
“The transformation into a lion is considered as the template for all other transformations, of myth and lore, ritual and the hunt ... it is beset with danger and dread.”¹ The Ju/’hoansi informant, Tshao Matze related:
“When I turn into a lion, I can feel my lion hair growing and my lion-teeth forming. I am inside that lion, no longer a person.”²

LAYERS IN CLAY AND ROCK

Petro Keene

The oldest statuette in the world, *Lowenmensch* (part-human, part-lion) from Hohlenstein-Stadel in the Lone Valley, Germany, was sculpted almost 40,000 years ago.³ The sculptor of this piece chose mammoth ivory tusk and stone tool(s) intent on creating a powerful “lion-man” object with an erect standing posture. The eyes are particularly impressive and hold an austere, contemplative gaze at the viewer. Captured in solid form, this intriguing figurative artwork remains timeless and hints of humans’ deep spiritual connection with an animal during the distant past. What was the motivation for this intriguing and beguiling piece?

I am captivated by the enigmatic powerful portrayals of the elements of ritual depicted by therianthropes (part-human, part-animal figures) in southern African rock art, some with elaborate painted detail and depictions of copious nasal emanations (Fig. 4). Contemplating therianthropes, I ponder the artistic processes of the ancestral San hunter-gatherer artists. Ochre pigments may have been sought in various and remote areas traversed by undertaking arduous and long journeys across valleys, rivers and majestic mountains. The preparation of pigment paints and its components (blood, water, plant sap, and animal fats), meticulously prepared, and, I imagine, forming part of a ritualised process.⁴

Rock art depictions are subject to human intervention and the elements of nature and regrettably fade over time. White pigments are particularly vulnerable. The creation of my sculptural piece named *Eldritch* is inspired by the translucent-white painting of a part-human, part-antelope figure at the site, Storm Shelter in the Maloti-Drakensberg, Eastern Cape. I created the sculpture to honour its presence of place in the landscape, and in solid form I aim to render a sense of timelessness. The Woodlot piece creation suggests a San trance metaphor, emulating a medicine-healer during a curing dance.

Manipulations of stoneware clay, placing layer upon layer to create form and symmetry, is a dynamic, slow and immersive process. The clay is soft and malleable, and from the activity of kneading and wedging I progress with a sculptural form. My creative process is entirely different to that of the *Lowenmensch* (lion-man). I have a choice of specialised tools to help delineate a particular form or shape as I add, carve, and smooth layers of supple clay. I deem the visual and tactile experience as similar in context to tracing a selected rock art image during fieldwork. Delicate and fine details of the contour, shape, angle and form, as well pigment colour, has the ability to hold my intense and keen interest as I sculpt.

1 Guenther, 2020, p. 165

2 Katz et al., 1997, p. 24

3 Conard, 2003

4 Jolly, 1986; Lewis-Williams, 1986



Figure 1. Clay stoneware ceramic of an anthropomorphised bull. Photo by Mark Callanan

My tactile experience involving fingers, hands, clay and tools is accompanied by evocative background music. Time passes in phases and layers of clay to impart a three-dimensional piece over a period of weeks and months, to finally rest in preparation for the firing and glazing process. I use a Dremel tool to create grooves in the fired ceramic piece, and I apply ground ochre pigment powder ground from a red haematite stone to denote the red markings on the torso and face. The final stage of glazing has culminated in a lustrous ambiguous piece (Fig.1) that I intend to be perceived as its beguiling and mysterious energy “essence.”

Anthropomorphism and Figurative Expressions

The origin of figurative art has been considered by archaeologists as a critical event in human evolution.⁵ The archaeological finds of three figurines carved from mammoth ivory at Hohle Fels Cave in the Swabian Jura of southern Germany dating to older than 30,000 years ago represent some of the oldest figurative art traditions worldwide.⁶ The remarkable, well-known find of *Lowenmensch* (lion-man) from Hohlenstein-Stadel in the Lone Valley is an impressive therianthrope with an upright posture of 30 cm in height and appears to have no utilitarian value. It resembles one of the figurative finds from the Hohle Fels Cave and would suggest that inhabitants of these two caves belonged to the same cultural group with shared belief systems and practices that were linked to therianthropes of humans and felines.⁷

Anthropomorphism is also conveyed in a painting of a part-human, part-bison figure (Fig. 2) at the Grotte Chauvet in the Ardèche region of southern France, where rock paintings have been published dating as far back as 36,000 years ago.⁸ These spectacular discoveries demonstrate man’s close connection to animals during the Upper Palaeolithic in Europe, integral to their survival and adaptive processes.

