Image-Makers

Rock-art images around the world are often difficult for us to decipher as modern viewers. Based on authentic records of the beliefs, rituals and daily life of the nineteenth-century San peoples, and of those who still inhabit the Kalahari Desert, this book adopts a new approach to hunter-gatherer rock art by placing the process of image-making within the social framework of production. Lewis-Williams shows how the San used this imagery not simply to record hunts and the animals they saw, but rather to sustain the social network and status of those who made them. By drawing on such rich and complex records, the book reveals specific, repeated features of hunter-gatherer imagery and allows us insight into social relations as if through the eyes of the San themselves.

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The Social Context of a Hunter-Gatherer Ritual

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi – 110025, India

79 Anson Road, #06-04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108498210
DOI: 10.1017/9781108632829

First published 2019

Printed in the United Kingdom by TJ International Ltd, Padstow Cornwall

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-108-49821-0 Hardback

This book is dedicated to the Khoisan people of southern Africa.
They left us an amazing heritage.

The royalties from this book are donated to the Kalahari People's Fund.

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Note: In all line drawings, black represents dark red paint; white represents white paint.

Acknowledgements

Numerous people have assisted in various ways in the writing of this book and indeed over many years of exploring our mutual interest. I am particularly indebted to anthropologists who have worked with the San: they include Alan Barnard, Megan Biesele, Mathias Guenther, Richard Katz, Richard Lee, Polly Wiessner, Edwin Wilmsen and members of the Marshall family – Lorna, Elizabeth and John (I met Laurence, who was the organiser of their pioneering Kalahari expeditions, only briefly). I mention Megan Biesele especially because it was with her that I first met the Kalahari San people. Since then, she has been extraordinarily patient in answering my endless questions. I also owe a great deal to John Argyle, who just over forty years ago was my PhD supervisor. Although I do not always live up to his standards, his abhorrence of jargon and meaningless abstractions has remained with me. Amongst South African friends and colleagues, I mention especially those who have worked with San rock art and the relevant ethnography: Janette Deacon, Mark McGranaghan and all members of the Rock Art Research Institute at the University of the Witwatersrand, but especially those who so usefully read drafts of various chapters of the book: David Pearce, Director of the Rock Art Research Institute, and Sam Challis. Jeremy Hollmann also read and usefully commented on chapters. David Witelson read chapters and moreover kindly undertook the onerous task of compiling all the illustrations. I am indebted to the University of Cape Town and the librarian of the Jagger Library for permission over the years to quote passages from the Bleek and Lloyd Archive. The research on which this book is based is supported by the National Research Foundation of South Africa.

Illustrations

All illustrations: Rock Art Research Institute. Except: 3.4 (Sam Challis and RARI); 7.2 (after Siegel 1977); 7.3a (after Pager 1971: fig. 387); 7.6 (courtesy J. H. N. Loubser); 8.2 (after Blundell 2004: figs 62, 67); 8.3 (after Blundell 2004: fig. 38); 8.4 (courtesy Sam Challis).

Note on Spelling

Linguists, anthropologists and San groups themselves have over the years used different spellings of San words. I retain the spellings as they are found in the literature, even though they may not be consistent with each other over the course of the book. The most recent orthography, especially the Jul'hoan one that Patrick Dickens compiled and that the people themselves and the Namibian government now adopt, has become one of the several educational languages of Namibia. None of the other San languages has achieved national educational status.

Note on Pronunciation

In addition to the more usual phonetic representations, the following symbols are used for the clicks that are a distinctive feature of the Khoisan language family. I take the descriptions of these sounds from Lorna Marshall's book *The !Kung of Nyae Nyae* (Marshall 1976: xx).

ǀ *Dental click* The tip of the tongue is placed against the back of the upper front teeth; in the release, it is pulled away with a fricative sound. English-speakers use a similar sound in gentle reproof.

ǃ *Alveolar-palatal click* The tip of the tongue is pressed firmly against the back of the alveolar ridge where it meets the hard palate and is very sharply snapped down. A loud pop results. English-speakers use this sound to imitate horses' hoofs on paving.

ǂ *Alveolar click* The front part of the tongue, more than the tip, is pressed against the alveolar ridge and drawn sharply downward when released.

ǁ *Lateral click* The tongue is placed as for the alveolar click. It is released at the sides by being drawn in from the front teeth. Horse riders sometimes use lateral clicks to signal their steeds to start or go faster.

ʘ *Labial click* The frontal closure is made with pursed lips; when the lips are released, the sound is like a kiss. This click is found in southern San languages only.

X In San orthography, X does not denote a click; it indicates a guttural sound as in the Scottish *loch*.

In Bantu language (e.g., isiZulu, isiXhosa) orthography, clicks, which derive from Khoisan languages, are represented as follows:

ǀ = c
ǃ = q
ǁ = x

Contrary to strict phonetic practice, I have given the first alphabetical letter of a proper noun as a capital (e.g., ǁKabbo). This departure makes for easier reading by persons not familiar with San names.

