

## 1 A Go-Between

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The Stone Age is a foreign country: they did things differently there. This paraphrase of L. P. Hartley's famous generalisation about 'the past' seems incontestable. But, as the novel that follows the author's opening shot across his reader's bow shows, 'the past' is not an altogether foreign country. The people who lived there did many of the things that we do, yet they did them sufficiently differently to make us feel that we are aliens. We can see, more or less, what they are doing, but we cannot understand their language. And we need the connotations of their words and the networks in which their thoughts were enmeshed if we are to grasp at least a little of the social and cognitive framework of their time and country. We lack a go-between to explain to us meaning and purpose.

It is easy to understand why today many archaeologists despair of ever reconstructing pre-farming, pre-domestication, pre-literate, pre-permanent settlement, pre-metal-using societies in any area of life beyond lithic technology and its immediate implications. The techniques employed in the making of millennia-enduring stone artefacts and their uses in specific ways in specific environmental circumstances have, since the early days of Stone Age research, been a primary focus. Other aspects of the Stone Age, such as social relations and religion, have long seemed irrecoverable (Hawkes 1954). Technology seemed to be governed by physical laws, whereas the various components of a people's culture seemed idiosyncratic and beyond rigorously rational study. This enigma is especially tantalising when we come to deal, as I do in this book, with a society that made not just stone artefacts but also images that seem to be a window on the past. At this point we inevitably recall the famous painted bulls and horses in the depths of Upper Palaeolithic Lascaux (Leroi-Gourhan and Allain 1979; Lewis-Williams 2002a; Aujoulat 2004) or the images of animals and even insects carved on the T-shaped pillars at Göbekli Tepe, a megalithic site dated to as long ago as 9,600 BCE (Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2005; Schmidt 2006). Ancient images like these, we feel, should speak to us far more directly than mute stone artefacts.

It is commonly agreed that one of the things that many, though not all, people did in the past was the making – in one way or another – of art. Today,

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researchers who study human evolution routinely take the presence of ‘art’ to be indicative of symbolic thought and fully modern human minds. So, at the outset I must say that, in writing this book about southern African terminal Stone Age images, I try to avoid the usual but loaded word ‘art’ as far as possible. One often feels that writers on human origins who use the word have insufficiently theorised it (Lewis-Williams 2015a). No matter how many caveats they may enter, ‘art’ seems inevitably to project into the past modern, though usually tacit, Western notions. These include, among other things, ‘transcendent values’, ‘high aesthetics’ and ‘sophistication’ – all value judgements. Olga Soffer and Meg Conkey (1997: 1–2) therefore argue that we should decouple ‘this body of archaeological evidence about past lifeways from its categorization as “art”’. As may be expected, some writers disagree (e.g., Heyd and Clegg 2005), but it does nevertheless seem that the handy monosyllable is inescapably interpretative, or at the very least tendentious, even before any research work on actual images, or ‘marks’, has begun. For one thing, ‘art’ is a collective: the word denotes images (with which subsequent chapters are concerned) but also various ways of making things ‘special’ (e.g., Dissanayake 1982). As a compendious category, ‘art’ is, however, highly problematic: ‘art’ is not a ‘given’, but rather a developing, unstable and contested construct of Western thought. Despite the work of philosophers and art historians on the sociology of the Western tradition (e.g., Freedberg 1989; Eagleton 1990; Adorno 1997), the word ‘art’, when used in Stone Age archaeological contexts, tends to imply that the activities it subsumes were practices devoid of, or ‘above’, any pragmatic, day-to-day usefulness – icing on a cake baked according to an altogether different recipe. On the contrary, it was (and still is) essentially a *social activity*: it inevitably implies interaction between makers and consumers. Adorno (1997: 1) was surely right: ‘It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident.’

Indeed, ‘art’ poses complex philosophical problems. I do not address them here save to say, somewhat contentiously, that those who advocate an art history approach to southern African San ‘rock art’ *without detailed recourse to San ethnography* have found interesting and valuable things to say about the ‘biographies’ of images and the ways in which researchers have used them (e.g., Skotnes 1994; Wintjes 2011, 2013, 2014). But, as I see it, they have so far produced little concerning the social context of image-making that was not already apparent to archaeologists without any art history background (Whitley 2005b). Still, whatever the case may be, the evidence that I adduce in this book suggests that, if what we say about Stone Age image-making processes sounds as if it could also be said about mainstream, conservative Western art, we shall almost certainly be wrong.