Visual expressions 30,000 years ago

Excavations at the Apollo 11 Cave, Namibia, led to the discovery of seven stone plaques from 30,000 years ago, four of which bear figurative forms and one with zebra striped markings (Fig. 3b). These images signify that visual expressions of the ancient past spanned over tens of thousands of years. The depiction on one of the Apollo 11 stone plaques (Fig. 3a) has the body of an animal and hind limbs that appear to be human, widely considered to be that of a therianthrope.⁹

San Rock Art and Ethnography

In the 1870s, Wilhelm Heinrich Emmanuel Bleek, a German linguist, and his sister-in-law, Lucy Lloyd, devoted themselves to recording the folklore of the /Xam (San). More than 12,000 pages of texts were produced revealing the /Xam’s personal histories and their rich folklore.¹⁰

Lewis-Williams¹¹ and his followers have approached the study of paintings of therianthropes by focusing on the details of the imagery and together with ethnographic data followed a shamanistic hypothesis for interpretations. Extensive anthropological research amongst the Ju/’hoan (!Kung) San, who live in Botswana and the Kalahari Desert, Namibia, about 1,200 km north of the area occupied by Bleek and Lloyd’s /Xam informants, was undertaken by the Marshalls in the 1950s. The /Xam spoke of various types of shamans who were “possessors” of animal potency, such as shamans of the game.¹²



Figure 2. Chauvet Cave. Anthropomorphised Bison. Photo by Jean-Michel Geneste © Rup’Art productions Ministère de la culture

