



THE UNIVERSITY OF
WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Review of Wikipedia's 'San Rock Art'

December 2014

Overview

The brief entry on 'San rock art' (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/San_rock_art) is unsatisfactory. It largely relies on outdated research – often decades out of date – to produce a partial, superficial and in some places offensive treatment of one of the world's great rock art traditions. Below I raise specific points I believe can help contribute to a better entry; and I have also made some suggested edits to the entry at the end of this entry review that make specific comment on how the existing text can be variously corrected, omitted and expanded.

Structure

The current 4 part article structure is incomplete and I would suggest something along the lines of:

Overview:

Mention here that southern Africa is home to several rock art traditions (Khoekhoe pastoralists, African farmers, multi-ethnic frontier groups and even European settlers). Mention that today's understanding of San rock art is based on relevant ethnography and it is thought to be primarily a symbolic and religious art, dating back at least 27, 000 years. Mention there are thought to be over 50 000 rock art sites.

History of rock art research:

Because the San and San rock art have been subject to so much abuse and misinterpretation it would be good to outline the different phases of outsider's research, explaining why ideas of hunting magic, arts for art's sake, art as a simple record of daily life, are not valid and why the current interpretation of a shamanistic and symbolic meaning set is qualitatively different because it uses ethnography to try to understand the art as it's makers would have.

How was rock art made?

Outline how both paintings and engravings were made. Practical and symbolic aspects of obtaining materials (pigment, binders, loaders, extenders for paints; engraving tools for engravings).

How old is the rock art?

Provide an overview of known age range of rock art (approx.. 27,000 years old [unless the 77,000 year old Blombos engraved ochre is counted as 'art'] until early 20th century). Also the techniques used for dating.

Meaning of the rock art:

Synthesis of current shamanistic model but also such that it includes research into gendered aspects of rock art, power relations, political resistance to colonial contact, and so forth. But also how San rock art connects with other rock art traditions, especially that of Khoekhoen ('Khoi') herders.

Rock art conservation:

Mention rock art as a valuable but finite resource useful for tourism and the education of schoolchildren and the broader public – especially in southern Africa where Apartheid myths about the San still prevail in some areas. Some information on factors affecting rock art – fire, water-soluble salts, people etc. How rock art enjoys legal protection and permits are required to develop sites,. Maybe here list some public rock art sites like Wildebeestkuil, Kamberg, Brandberg, Twyfelfontein, Tsodilo Hills, Cederberg, Karoo.

Use of rock art today:

Important to stress San rock art is not just an ancient tradition but continues to live today in, for example, South Africa's new Coat of Arms in which the central figure is based on a rock painting from the Linton Fragment, which is on display in Iziko South African Museum in Cape Town. But this use also raises the issue of Indigenous Intellectual Property rights (and can here link to WIMSA and SASI). There are commercial exportations such as insensitive use of rock art imagery on wine bottles and chili sauces.

Images

For an entry on rock art, this entry is remarkable image-poor. I suggest a map showing major southern African rock art sites/regions; plus a representative suite of images showing engravings, paintings and markings from Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe.

Suggested edits and additions

Rather than write about specific flaws, I now provide a draft edit of the existing text to highlight good and problematic areas. The edit suggestions are in red.

San rock art http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/San_rock_art

The [San](#), or Bushmen [should be a footnote here saying that both terms are exonyms and that the many different San groups today and in the past had group-specific ethonyms and generally seemed to have lacked an overall word for all San], are one of [southern Africa is home to other Indigenous groups. San and their descendants are, however, the group longest resident in the region] the indigenous people of [Southern Africa](#). Their ancient rock paintings (also called pictographs – then hyperlink to ‘pictographs’ in Wikipedia) and carvings [carvings should be replaced with ‘rock engravings (also called petroglyphs – then hyperlink this to ‘Petroglyphs’ in Wikipedia] (collectively called [rock art](#)) are found all over Southern Africa in caves (seldom found in caves proper, of which there are few. The rock paintings tend to be found in rock shelters while the engravings tend to be found in the open areas on boulders, ridges and rock pavements, with a few areas in Namibia and northern South Africa / southern Zimbabwe, and Tsodilo Hills in Botswana, where they co-occur)and on [rock shelters](#). The San depicted non-human beings, hunters, and half-human half-animal hybrids but many other things such as animals, people, items of material culture, Beings from the Spirit World and so on. The half-human hybrids are believed to be the medicine men or healers in transformed form, often activated via the performance of a Medicine or ‘Trance’ Dance, one of the world’s oldest religious rituals, and which is still performed today.^[1] The Gall reference is strange here as it is not a primary reference but one by a commentator publishing on contemporary San issues. Work by, for example, David Lewis-Williams would be more useful here. Their depictions of these medicine men, give us evidence that they did do the healing dances. This is a bad sentence; borderline circular logic.

