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## 23 *Towards an archaeology of mimesis and rain-making in Namibian rock art*

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### **Introduction**

There is a lingering paradox in archaeological studies of southern African hunter-gatherers, renowned for their highly adapted way of life and the extraordinary legacy of their rock paintings at archaeological sites throughout the region. Despite considerable progress in research, the economy and ritual life of the hunter-gatherer society have remained essentially separate areas of investigation, almost always approached from different premises. The result is that southern African hunter-gatherers exemplify, on the one hand, the apotheosis of ecological knowledge, while at the same time subscribing to a complex of religious precepts that appear to contradict this very image. Although the need for a more unified view of social and environmental relations is clearly apparent, there is little to compare with the attention paid to the same general issue elsewhere (e.g. Bradley 1991; Tilley 1991; Ingold 1993).

Archaeologists in southern Africa have for several decades emphasised the technology and ecology of hunting and gathering, with detailed reconstructions of subsistence strategies in a variety of environmental contexts (e.g. Deacon 1976; Parkington 1984; Mazel 1989; Walker 1995). This interest reflects not only the preservational bias of the archaeological record, but a common view, supported by studies of surviving foragers, that adaptation is the essence of the hunting and gathering economy. Although it has yielded many valuable insights, the ecological perspective is ultimately misleading if observations on the environment are adopted as the basis for archaeological inference. The need for alternative approaches has become increasingly apparent as rock art studies reveal a pervasive and deeply held belief in the supernatural as an ideological determinant in the hunting and gathering economy (Lewis-Williams 1981, 1983; Dowson and Lewis-Williams 1994). There are few examples of research in which rock art and the conventional evidence of the archaeological record are combined within a single theoretical framework (Kinahan 1991; Yates et al. 1994; Jolly 1996; Ouzman 1996; Ouzman and Wadley 1997). One reason for this is the difficulty of establishing

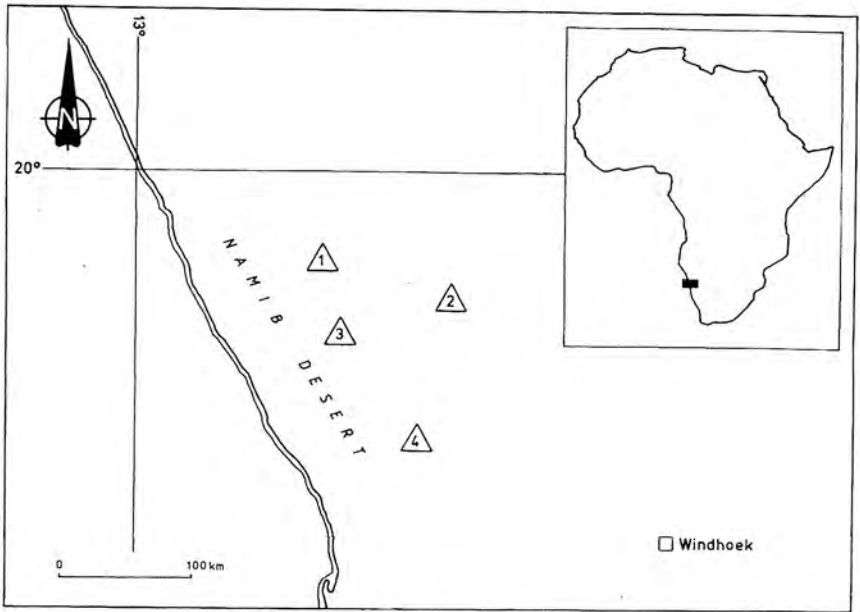
chronological links between paintings on the walls of overhangs and rockshelters, and the archaeological deposits that lie within them. Just as problematic, however, is the almost exclusive reliance of rock art interpretation on the authority of recent ethnography, and the fact that in rock art studies little cognisance is taken of the archaeological evidence, particularly that relating to temporal change and ecological relations (e.g. Lewis-Williams 1984, 1993). To overcome these difficulties and arrive at an integrated view, it is necessary to locate rock art in the archaeological context of hunter-gatherer economy and society. At the same time, the knowledge gained from rock art studies obviously requires that the environmental context and the archaeological record of hunter-gatherer settlement is viewed through different eyes.