A fundamental question to which I referred in the Introduction and to which we shall return more than once is: was San ‘art’ a freestanding activity that

could, like Western art, be turned to a variety of ends, such as recording events, teaching, illustrating myths and the creation of beauty, or was it a more restricted, distinct activity, a part of San religion that was set in its own nexus of social relations? Was image-making a specific ritual with a generally acknowledged purpose, whatever idiosyncratic responses it may have triggered? If, as I have come to believe, a combination of San ethnography and imagery shows that it was a specific ritual, we should have a powerful reason for speaking not so much of San ‘art’ but rather of San ‘image-making’. The verbal noun ‘image-making’ lifts ‘art’ from its abstract, philosophical context and sets it in the arena of human activities.

Notwithstanding this debate (e.g., Heyd 2012), some Stone Age images have become world famous for their perceived aesthetic qualities. They include, pre-eminently, the French and Spanish Upper Palaeolithic cave paintings and engravings to which I have referred. Those images are, of course, stunningly beautiful – at least to our eyes. To Stone Age eyes they may have been terrifying; for all we know, some may even have been repulsive. In any event, they seem, independently of their aesthetics, to have been made to communicate in some way, though what and between whom it is hard to say. For us, without a go-between, they remain silent messages in a foreign language from a very different country. To be sure, the deep underground locations of many of the Franco-Cantabrian images seem to point to important beliefs and values that must have framed and ordered the societies in which the people who made them lived (Lewis-Williams 2002a). But to be more specific about those beliefs and values seems to some hard-line archaeological researchers not just folly but a heinous betrayal of ‘science’. ‘We shall never know, so let’s just leave it at that’ is a frequently heard archaeological mantra when it comes to ancient image-making.

### **Ethnography and the Past**

In their attempts to glimpse what life in ‘foreign’ Stone Age societies may have been like, more sanguine archaeologists have turned to a possible go-between: the accounts of pre-literate, pre-farming societies that lasted through into the nineteenth, twentieth and even twenty-first centuries. At the beginning of the twentieth century, by which time eight decorated Franco-Cantabrian caves were known, Salomon Reinach set the stage for what was to become a major approach to Upper Palaeolithic imagery. He was an influential French classical archaeologist and keeper at the Musée des Antiquités at Saint-Germain-en-Laye. Largely as a result of his reading of, and correspondence with, Sir James Frazer, the influential British armchair anthropologist, he turned to the ethnography that was then coming from Australia (Spencer and Gillen 1899; Lawson 2012: 204). Urging caution, he insisted that researchers

working in the Upper Palaeolithic caves should limit their sources of possible explanations strictly to hunter-gatherer societies that, in his view, had much in common with those of Upper Palaeolithic Europe. In brief, he proposed that the Franco-Cantabrian images were related to Upper Palaeolithic religion, which he took to be essentially totemic and animistic: for instance, he argued that the images were designed to attract large numbers of animals to the vicinities of the caves and to ensure their fertility – forms of sympathetic magic (Reinach 1903). Reinach's work was not as facile as that of some of his followers. For example, the Abbé Henri Breuil, for decades the dominant writer on Upper Palaeolithic art, cited a plaited fibre disguise used by a 'French Guinea black sorcerer' to explain a Lascaux engraving as 'a Palaeolithic sorcerer clad in a disguise of grass' (Breuil 1952: 146–147). The approach was leading down a simplistic *cul-de-sac*.