The Bleek and Lloyd Archive References

References to the Bleek and Lloyd Archive comprise the following parts. The initial letter (B or L) indicates the recorder as Wilhelm Bleek or Lucy Lloyd. The following Roman number indicates the informant. The next two Arabic numbers indicate the volume number and the page number. Reverso pages are signalled by an apostrophe (e.g., L.V.16.5169').

Introduction

This book adopts a new approach to hunter-gatherer rock art. Instead of focusing principally on the meanings of images, as is usually the case in interpretative studies, it begins by placing the process of image-making within the social framework of production and the ways in which San people variously responded to their imagery.

While this approach has implications for rock imagery worldwide by virtue of the principles it uncovers, I illustrate the social role of imagery in a hunter-gatherer context by means of the southern African San, more popularly though contentiously still known as 'Bushmen'. A major advantage of this exemplar is that researchers have recourse to a remarkable archive of nineteenth-century verbatim southern San ethnography in the original, though now extinct, ǀXam San language. In addition, there is the considerable amount of related material garnered from the better-known twentieth- and twenty-first-century Kalahari San. It is therefore possible to go further in southern Africa than in some other parts of the world where relevant ethnography is minimal, absent or of dubious relevance and to elucidate the underlying social and cognitive framework of San imagery. Certainly, I do not say that researchers should argue by simple analogy from San to other rock arts. Each rock art is worthy of its own study; no one explanation can cover all rock arts. Rather, the San example opens up lines of enquiry that may be followed up in those different contexts. Researchers may find points of similarity and, at the same time, difference; it is principles, rather than specifics, that matter. In short, the southern African evidence points to the multi-stage process of San image-making being embedded in, and contributing to the maintenance of, definable social distinctions and networks.

This conclusion raises a fundamental question, one that researchers rarely confront. Should we more or less automatically accept San image-making as an independent practice that could, along the lines of Western image-making, be turned to any area of San life and thought – such as the recording of events, the illustrating of myths or 'merely' the creation of beauty and its enjoyment? Or should we see it as a more restricted practice that, along with healing and rain-making, was a specific part of San religion? The two sources of ethnographic evidence that I have mentioned combine to provide a foundation for

a compelling answer to this question. The nineteenth-century San ethnography contains authentic indigenous comments on images that, read in the context of San thought and belief rather than Western notions of art, point to an overarching social context. Then the intricately and, I believe, uniquely detailed and varied images themselves provide links to well-understood San ritual practices and beliefs.

It was not until the late 1960s that southern African researchers began to take San ethnography seriously. But at that time the expectations of some researchers were unrealistic in that they were too literal. They thought that it would be a simple matter to match passages in the ethnography with the images in a fairly straightforward way. In this view, research could proceed as a game of 'snap'. In the excitement of the time researchers identified bows and arrows, spears, what they took to be body-paint, hair styles, items of dress, and as many species of animals as they could find. Rarely depicted animals became the valued gems of research. Significantly, and despite their deeply held expectations, researchers failed to identify any persuasive evidence that the San depicted scenes from their myths, a great many of which have been recorded. In some regions of southern Africa, a noticeably different set of images cropped up. They include depictions of horses, rifles, wagons, cattle, shields, iron-bladed spears and so forth and point to the presence of people other than the hunter-gatherer San.

All this early work seemed to add up to what became an enduring belief: the imagery was overwhelmingly, if not entirely (some clearly non-real images were noted), a naïve record of the image-makers' daily lives, whether their own or those of newcomers in recent centuries. Here, in some researchers' view, was a simple answer to the question of why the San made images at all: they delighted in depicting the world around them. Challenged, some of these researchers invoked Occam's razor and the value of what they saw as simplicity to support their explanation. But Occam's razor also provided them with an excuse for not exploring San ethnography in any depth, especially the nineteenth-century sources with their complex linguistic component.

This essentially empiricist approach eventually ran out of steam. The numbers of identifiable items of material culture and species of animals in the imagery were finite but, more significantly, to go any further with San ethnography was a daunting prospect for a number of reasons. For one, popular stereotypes of the San are deeply embedded in Western concepts of 'the other' and they usurped the place of scholarly research in the minds of even those who would have vehemently denied being racist. To abandon those stereotypes would have necessitated a reassessment of the Westerners' concept not only of the San but also of themselves as a superior race that was bringing enlightenment to a dark continent. The supposed mental backwardness of the San, or at

best their imagined childlike simplicity and closeness to 'Nature', became a yardstick against which Western superiority could be measured.