5 Conard, 2003

6 Conard, 2003

7 Conard, 2003

8 Quiles et al., 2016

9 Rifkin et al., 2015

10 Lewis-Williams & Pearce, 2004a

11 Lewis-Williams, 1982; Lewis-Williams, 1985

12 Lewis-Williams & Pearce, 2004a, p. 103

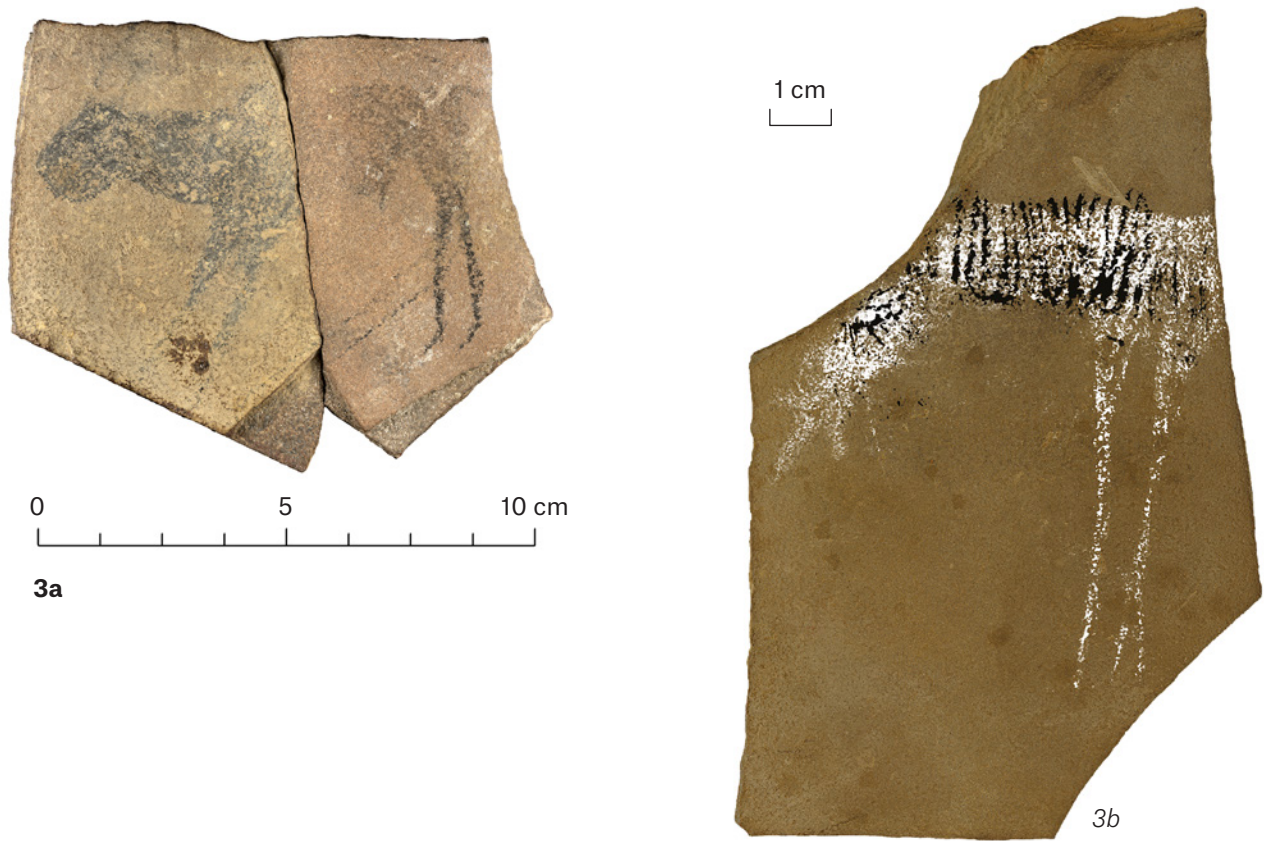


Figure 3a. Original image

Figure 3b. Enhanced image. Apollo 11 Cave, Namibia. Painted stone plaques, 30,000 years ago, with a depiction of a therianthrope and an enhanced image indicating zebra stripes. Photos by Magnus M. Haaland

Figure 4. Therianthrope with hand to nose posture, representing bleeding from the nose. Photo by Pieter Jolly



“Trance-formation,” Myth, and Spirits of the Dead

It has been suggested that generally humans “are prone to a compulsive anthropomorphizing,” and with modern hunter-gatherers the social and natural worlds appear to have no boundaries¹³ In terms of “thought about the natural world, cognitive fluidity allowed this to be integrated with that about the human social world and artefacts. The former allowed the possibility of anthropomorphism – attributing animals with human-like beliefs and desires – and totemism in terms of attributing humans with animal ancestors.”¹⁴

The “essential characteristics of San social organization and their religious beliefs and mythology are fluidity, ambiguity, ambivalence and liminality.”¹⁵ Guenther¹⁶ asserts that changing from human to animal and back into human form are mystical-ontological states, and the moment of full animal transformation is tenuous and brief. The shaman can be this or that, and in-between transformations he always reverts back into himself again.¹⁷ The experience of trance and transformation are processes that “need to be kept apart, conceptually although they are both altered or alternate states and in this sense, transformations; however, the one is of a person’s consciousness, the other, his or her being.”¹⁸

Jolly¹⁹ proposes that the paintings of therianthropes (Fig. 4) in San art are an expression of religious symbolism connected to dream and trance, the spirits of the dead including the mythical realm, and furthermore supports the idea that the therianthropes are connected to the people of the Early Race. Some paintings with antelope-headed figures may pertain to shamans wearing antelope-headed masks.²⁰

“Eland Potency,” ochre, blood and fat

The “potency of an animal derives from peoples’ anthropomorphic inferences about that animal’s physical characteristics,”²¹ and notably the species of animal was an important factor. For the Kalahari San, the eland (*Taurotragus oryx*) held a dominant role in ritual contexts and in terms of “potency.” Important were the “fat, marrow, certain bones and muscles, horns, tails, blood and urine.”²²