Some preliminary discussion of this problem is in order because it will enable us to evaluate the ethnographic material on which I later draw. As anthropologists now accept, we must not be uncritical of the ethnographies that became the staple of mid-twentieth-century social anthropology courses (Kuper 1996; Barnard 2000). As the West expanded in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, administrators, ethnographers and travellers of the time produced records to facilitate Western control of conquered peoples. Their reports and publications inevitably reflected Western attitudes to those people. The ethnographers themselves, of course, saw their work as a service to 'primitive people' that would allow them to adapt to their changing world and, to the benefit of all, enter the capitalist economy. Later, numerous academic ethnographers, such as E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Marcel Griaule, Raymond Firth and Godfrey Lienhardt, took up the task and, trying to be more 'objective', many worked towards a PhD thesis that would be a foundation for their career. Many learned the local language and practised participant observation. But some of them, especially in the second half of the twentieth century, saw what was happening and began to reject the appropriation of their work by colonial enterprises (e.g., Barnard 1992, 2000; Biesele and Hitchcock 2011). To disentangle themselves from colonisation entirely proved difficult. More recent field researchers have therefore focused on the impoverishment and marginalisation of indigenous peoples and have in numerous cases contributed to the alleviation of their suffering (in southern Africa, see, for example, Schweitzer *et al.* 2000; Biesele and Hitchcock 2011; Lee 2013; Suzman 2017). Ethnography and politics cannot be separated.

As they tried to systematise their accounts of the lives of 'primitive people', the earlier ethnographers, anthropologists and sociologists constructed a universal model of society. Unfortunately, it has influenced (and, less explicitly, still does influence) the ways in which many researchers approach Stone Age imagery. Generally speaking, the early writers saw society as an organism

comprising several ‘institutions’: economics, kinship, politics and religion. The functioning of these ‘institutions’ could be individually studied, and their sustaining interrelationships could be elucidated – the essence of what became known as structural functionalism. I mention this now-*passé* social theory because the supposed universal reality of the ‘institutions’ is still deeply ingrained in much Western thought, both within and outside archaeology. As I explain in the next chapter, at least one of the ‘institutions’ can in fact act as another: like ‘art’, they are researchers’ constructs derived from their own internal observation of the history of Western capitalism. Moreover, and as is often pointed out, structural functionalism does not explain change. If societies naturally tend towards a state of functioning equilibrium, we have to look outside them for causes of change: environment becomes the only and overwhelming impetus for change and people living in small-scale societies are seen as passive in the face of their environment – hence many archaeologists’ focus on environment and adaptation. Ancient imagery, too, is often studied in the hope it may cast light on environment and subsistence strategies.

How useful, then, in reconstructions of the deep human past are the admittedly contentious ethnographies of surviving and supposedly terminal Stone Age people? Today, a usual answer is: not very. Even in the 1950s Annette Laming-Emperaire rejected ethnographic analogy in her ground-breaking study of the Lascaux cave. Rather than constructing a series of dubious, one-off analogies, she advocated thorough study of the images and the caves themselves as a starting point (Laming 1959: 167–173). Then, in a position that presages some of the chapters of this book, she argued that associations between images that had been seen as merely fortuitous juxtapositions and superimpositions should be ‘regarded as deliberately planned compositions’ (Laming 1959: 186). Working in parallel, rather than collaboration, with Laming-Emperaire, André Leroi-Gourhan reached similar conclusions. He believed that his hands-on recording and mapping of images in the caves showed – empirically – that the distribution of Upper Palaeolithic imagery in the caves was patterned (but see Ucko and Rosenfeld 1967; Parkington 1969). On attempts to explain that pattern he warned: ‘To take what is known about prehistory and cast about for parallels in the life of present-day peoples does not throw light on the behaviour of prehistoric man’ (Leroi-Gourhan 1968: 34).

The reasons for these and other writers’ rejection of ethnographic analogy are numerous and need to be taken seriously. For one thing, ethnographers have shown that, even though there may be parallels between them, pre-farming societies themselves differ from one another in many ways. The same was probably true in the deep past. It would therefore be unwise to take one terminal Stone Age society (such as the San) as a model for the whole ancient Stone Age. Then, there are today no completely isolated forager societies. All that have survived have been in some degree of contact with neighbouring

herders and farmers and, more recently, Western capitalism (cf. Wallerstein 1974; Renfrew and Shennan 1982). That could not have been true millennia ago. Finally, we must allow that foraging societies have not been static: all have had long histories, though the rate of change in them would not have been as swift and fundamental as it has been in the industrial West, a problem confronted long ago by Marxist anthropologists (e.g., Bloch 1983; cf. Lévi-Strauss 1977: 29).