It is here that we come up against what has been, and for some researchers still is, the most daunting impediment to research on San imagery. As opposed to textbook summaries, the primary nineteenth-century sources of San ethnography are overwhelming in their quantity and, simultaneously, opaque in their complexity. Briefly put, we are dealing with verbatim ethnographic records and images in the hope that one will explain the other. But there is a problem. *Both* are couched in what are, for most researchers, foreign categories of thought. In some ways, it is like English monoglots looking at, say, Italian Renaissance pictures with only Italian language records to guide them. But worse, for Italian texts can, with good translation, be set in the overall Western tradition with which researchers are familiar. In stark contrast, San imagery and verbatim ethnography were both set in a society very different from that of the researchers. We therefore 'attempt to *translate* into our language rules originally conceived in another language' (Lévi-Strauss 1977: 10, original emphasis; cf. Geertz 1988).

In the following chapters I begin my account of the social context of San imagery by outlining the provenance of the various San ethnographic texts that add up to an amazingly rich resource (Chapter 1). It is necessary to have a good understanding of the temporal and geographic mosaic of San ethnography and the questions that that mosaic raises before one attempts to explain the images. Some sources are 1,000 km apart and are couched in different languages. Drawing on that material, I then outline the principal San social relations in which the process of image-making was situated (Chapter 2). These relations include the kinship, sharing and exchange systems that most ethnographers describe. Importantly, I also consider less widely discussed social relations that result from contacts with the spirit realm and its beings and those other relations, sometimes volatile, that exist between ritual specialists and the communities in which they live. It soon becomes clear that, if we see San imagery through the lens of present-day Western economics and social structure, let alone Western notions of 'art', we shall never penetrate to the deep levels of San thought from which the imagery arose.

Thereafter I follow up a variety of themes. The first is the question of the extent to which San imagery may be seen as narrative (Chapter 3). Ethnographic evidence, together with the images themselves, shows that the imagery is not an easily intelligible record of every-day events, as modern viewers tend automatically to assume if they cannot find painted elements that are patently non-real. Many of the images are set outside of time in another existential realm, one of which ritual specialists had inside knowledge and about which they generally spoke freely, as San ethnography shows. That conclusion leads on to the ways in which the acquisition and dissemination of spiritual knowledge involved

the participation of numerous people, not just the image-makers themselves (Chapter 4). It becomes clear that relations between images refer, sometimes directly, sometimes obliquely, to relations between people (Chapter 5). This is a central point. In manipulating imagery, the painters were simultaneously defining and manipulating social relations. Quintessentially, a widely painted linear motif links not only images but also existential realms (Chapter 6). As this linking process unfolded in the to-ing and fro-ing of daily San life, the idiosyncratic insights of some painters were integrated into the fluid congeries of beliefs that constitutes San religion. The relationships between individuals and between them and society at large thus constituted the dynamic of the imagery.

At this point it is necessary to explore an area of San religion that is, at least for some researchers, the most obscure and the one about which they are most wary. This is the spirit realm that San practitioners still speak of visiting and components of which the image-makers of the past clearly depicted. It is here that we find striking parallels between, on the one hand, the mental and physical experiences which the San themselves describe and, on the other, independently conducted neuropsychological research. This was a counter-intuitive turn. Numerous researchers schooled in an empirical approach to the images or in a strictly ethnographically oriented approach considered resort to another discipline to be out of bounds. Certainly, I agree, an appeal to neuro-psychology requires some justification (Chapter 7). I therefore ask if this meth-odological innovation clarifies elements of San imagery in a way that not only fits in with but also expands our ethnographically derived insights. I show that San ethnography and neuropsychology combine to explain some highly enig-matic images. Indeed, the more enigmatic an image at first appears, the more informative it often turns out to be. It is here that I consider human–animal hybrid images and, especially, the geometric motifs that in some areas of the subcontinent blend with apparently realistic images: in those areas, both are clearly parts of the same tradition.

I then ask: what happened to San society and belief in the centuries now known as the contact period (Chapter 8)? Approximately, 1,800 years ago the southern San experienced an influx of Bantu-speaking agriculturalists and then, 300 years ago, settlers of European origin. Often, writers depict the San of this time as passive victims. Whilst it is true that the newcomers heralded the end of their traditional way of life, the San dealt innovatively with the circumstances in which they found themselves. Those innovations can be detected in their imagery.

I close by briefly outlining the place of San imagery in the present-day South African political and social situation (Epilogue). San imagery is entering a new phase. After three centuries of genocide, descendants of the San and the Khoekhoe (click-speaking cattle herders) are today a political and cultural

force in post-apartheid South Africa. Despite some earlier challenges to the contrary, most of the imagery (though not all) is now widely accepted as the work of the San. Its scatter across the whole of the subcontinent is, however, having profound political implications. The San were indeed a First Nation and they lived everywhere in southern Africa, not just in the arid areas with which they are nowadays commonly associated. I end by showing that in at least one South African context San imagery has achieved a remarkable, but still insufficiently recognised, prominence: this achievement is, I believe, globally unequalled.