The eland was the animal selected in both the /Xam and Ju/’hoansi communities for a boy’s first killing and upheld in specific rites such as girl’s first menstruation.²³ In the ancient menarcheal rite of the Eland Bull dance, widely known among Khoesan groups, a symbolic “transference” of sex roles incorporates female to eland bull (male) that represents a human-to-animal anthropomorphic metaphor.²⁴

An intriguing description of paintings performed in a ritualistic context was related by a descendant of a San painter, an elderly woman named Manqindi Dyantyi, from the southern Drakensberg’s Tsolo District.²⁵ Manquinidi, while standing in front of a panel of rock paintings, stated that some of the paintings were executed with paints prepared with the blood and fat of a slaughtered eland that had been killed close to the shelter where her father had lived.²⁶ She elaborated that people would dance in the painted shelter and with arms raised draw out eland potency from paintings that were made from eland blood.²⁷ Further details by Manquindi of the eland ritual revealed that

¹³ Kennedy, 1992 cited by Mithen, 2006, p. 552

¹⁴ Mithen 2006, p. 556

¹⁵ Guenther, 2020, p. 170

¹⁶ Guenther, 2020

¹⁷ Guenther, 2020

¹⁸ Guenther, 2020, p. 164

¹⁹ Jolly, 2002, p. 85

²⁰ Jolly, 2002

²¹ Hollmann, 2003, p. 44

²² Bieseles, 1975, p. 166

²³ Lewis-Williams & Bieseles, 1978; Lewis-Williams, 1981a, pp. 55–67

²⁴ Power & Watts, 1997; Knight & Power, 1998, p. 130; also see Power, 2019

²⁵ Jolly, 1986; Lewis-Williams, 1986

²⁶ Jolly, 1986

²⁷ Jolly, 1986; Lewis-Williams, 1986; Lewis-Williams & Pearce, 2004a

cuts would be performed on the eland’s forehead, underneath its rib cage and on the neck. Jolly states: “The blood taken from these cuts was mixed with a variety of ingredients, including fat from the eland’s stomach, to make a ‘medicine.’ The remains of the mixture were used, mixed with paint, to make lines and patterns on the rock face of the shelter next to the river.” This is a fascinating and important account in terms of an insight into the ritualistic elements of the art and humans’ reverence for the animal’s “potency.”²⁸

Animal Behaviour and Painted Detail

In terms of anthropomorphism, postures of animals may have been carefully construed by a San painter when painting an image of an animal and also symbolically motivated in terms of animal behaviour.²⁹ Mithen³⁰ contends: “Modern hunter-gatherers make extensive use of the latter (anthropomorphism), effectively attributing human-like minds to animals, and this can also provide effective predictors of behaviour.”

The painting at the Game Pass Shelter (Fig. 5), Kamberg Nature Reserve, Drakensberg, was of vital significance to interpreting imagery in rock art. Lewis-Williams³¹ pointed out that the posture of the split-bodied therianthrope (human figure with antelope head and hooves), portrayed with its legs crossed, is symbolic of a dying transformed shaman and represents the trancing medicine healer taking on the dying eland’s potency. Notably in this painting, the eland symbolically holds the same stance as the therianthrope. Followers of the shamanistic hypothesis regard the “dying” shaman and dying eland as metaphors for trance. Solomon³² argues that the split-bodied figures are spirits and not shamans, and suggests that the therianthrope holding the eland’s tail is an other-worldly entity as it has a slender body and body painting and may portray a rain-spirit who helps the living.

Significantly Differentiated Figures (SDFs)

An area formerly known as Nomansland in the region of the southern Maloti-Drakensberg has unusual paintings of images termed Significantly Differentiated Figures (SDFs) (Fig. 6).³³ This region is characterised by fine-line shaded polychrome paintings found throughout the south-eastern mountains, typical of the classic San rock art tradition, and also includes monochrome and bichrome images executed in the fine-line category with a paint medium that consists of a pigment and binder.³⁴ Blundell³⁵ suggests the white pigment symbolically adds information about the meaning of this art representation. Images termed *Eldritch Images*³⁶ are compelling, painted in translucent white pigment, some grotesquely portrayed bearing claws. In this genre of paintings is a sequence of images from the Storm Shelter that appear to be human, and others therianthrope—one with an antelope head and a human body possibly representing San trance metaphor³⁷ (Fig. 6).