These reservations do not completely destroy the value of ethnographies. There is today a re-evaluation of ethnography and a new theorising of how description and interpretation intermingle in ethnographies (da Col and Graeber 2011; Nader 2011; Pearce 2012; Hviding and Berg 2014). In this new assessment, the older, ‘classic’ ethnographers are not forgotten. Their struggle to make ‘stranger concepts’ intelligible, be they religious or pertaining to kinship and other components of society, without rendering them equivalent to contemporary Western notions is a source of continuing debate. Many of the older theoretical frameworks are unacceptable today, but the empirical content of earlier ethnographies remains, even if it is fragmentary and moulded by Western interests.

Acknowledging this critical work, I argue that, if we can find at least one well-recorded terminal Stone Age society and if we can form some understanding of how image-making functioned in it, we should seize the opportunity to explore it in as great a depth as possible. Then, avoiding simplistic analogies, we can begin to form an idea of the diversity and complexity of the social relations in which image-making was, at least in this instance, embedded (Lewis-Williams 1991). In doing this, I am not formulating theoretical generalisations about the essence and functioning of foraging societies in general, useful as they may be (e.g., Ingold 1987, 2000, 2014). For instance, the New Animism that emphasises relationships with other-than-human beings runs the risk of reducing the individuality of hunter-gatherer societies (Guenther 2015). Notwithstanding this and the valuable work being done in Australia, North America and elsewhere, I merely suggest that my single, and I hope to demonstrate exceptionally rich, example opens up evidence-based ways of thinking more generally about image-making in foraging societies. It expands our expectations and heightens our sensitivity to social and cognitive complexity different from our own.

### **An Ethnographic Mosaic**

My example is the San of southern Africa, the ‘Bushman’. As late as the mid-nineteenth century, the southern San were still making stone artefacts and, at least in that regard, justified the appellation ‘Stone Age’ (Kannemeyer 1890; Bleek and Lloyd 1911: 3, 11, 15, 227; Lewis-Williams 2002b: 110). The San instance shrinks the analogical component of a type of explanation that troubles

some researchers (Lewis-Williams 1991): the nineteenth-century ethnography on which I draw, though by no means simple and unitary, derives from communities that made the images that we study.

The feeling among some researchers that San ethnography is either inadequate or irrelevant to a possible explanation as to why the San made images derives from ignorance or a very superficial overview of what I call the mosaic of San ethnography. Put simply, they do not know what to look for: reading the texts from a detached Western perspective, they miss the significances embedded in San idiom, or they consult only second-hand summaries that other Westerners have selectively prepared. The power of the mosaic becomes apparent only when specific details, preserved especially in the verbatim texts, are found to pertain to repeated specifics of the imagery. The simple, straightforward, easily understood explanations that some researchers seem to demand are an illusion created by their own Western preconceptions of what image-making is.

This is why, notwithstanding the temporal and geographic proximity of parts of San ethnography to the images, the texts must be subjected to close critical scrutiny. In the light of the reservations that researchers have expressed about ethnography in general we must ask, specifically, how useful is the San record in building up an understanding of San imagery in its social context? We need a more nuanced response to that question than blind acceptance on the basis of a series of unrelated ‘snap’ correlations between the ethnography and the imagery or, on the other hand, outright rejection. Can San ethnography be disentangled from widely held and nowadays often romantic misconceptions of the San that are woven into colonial understandings of the history of the subcontinent and into some researchers’ beliefs as well? As is the case with every ethnography worldwide, the San record warrants its own interrogation.

In southern Africa, the phrases ‘Bushman rock art’, ‘Bushman paintings’ and ‘Bushman drawings’ have, at least in the minds of many popular writers and the general public, connotations of worthless primitiveness, despite some of the images being astonishingly beautiful – a return of the Lascaux problem. Indeed, ‘surprised by beauty’ seems to be a common reaction to San imagery. Why should present-day, as opposed to nineteenth-century, Westerners still be surprised? The reason lies in the history of Western evaluations of the San. The very word ‘Bushman’ has for many people inherited connotations of a child-like mind and a ‘savage’ way of life precariously eked out in the ‘bush’. One missionary wrote: ‘He has no religion, no laws, no government, no recognised authority, no patrimony, no fixed abode, a soul, debased, it is true, and completely bound down and clogged by his animal nature ... [M]orally, as well as physically, his aspect is dark and discouraging’ (Tindall 1856: 26). Condemnation could hardly be more comprehensive.