Towards this general aim, I suggest that rock art may in some circumstances have served a purpose somewhat different from that which is generally supposed by current approaches to the interpretation of these complex images. The argument developed here is that rock art, particularly that relating to rain-making, represents a mimetic attempt (e.g. Taussig 1993) to establish what I shall call *concrete association* between otherwise disparate phenomena, such as rainfall, topographic features and the causative agency of animal metaphors. I propose that rock art for purposes such as rain-making was produced as a practical instrument to effect precipitation in particular places and at particular times. In contrast to the widely accepted notion that paintings were made in recollection of shamanistic experiences of the supernatural (Lewis-Williams 1988), I conclude that these paintings are more plausibly explained as a powerful act of preparation for altered consciousness; they preceded rather than followed the work of rain-making. The rock art of rain-making, which is elaborative in nature, might therefore be seen as an important and highly revealing series of thinking experiments, or a 'dialogue with nature' in the sense of Lévi-Strauss (1966: 19). As such, the art is a legacy of hunter-gatherer attempts at intervention in the rhythm of natural events, and a unique documentation of cause and effect as perceived by a people credited with an almost supernatural prescience.

The first of the following three sections introduces the environmental conditions of western Namibia, the setting of the archaeological sites to be discussed in this chapter (Figure 23.1). The second section considers the evidence of these sites against the background of conventional views based on rock art studies in southern Africa. This leads to a series of general propositions that are examined in the last section, as an attempt at a unified interpretation of the rock art and environmental context of a specialist rain-making site.

### **The hills and the rain**

Throughout most of the year, the thornbush savannah on the edge of the Namib Desert lies still and apparently lifeless. Dust-devils in the early summer



**Figure 23.1** Major concentrations of rock art in western Namibia. 1 Twyfelfontein, 2 Otjohorongo, 3 Hungorob (Brandberg), 4 Spitzkoppe.

are no more or less reliable a portent than the grey haze of bushfires further east, but the expectation of rain invests meaning in everything, from the listless gaze of rock lizards nodding at the northern horizon, to the strength and shifting direction of the wind. It often happens that massed clouds, just before the storm should break, move elsewhere at the caprice of the atmosphere, or dissipate into nothing. Some years there is no rain, although a few trees and bushes may come briefly into leaf, deceived by a faint shift in humidity brought on the evening wind.

Usually, in the days before the rains begin, the sun burns more fiercely and strong winds from the north and east bring in tall white cumulus clouds. The thunderheads, steel-grey beneath, may have several showers of rain pouring from their underbellies at different points. However, showers issuing from the largest clouds very often fail to reach the ground, their enormous contents being swept repeatedly upward and into the brewing storm by the rising air mass. This spectacular development can continue over many days, with erratic cloud movements sometimes accompanied by distant lightning, as the first storms draw nearer. These are brief downpours, with the sun emerging after a few minutes to show the new moisture being drawn upward again in long fingers of vapour, seemingly as fast as it sinks into the soil.

If the rains set in for a few weeks, there is a storm almost every afternoon. The soil becomes waterlogged and the river courses, which are otherwise dry, come down in spate for a few hours, carrying dead trees and all manner

of accumulated debris. Floods most quickly arise near the river source, particularly in areas with outcrops of granite which shed large volumes of water. A common feature of the desert and scrub savannah, granite hills often occur in clusters, and since they are all remnant plutonic stocks of the same Cretaceous events, they tend to be similar in many ways. Their characteristic domed shape usually represents the compressional core of an antiformal fold structure (Twidale 1988), and where the surface is broken by large fractures, these often reveal partings in the body of the granite itself. Such crevices are often convex-upward beneath topographic rises, providing deep rock-shelters in the shape of empty eye-sockets.

The relationship between the rain and the granites, especially the larger massifs, is not simply fortuitous. Within the narrow crevices of the rock, it is possible on a warm windless day to feel the current of air drawn into the hill as a result of its higher temperature and the cell of low pressure that develops around it. The rock retains this heat and the first rain clouds often gather above the hills which provide the necessary orographic lift to ensure condensation and rainfall (cf. Barry and Chorley 1976). Beside this apparent link between the hills and the rain, there is also the remarkable capacity of granite hills to retain large quantities of runoff from precipitation in crevices deep below the surface. These reservoirs fill narrow aquifers in the granite and feed tiny springs that supply animals and birds with water for months or even years between seasons of rain. Consequently, the granite hills of the desert and scrub savannah are islands of relative plenty, with a remarkable diversity of plant and animal life.

In view of its crucial importance to the survival of hunter-gatherer communities in arid parts of southern Africa, it is not surprising that there should be an abundance of folklore devoted to the rain. Such narratives contain acute observations on the weather and the unpredictability of the rain, although the explanations they offer for this evidently well-understood phenomenon do not as a rule reflect meteorological considerations (Schmidt 1979; Prins 1990; Jolly 1996). Indeed, ethnographic accounts describe the rain, in both appearance and habit, as an animal rather than a force of nature. For example, the /Xam, a Bushman group who once lived in the central parts of South Africa, referred to the dark rain clouds as the rain animal's body, to the columns of falling rain as its legs, and likened as to walking its movement across the landscape (Bleek 1933). Violent downpours were the male rain, or blood of the rain animal, as opposed to the soft, soaking, female rain which represented its milk. To another group, the !Kung Bushmen of Namibia and Botswana, these different kinds of rain left easily recognisable spoor in the sand (Thomas 1988).