Blundell³⁸ proposes that SDFs at rock art sites follow a certain pattern with a number of categories of imagery. The category termed large-headed SDFs (LH-SDFs) (Fig. 7) appears as anthropomorphic oversized elaborate heads (Fig. 6). It has been suggested that these figures are an expression of socio-political roles.³⁹

Ezeljagdspoort—“Rain’s Sorcerers”

Renee Rust has examined imagery at the rock art site Ezeljagdspoort (Fig. 8) and asserts these are water maidens. Together with her extensive ethnographic research she has found this art form represented at various sites in the Southern Cape region. Rust points out that “Rock art research of the region includes therianthrope paintings that may represent the sacred personification of water, a spiritual value present in the folklore of the Klein Karoo today, of hallowed water creatures with half-fish, half-human physiognomies.”⁴⁰

An opposing viewpoint by Jeremy Hollmann⁴¹ stems from his analysis of bird behaviour of swallows and swifts, with specific details of the painted imagery together with symbolic associations in /Xam ethnography. Hollmann⁴² suggests that the compositions of the paintings of swift-people were expressions of sorcery and that “swift-people” were symbolic of ritual practitioners.

Interesting is the fact that the images from Ezeljagdspoort were termed “people” by the /Xam informant /Han#kass’o, who remarked: “People they are, sorcerers; rain’s sorcerers. They make the rain to fall and the rain’s clouds come out on account of them.”⁴³

Woodlot (RARI-LES-MTM1)

San trance metaphor is implied by the numerous depictions of cattle therianthropes at the Woodlot (RARI-LES-MTM1) rock art site in south-eastern Lesotho. Sello Mokhanya⁴⁴ suggests that the various paintings at the site portray clusters of images that pertain to a number of ritual practices. It has been hypothesised that, for some San groups, cattle, like eland, were revered for their “spiritual potency.”⁴⁵

The depictions of part-human, part-cattle paintings that are symbolically portrayed in postures that emulate movement are numerous. Striking features of the therianthropes are the copious emanations of nasal bleeding and the prominent displays of red pigment markings painted on their torsos and heads (Figs. 9 and 10). The analogy represented in these paintings is interesting, with San healers who, while in trance states (during curing dances), are known to have experiences of nasal bleeding.

San and Rain “Possession”

Certain rock paintings reproduced and subverted social relations by depicting images that were associated with rain control rites that embodied and projected both ritual potency and social influence.⁴⁶ Rainmaking rituals may well have occurred in specific places, but the capture of the rain animal took place in the spirit world and required entry into an altered state.⁴⁷ A rain-controller may have drawn on the power of the painted images for rain control or revisited the site for rites and ceremonies out of view of other rain-makers.⁴⁸

From ethnohistorical accounts it is widely known that black animals (sheep, goats and oxen) were chosen for rainmaking rites.⁴⁹ Black clouds are known to be a metaphor for black cattle in /Xam folklore and symbolize heavy rain.⁵⁰ Pertinent to this are the cattle paintings at the Woodlot site painted predominantly with black torsos and limbs.

28 Jolly, 1986, p. 3

29 Lewis-Williams, 1985; Hollmann, 2003

30 Mithen, 2006, p. 551

31 Lewis-Williams, 1981, Dowson, 1988, Lewis-Williams & Dowson, 1999

32 Solomon, 2008, p. 70

33 Blundell, 2004

34 Blundell, 2004

35 Blundell & Lewis-Williams, 2001

36 Blundell, 2004, pp. 97-112

37 Blundell, 2004

38 Blundell, 2004

39 Blundell, 2004

40 Rust, 2011, p. 1

41 Hollmann, 2005

42 Hollmann, 2005, p. 26

43 Hollmann, 2005, p. 24

44 Mokhanya, 2008

45 Campbell, 1987; Jolly, 2007; 2015, Hollmann, 2015

46 Lewis-Williams & Pearce, 2004b

47 Lewis-Williams & Pearce, 2004b

48 Lewis-Williams & Pearce, 2004a

49 Hollmann, 2015

50 Callaway, 1884, cited by Hollmann, 2015



Figure 5, above. Game Pass Shelter, Drakensberg. Therianthrope touching an eland. Photo by the author



Figure 6, below. Storm Shelter, Maloti-Drakensberg, Eastern Cape Province. White translucent paintings termed *Eldritch figures*. Photo by Jeremy Hollmann



Figure 7. Maloti-Drakensberg, Eastern Cape. Anthropomorphic figure with nasal emanations.