This whole paragraph is puzzling. Van der Post wrote on the San, but his writings are widely acknowledged as overly romantic at best, fraudulent at worst. The Tsodilo rock art is actually relatively unknown compared to rock arts from the Brandberg, Cedeberg, Karoo, Drakensberg etc. Rather too specific a reference/account for a general article. Gall writes, "The Laurens van der Post panel at Tsodilo is one of the most famous rock paintings." High on this rock face in Botswana is the image of a "magnificent red eland bull" painted, according to Van der Post, "only as a Bushman who had a deep identification with the eland could have painted him." Also on this rock face is a female giraffe that is motionless like it is alarmed by a predator. Several other images of animals are on it also, along with the flesh blood-red handprints Handprints are more likely to have been made by Khoekhoe herders than San. that are the signature of the unknown artist.^[1]

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Learning from rock art

This para is rather weak. Mentioned should rather be made of the polysemic nature of San rock art. According to [Thomas Dowson](#), "a lot of rock art is actually in symbols and metaphors." For example, eland bulls, meant marriage, and curing or the trance dance. Rock art gives us a glimpse of the San's history, and how they lived their lives.^[2]

San also used rock art to record things that happened in their lives This is very contentious. The rock art certainly does record events both in this world and what the San believed to be the Spirit World, but not in the historical narrative sense most Westerners understand. Depicting wagons etc is more likely a series of metaphors and statements about colonial invasion and identity of people in situations of culture contact. Several instances of rock art have been found that resemble wagons and colonists. Dowson notes that, "The people who brought in the wagons and so forth thus became, whether they realized it or not, part of the social production of southern African rock art. They added a new dimension."^[2] The Dowson quote is good and would have more impact if illustrated with an image. D.P. It is DF Bleek (Dorothea Francis) Bleek, writer of the article "Beliefs and Customs of the /Xam Bushmen", published 1933, says the San also recorded "rain dance animals". It should be mentioned that Dorothea, was the daughter of Wilhelm Bleek who, with Lucy Lloyd, were the interlocutors for several /Xam San in the late 19th century; producing an unrivalled ethnography that was used by Patricia Vinnicombe, David Lewis-Williams and others, to interpret San rock art (Wikipedia has entries for all these people; and a link to the Digital Bleek Lloyd Collection at the University of Cape Town, should here be made)together with When they did rain dances they would go into a trance to "capture" one of these animals. In their trance they would kill it, and its blood and milk became the rain.^[3] As depicted in the rock art, the rain dance animals they "saw" usually resembled a hippopotamus, ~~or~~ antelope or other mega-herbivore, and were sometimes surrounded by fish according to Dowson.^[2] an image of a rain animal would here be good

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We can also learn more about how the San lived through their rock art. In the following depiction, the people are all in a dancing stance, and the women are all clapping. So, according to Dowson, it is believed to be one of their healing or trance dances. Everyone is the same; one is not more elaborate or more detailed than another. This shows that though the healers held special powers, they were not thought of as higher or better. Healing was not for becoming a more prominent and powerful person, it

was for the good of the entire community.^{[2] [4]} The language in this paragraph is clumsy and repeats itself

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The following paragraph is wrong. It is what people thought until about 40 years ago and should either be deleted, or included in a section on the history of interpretation of San rock art – which is often a contested history. H. C. Woodhouse, author of the book Archaeology in Southern Africa, says historical sources have also said that the San often disguised themselves as animals so they could get close enough to grazing herds to shoot them. The head of the buck was an important part of this disguise, and was also used in dancing and miming of the actions of animals. The large number of buckheaded figures in paintings is proof that the San did this.^[5]

Production of rock art

Similarly, this paragraph is out of date. Work by Stephen Bassett, for example, has produced a rather more complex set of information. Also, this section does not include how rock engravings and 'markings' like cupules were made.