The Bushmen, as Lewis-Williams (1981: 103) points out, were certainly not so credulous as to believe that the rain animal was a real creature in the mundane sense. But it was, nonetheless, a powerful and pervasive metaphor with specific ritual connotations. Certain shamans were acknowledged for their influence over the rain, the animal metaphor being extended for the purposes



of rain-making into a ritual hunt, involving all the necessary cooperation, guile and weaponry, as well as the ever-present possibility of failure. In recent times, at least, the skills of rainmaker shamans from hunter-gatherer communities were much sought after by agriculturalists and pastoralists alike, since both were constantly threatened by drought and its potentially disastrous consequences (Jolly 1996). Whether rituals of rain-making were efficacious or not is less important than the fact that they represent a crucial nexus of belief and practical action. There, at least in part, lies their interest to archaeology, for the beliefs and rituals of rain-making would arguably have influenced both the subject-matter of ritual artwork and the selection of ritual sites.

### **Rock art and ritual**

In the last two decades, systematic comparison of recent San ethnography and southern African rock art has yielded many new insights, and it is now widely accepted that the beliefs and rituals of hunter-gatherer society provide a valid framework for the interpretation of the paintings and engravings that occur throughout this region. This cognitive stance has been argued in detail elsewhere (Lewis-Williams 1981, 1982, 1983, 1993, 1995; Lewis-Williams and Loubser 1986; Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1989; Dowson and Lewis-Williams 1994), so that here it is only necessary to sketch its most relevant general features before proceeding to consider the evidence of Namibian rock art.

Among southern African hunter-gatherers, the most important and widespread ritual is the trance dance, a communal rite in which medicine people heal the sick and carry out a wide range of other related tasks. As described by Lee (1968), the trance ritual usually commences with prolonged dancing to the accompaniment of singing and clapping, contributed by the women of the community. Among some modern Bushmen, a large proportion of men and women are able to achieve trance, although few are skilled as healers and in certain groups healing is the province of ritual specialists, or shamans (Barnard 1992). The onset of trance is marked by outward symptoms including trembling, perspiration, and sometimes nasal haemorrhage, while the ensuing state of altered consciousness is frequently marked by vivid hallucinations and physical sensations, such as flying, or the ability to travel either underwater or beneath the surface of the ground. The experienced trancer construes these physiological symptoms as a form of supernatural power derived from the animal species they suggest. Animals thus serve as metaphors of the trance experience, which is associated with a small range of ritually important species. These animals recur, with some local variation, throughout the rock art of southern Africa (Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1989).

Generally, the rock art confirms the ethnographic evidence of communal participation in ritual activity. In contrast to the solitary nature of the shaman's work in other hunter-gatherer societies, the San are credited with

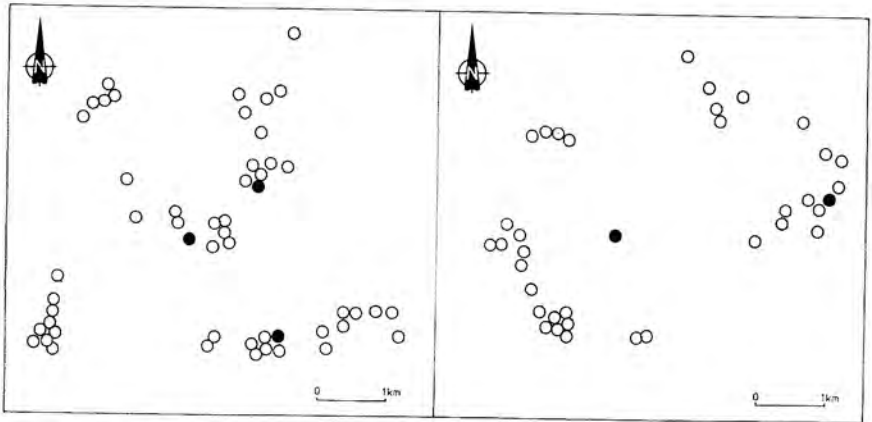
an openness about religious experience (Lewis-Williams 1988) that is reflected in the fact that paintings were done in open rockshelters, 'not in dark subterranean caves' (Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1989: 15). There were no ritual specialists or secret rites according to this view, other than the powerful shamans who emerged in recent times as leaders of beleaguered hunter-gatherer communities (cf. Lewis-Williams 1995: 144). Although under normal circumstances the abilities of gifted individuals were acknowledged, they enjoyed no permanent rank or status. A crucial element of this conventional view is that the paintings are thought to depict the healer's recollection of the supernatural; they were shared with the community at large, and served to prepare novices for the potentially terrifying experience of trance (Lewis-Williams 1982, 1988). As Lewis-Williams (1995: 147) has argued,