Figure 8. Ezeljagdspoor, Southern Cape. Part-flesh, part human figures representing "rain's sorcerers." Photos by Pieter Jolly

A Mythological Water-Bull, *!Khwa*

The /Xam held medicine men of the rain in high esteem, and folklore accounts inform of *!khwa-ka gi:ten*, or “shamans of the rain.”⁵¹ The /Xam storytelle, Diä!kwain narrated to Lucy Lloyd in 1875 how /Xam rain-controllers would capture a rain animal.⁵² “The medicine men cut up the water-bull, they broil its flesh. They treat the rest of its flesh this way, they throw it away on the places where they want the rain to fall. The rain does as follows, where they kill the water-bull, there rain runs along the ground.”

!Khwa, the mythical rain-bull, is regarded as a significant figure of power in /Xam folklore with the intriguing narrative of “she-rain” and “he-rain,”⁵³ as related by Lucy Lloyd’s informants. Clouds were described as the rain’s hair, falling sheets of rain were the rain’s legs, while “she-rain” (a cow) flowed gently to make the earth soft and wet. The informant, /Han#kass’o, described the rain to Lucy Lloyd as “‘trotting,” as having a breath, a smell, a tail, ears. He resembled a bull, he “felt that (he) was the rain’s body.”⁵⁴ //Kabbo related: “Rain must fall on all places, for I will milk a she-rain, I will cut her, by cutting her I will let the rain’s blood flow out, so that it runs along the ground.”⁵⁵

Conclusion

Humans’ anthropomorphic connection to animals has a long and ancient history, as expressed in enigmatic complex motifs that formed part of human cultures dating back 40,000 years. Rock art researchers have held a keen interest in these compelling objects and images and engaged in often contentious debates in attempts to establish their meaning. Regrettably, the human condition and man’s close connection to animals have dwindled over time, with adaptations to new and threatened environments coupled with the overwhelming pace of the modern world’s technological innovations. We nevertheless remain in awe of these evocative paintings and figurative forms found throughout the world. They evoke a sense of humans’ once deep spiritual connection to animals and of a “Primal Time” when humans felt driven to embellish rock surfaces utilising hand-crafted brushes and compounds of ochre pigments. With present-day threats to our existence, we may be encouraged to glimpse into our ancestor’s former adaptive processes and into their unrelenting quest for survival, while navigating their natural environments in the distant past when humans and animals were closely entwined.



Figure 9. Woodlot (RARI-LES-MTM1), Lesotho Part-human, part-bull therianthrope with elaborate painted detail and emanations from the nose. Photo by Pieter Jolly



Figure 10. Woodlot (RARI-LES-MTM1), Lesotho. Cattle therianthrope, bleeding from the nose. Photo by Jeremy Hollmann

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Notes

Woodlot rock art site: Refer the Rock Art Research Institute, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa designation: RARI-LES-MTM1.

San: A corruption of Khoe terms for people who did not own cattle. Here it refers to Southern Africa hunter-gatherers, known to be the descendants of the earliest *Homo sapiens* inhabitants of southern Africa.

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Lion Man 2.0—The Experiment (2014) can be viewed at YouTube https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hgbvT9_pjzo

51 Lewis-Williams, 1981 pp. 103–116; Lewis-Williams & Pearce, 2004b
52 Bleek 1933, pp. 375–376; Hollmann, 2004 p. 169 (notebook ref. L.V.3: 4078–4085)
53 Hoff 1998, p. 109; see also Hollmann, 2004, pp. 155–157
54 Hollmann, 2004, p. 156 (notebook ref. L.11.24: 2223–2225)
55 Hollmann, 2004, p. 156 (notebook ref. L.11.24: 2223–2225)

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