Woodhouse also says the San used different coloured stone to do the drawings. He says, "They usually used red rock, which they ground until it was fine, and then mixed it with fat." They then rubbed this on the rock to form the pictures. This paint that they used withstands the rain and weather for very long periods of time.^[6] The San then, according to Phillip V. Tobias, an Honorary Professor of Palaeoanthropology at the Bernard Price Institute for Palaeontological Research, used this paint in four different styles. These four style techniques are "monochromes, animal outlines in thick red lines, thinly outlined figures, and white stylized figures."^[7] A.R. Willcox, writer of the article "Australian and South African Rock Art Compared", published 1959, says the tool they used to do these paintings was "a brush made from animal's hair or a single small feather." This may be one reason for the great fineness and delicacy of their painting.^[8] I. and J. Rudner, writers of the journal "Who Were the Artists? Archaeological Notes from South West Africa", published 1959, say the form that the San use is often referred to as a Dynamic School. "It has a lot of action and color, and reached its climax in the shaded eland pictures." It is usually associated with the San.^[9]

Again, this research is out of date and the word 'Kafir' is deeply offensive and has been for 30 years or more. People like Anne Solomon and Judith Stevenson have published on gender and San rock art. According to Woodhouse, clues are given as to whom worked on the rock art by the subjects that are chosen. There are many pictures of the Eland, Reybuck, Hartebeest and Lion, and also of San and "Kafirs" fighting.^[10] However, there are few depictions of plants. Wilcox notes that, "plants usually fell in the domain of women, so it is presumed that the authors of these paintings were men."^[11]

See also

- [San healing practices](#)
- [Tsodilo Hills](#), World Heritage site in Botswana
- [Twyfelfontein](#), World Heritage site in Namibia
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drakensberg#San_cave_paintings;
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/San_religion;
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wildebeest_Kuil_Rock_Art_Centre
- [UCT's Digital Bleel and Lloyd should go here](#);
- [also Wits University's Origins Centre as external links.](#)

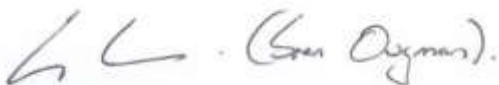
Notes

1. Gall, Sandy. "The Bushmen of the Kalahari." *Ecologist* 33.7 (2003): 28-31.
2. Dowson, Thomas A. "Reading Art, Writing History: Rock Art and Social Change in Southern Africa." 25.3 (1994): 332-345.
3. Bleek, D.P. "Beliefs and Customs of the Ixam Bushmen." Part VI: Rain Making. *Bantu Studies*, 7 (1933): 375-92.
4. Dowson, Thomas A. "Reading Art, Writing History: Rock Art and Social Change in Southern Africa." 25.3 (1994): 332-345.
5. ~~Woodhouse, H.C. "Rock Paintings of Southern Africa." *African Arts*. 2.3 (1969): 47.~~
6. ~~Woodhouse, H.C. "The Medikane Rock paintings: Sorcerers or Hunters?" *South African Archaeological*. 23.90 (1968): 37-39.~~
7. ~~Tobias, Phillip V. "Bushmen of the Kalahari." *Man*. 57 (1957): 34.~~
8. ~~Rudner, I. & J. "Who Were the Artists? Archaeological Notes from South West Africa." *South African Archaeological*. 14.55 (1959): 106-108~~
9. ~~Willcox, A. R. "Australian and South African Rock Art Compared." *South African Archaeological*. 14.55 (1959): 97-98.~~

References 5-9 are badly out of date and should be omitted unless using by way of historical reference. References by David Lewis-Williams, Janette Deacon, Ed Eastwood, Jeremy Hollmann, Geoffrey Blundell, Anne Solomon and Sven Ouzman should be cited. UCT's

Conclusion

This entry is in urgent need of revision as it does not adequately convey the depth, range and complexity of San rock art. An expanded structure would both add additional information and provide the space for future entries as the state of our knowledge grows. I make all my comments in a constructive spirit and am happy to engage with any comments or queries to what I have written.



Sven Ouzman

Centre for Rock Art Research + Management

School of Social Sciences (M257), University of Western Australia, 35 Stirling Highway, Crawley WA 6009

T +61 (0)8 6488 2863

E sven.ouzman@uwa.edu.au

W www.uwa.edu.au/rock-art