figure 4. Eland frequently
sleep standing up or lying down with legs folded beneath them and head held high (M. Penrith and R. Smithers, pers. comms.; cf. eland at extreme left of Fig. 5). Both standing and lying down eland are common in the art. Because these may not be sleeping, it is impossible to say with any confidence that they represent a sleeping shaman. But another painted posture leaves no doubt: it is lying curled up with the head tucked in, as are the two in Figure 4 (J. Kingdon and L. van Schalkwyk, pers. comms.). Even as depictions of dying eland are equivalent to shamans 'dying' in trance, unequivocally sleeping eland may represent shamans in what I have called trance-dreaming.

This understanding helps to elucidate the complex forms that appear to overlie the sleeping eland. Each is a blend of a trance-buck and a hunting-bag containing an unstrung bow. Trance-buck are hallucinatory depictions of shamans fused with their animal potency. Some of their features include a kneeling posture or an absence of legs, blood falling from the nose, trailing 'streamers', erect hair and antelope heads (Lewis-Williams 1981: 84–101). Here the heads are particularly interesting because they both have a pair of tusks, an imperfectly understood feature of numerous hallucinatory depictions of shamans. Similarly, both have blood falling from the nose and also streaming back across the face in a way that recalls the red facial lines I have discussed. The trance-buck on the right has antelope ears, but the one on the left has a conical head. This type of head, often greatly exaggerated, probably depicts the sensation experienced in the crown of the head by people in altered states of consciousness. The San believe it is from this spot that a shaman's spirit leaves on out-of-body travel. Both trance-buck, but

Figure 5 A group of painted eland some of which have non-realistic features. Barkly East district. Colours: red, black and white. Scale in centimetres.
especially the one on the left, have humps reminiscent of an eland’s dorsal line. Another feature common to both is the collection of items protruding from the chest. Those on the left are poorly preserved, but those on the right clearly include three flywhisks and a digging stick weighted with a bored-stone. A full discussion of this combination of male (flywhisks) and female (bored-stones) equipment in a hallucinatory painting lies beyond the scope of this paper. The ‘streamers’ associated with each trance-buck are somewhat enigmatic. In depictions of trance-buck the streamers probably represent potency entering the shaman or, sometimes, sickness being expelled. Here the two sections of each streamer suggest link-shaft arrows, but in neither case do they appear to be in the bags; instead they seem to come from the sleeping eland.

Perhaps the most striking feature of these trance-buck is their fusion with hunting-bags. Bags in general have great significance in San art, but here we are concerned specifically with hunting bags that are differently shaped from general purposes bags designed to be carried by hand. The proportions of ordinary bags tend to be square with rounded corners and they have a thong handle looped over the opening, but hunting-bags are more oblong or slightly conical with a shoulder strap running the length of the bag and an opening at one end. When a San man goes out to hunt, he frequently places his quiver and bow in a hunting-bag which he slings over his shoulder, a practice depicted in numerous paintings. The fusion of a hunting-bag with a trance-buck probably refers to the fact that hunting is a further activity performed in trance. Sometimes trance-hunting is done in feline form, but it can also be accomplished with bow and arrow. A Nharo San shaman spoke of this when he said that, during a trance dance, he entered trance, went hunting, and shot an antelope. The next day, he claimed, he took his family to the place where he had killed the animal and they ate it (R. Matthews; pers. comm.). This ‘hunt’ was experienced during a trance dance, but it seems probable that similar ‘hunts’ could have been part of trance-dreaming.

Each trance-buck is thus a blend of diverse components: hunting-bags, hunting equipment, antelope, a digging-stick, flywhisks and features of trance experience. Such bizarre combinations are characteristic of altered states of consciousness. Here each trance-buck may be part of the trance-dream of a sleeping shaman, represented in this panel by the curled up eland. The three components of each group are thus a standing eland (a shaman in eland form, or a symbol of potency), a sleeping eland (a shaman in a trance-dream) and, finally, an image of the shaman’s trance-dream. The shaman, himself a sleeping eland, harnesses eland power and dreams of the eland hunt.

Although some of my explanation of these paintings is conjectural and incomplete, it should be clear that the essential elements and the location of the paintings within the domain of San shamanism are not in question. In establishing the provenance of these depictions, I have tried to show that the shamanistic view of southern San rock art is not, like some of its predecessors, a superficial explanation that does not confront individual paintings and the details within them. In contrast to earlier explanations, the shamanistic view forces us to address hitherto overlooked painted details and to explain these by drawing on well-documented San beliefs, experiences and practices. The establishment of the art’s association with shamanism is the beginning, not the end, of a long research project that will explore further components of San shamanism, decode increasingly complex painted panels and thus help to reconstruct southern African Later Stone Age.
idea (Lewis-Williams 1982, 1984). Already southern African rock art provides an especially penetrating view into the heart of shamanistic experience. Eventually we may be able to use these insights to formulate general principles of shamanistic rock art.

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References


Abstract

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Accounts of San (Bushman) shamanistic rock art have concentrated on the role of the trance dance in the generation of the paintings. This paper considers the role of dreaming to achieve ends similar to those served by the dance. Animal behaviour was depicted to suggest trance-dreaming, as it was to suggest other shamanistic experiences. Sleeping eland probably represent San shamans in trance-dreaming.