The matter did not rest there. Following Laurens van der Post's influential romanticising of the Kalahari Desert (Barnard 1989; Jones 2001), the San, as the 'Bushmen' are known today, are admired for their 'closeness to nature'. This is, of course, little more than a sanitised version of 'primitive' and is taken as a reason for keeping them marginalised under the pretext of preserving an ancient way of life. Van der Post (1962: 13) believed that he could discern in Western civilisation a spiritual need for 'a clear image of some child-man, like the Bushman' – whatever that may mean. As a result of this kind of infantilising thinking, 'Bushman' images have been considered useful for little more than decorating placemats and fabrics (see Epilogue). The denigrating phrases by which San imagery is generally known are dismissive of any suggestion that the 'drawings' may have had deeper meanings beyond idle daubs made merely to pass the time. Challenging that view, later chapters of this book show that the too often dismissed 'Bushman paintings' – indeed, I suggest, probably many Stone Age images worldwide – were in fact deeply embedded in daily social relations between individuals, between groups of people, and between people and a spirit realm. Moreover, they played a role in the construction and manipulation of those social relations.

As a result of this history, the San are sometimes unthinkingly dismissed as a source for generalised knowledge of relationships between pre-farming image-making and social life. It is only in recent decades that the significance of their complex ethnographic history has begun to be more fully appreciated. Here we have a well-documented people with records of their beliefs and image-making that date back to the 1870s. Even acknowledging the fine work that has been done in North America (e.g., Whitley 2000, 2005a; Francis and Loendorf 2002; Boyd 2003), South America (e.g., Reichel-Dolmatoff 1978a, 1978b), Scandinavia (e.g., Helskog 2012a, 2012b), Central Asia (e.g., Rozwadowski and Koško 2002; Rozwadowski 2004) and Australia (e.g., Layton 1992; Taçon 2001; Morwood 2002), I would go so far as to say that the remarkable time depth of San ethnography combined with its possibilities for understanding the social context of its exceptionally detailed imagery is unparalleled.

The role of the San in the turbulent history of southern Africa has been much discussed (e.g., Wright 1971, 2007; Vinnicombe 1976; Saunders 1977; Campbell 1986, 1987; Eldredge 1988; Jolly 1996a, 2000, 2015; Adhikari 2001, 2005; Blundell 2004; Penn 2005; Wright and Mazel 2007; Challis 2008, 2012; Mitchell 2009; McGranaghan *et al.* 2013; Pinto 2014). Extermination by colonists was often the order of the day. For instance, in the 1770s the Swedish naturalist Anders Sparrman found: 'Does a colonist at any time get in view of a Boshies-man, he takes fire immediately, and spirits up his horse and dogs, in order to hunt him with more keenness and fury than he would a wolf or any other wild beast' (Sparrman 1789: II: 104; cf. Philip 1828: I: 42, 43, 46–48 on



the Western Cape; Thompson 1827: I: 80, II: 6; Collins 1838: 7 on the Eastern Cape in 1820s). The genocide was disastrous (Adhikari 2005).

Warnings like the shocking official report that Louis Anthing compiled for the Cape of Good Hope parliament in the early 1860s went unheeded. He found that ‘the Bushman people had been hunted down and exterminated’. This was a deliberate policy: ‘[P]arties of Bushmen who had never done any harm had been wantonly and treacherously massacred’ (Anthing 1863: 12). One of Anthing’s informants, a white farmer named Floris Steenkamp, had been ‘upbraided’ by the leader of a commando when he had ‘begged that the firing might cease so that they might surrender’ and he had interceded ‘on behalf of the women and children’ (Anthing 1863: 12). By the late 1870s, the missionary John Widdicombe could write that only a few San ‘were still to be found, dragging out a precarious existence in the inner most fortresses of the Malutis’ (mountains in present-day Lesotho). He noted that ‘their paintings abound in the many caves and grottoes’, but their traditional way of life was all but gone (Widdicombe 1891: 13, 14).

Sparman, Anthing, Widdicombe and numerous other explorers and missionaries were for many years writers of the often superficial and deeply prejudiced reports on which researchers studying San imagery tended to depend. The South African anthropologist Isaac Schapera summarised and categorised all this unsystematic work on the San and the related herding people now known as the Khoekhoe (formerly and dismissively known as Hottentots) in his book *The Khoisan peoples of South Africa* (Schapera 1930). For a quarter of a century it remained the standard work on the subject and is still valued.

### The Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd Archive

Far more important than the desultory early reports that Schapera summarised is the remarkable manuscript archive that the German philologist Wilhelm Bleek and his sister-in-law Lucy Lloyd compiled in the 1870s from !Xam San people who were living in the central, semi-arid parts of what is now the Northern Cape Province of South Africa (Spohr 1962; Lewis-Williams 1981a, 2002b; Deacon and Dowson 1996; Skotnes 1996, 2007; Schoeman 1997; Hollmann 2004; Bank 2006; Wessels 2010; McGranaghan 2012; Deacon and Skotnes 2014). Prior to his southern African work, Bleek had worked in Berlin with Richard Lepsius. He adapted some of the orthography of this influential philologist and Egyptologist to cope with the clicks and other sounds of San languages that Westerners find so difficult to pronounce. The resulting Bleek and Lloyd collection is vast. It comprises more than twelve thousand pages (numbered on the right-hand page only) of phonetic transcriptions ‘written down from the lips of the Bushmen’, as Bleek (1873: 3) himself put it, together with adjacent line-by-line English transliterations. Here we have San daily life,

myths, rituals, word lists, insights into !Xam grammar, and biographies of individual people, all recorded in the no-longer-spoken !Xam San language.

The sheer size and density of the Bleek and Lloyd Archive have proved a barrier for some researchers who have studied San imagery. If we add to that the sometimes barely legible handwriting (especially of Bleek himself) and the generally unsystematic, even aleatory, way in which it was compiled, we can begin to see why so few researchers have read the entire archive and why so many have failed, and still do fail, to see the treasures it contains. Pioneering San image researchers Jalmar and Ione Rudner (Rudner and Rudner 1970: 207), for instance, dismissed the collection as being ‘of little value except to indicate caution on our own interpretations [of images]’. That was four decades ago when only small extracts from the archive had been published (Bleek and Lloyd 1911; Bleek 1924, 1931, 1932, 1933, 1935a, 1935b, 1936). Since then, a little more has appeared in print (Guenther 1989; Lewis-Williams 2002b; and Hollmann [2004] has annotated and re-published the extracts that Dorothea Bleek published in *Bantu Studies*), but, more importantly, the whole archive is, thanks largely to the efforts of Pippa Skotnes at the University of Cape Town, today readily available in electronic form ([lloydbleekcollection.cs.uct.ac.za](http://lloydbleekcollection.cs.uct.ac.za); Skotnes 2007).

Perhaps the most significant point about Bleek and Lloyd’s complete verbatim transcriptions is that we can identify and then track key !Xam words and concepts through the archive. In this way we can begin to form some idea of the words’ connotations in a variety of contexts (Lewis-Williams 1981a; McGranaghan 2012). Then, in citing !Xam beliefs and the ways they are evident in their imagery, we can quote their actual words together with word-by-word transliterations, as I do in subsequent chapters. We do not have to depend on potentially tendentious Western paraphrases, as is the case with many other ethnographies worldwide.

It is at this point that we encounter one of the problems with all ethnography: we have to render San ‘stranger concepts’ in understandable ways but without eliding them with Western concepts and clothing them with the connotations of Western words. Translating cultures, it has long been accepted, is no easy matter (e.g., Geertz 1983, 1988). In this instance, because we are dealing not with biased Western summaries but rather with !Xam beliefs and practices as expressed in their own language, we need to read between the lines and try to understand the people’s own metaphors, idioms and ways of thinking. We can then go on and form some idea of their different kinds of social relations with one another and with the spirit world.

The whole collection was, of course, built up under Bleek and Lloyd’s guidance and within the parameters of Western thought about myth and language as it was in the 1870s. Indeed, Bleek corresponded with the German philologist Max Müller, whose influential ideas about the sidereal and lunar