they painted while in a normal state of consciousness, recalling their vivid glimpses of the spirit world and making powerful images of those visions and of the animals that were their principle sources of potency. Probably, the very act of painting assisted in the recall, recreation and reification of otherwise transient glimpses of spiritual things. Like Wordsworth's observations on poetry, San rock art should be seen as powerful emotion recollected in tranquility.

However, while the cognitive explanation as to the meaning of the rock art is well supported, this hypothesis concerning its function obviously relies on the agreement of ethnography and the evidence of rock art in those areas of southern Africa that have been studied in detail (cf. Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1989).

Namibian rock art is comparatively less well studied, although there are significant concentrations of sites in some areas, such as the higher parts of the Brandberg (Pager 1980), a spectacular granite massif deeply incised by a series of rocky ravines. In the Hungorob ravine at the Brandberg, most of the rock art sites are concentrated in the upper reaches of the ravine, where they are loosely clustered in the vicinity of a few small but reliable waterholes. Sites at the Spitzkoppe, a somewhat smaller granite inselberg complex in the same general area, exhibit a similar pattern of distribution, with large central sites located at the waterholes and smaller peripheral sites scattered about in the same general area (Figure 23.2). In both cases the central sites are spacious rockshelters with complex painted friezes. The peripheral sites are smaller, sometimes with but a single painting to attest to their use, and little or no other evidence of occupation (and see Kinahan 1990, 1991 for further details).

Excavations in the large central sites of the Hungorob and Spitzkoppe revealed evidence of repeated occupation over the last five millennia, with stone tool assemblages and faunal remains indicative of a hunting and gathering economy. The sites have major friezes of rock art depicting several aspects of the trance ritual, including men dancing to the accompaniment of clapping women, and men in various stages of trance. In both the Hungorob and Spitzkoppe site concentrations, the archaeological and related



**Figure 23.2** Comparative distribution patterns of rock art sites in the Hungorob (left) and Spitzkoppe (right). Solid circles are sites with eighty or more paintings.

environmental evidence points to a pattern of aggregated settlement during the dry season, followed by a period of dispersal subject to the abundance and distribution of rainfall. This hypothetical cycle has parallels among modern hunter-gatherers in the region (Barnard 1979), and it is of particular relevance that for these peoples the period of aggregation is also a time of ritual intensity (Lee 1972). The rock art at the central Hungorob and Spitzkoppe sites reflects a similar concentration of ritual activity involving the aggregated community. However, there are no obvious ethnographic parallels to help explain the more common peripheral rock art sites in the same distributions. There is no reason to suppose that paintings at these sites were any less concerned with ritual matters, for their subject-matter is generally the same. No motifs are exclusive to the larger central sites, although, having more paintings, their subject-matter does tend to be more diverse (Kinahan 1991).

Table 23.1 presents a simplified comparison of rock art from forty-four Hungorob sites and thirty-seven Spitzkoppe sites, using raw counts of paintings identifiable to species or higher taxon. Numerically, the rock art is dominated by human figures to the extent that all other subjects together comprise less than one fifth of the recorded total. The table shows the effect of this contrast on the distribution of the paintings: while human figures occurred at nearly every site, most animal subjects were restricted to one or two sites. Considerable selectivity is also apparent, although clearly it was not guided by the availability of the various species as game, and in the rock art itself the animals are often grouped without regard to their natural habits. The fact that few of the painted species are represented in the faunal remains from excavations at the sites (Kinahan 1990, 1991) also serves to show that the relationship between the hunters and their environment is not self-evident from only one of either field of evidence.



**Table 23.1** Comparative frequencies of rock art subjects, Hungorob (A) and Spitzkoppe (B)

<i>Subject</i>	<i>A n sites</i>	<i>B n sites</i>	<i>A count</i>	<i>B count</i>	<i>A S total</i>	<i>B S total</i>
Human	42	28	158	86	494	317
Therianthrop.	3	2	3	1	5	2
Lion	3	3	1	2	3	4
Elephant	2	3	1	2	2	4
Rhinoceros	0	2	0	7	0	8
Zebra	2	2	14	1	15	2
Giraffe	11	7	6	14	28	26
Springbuck	7	2	8	1	20	2
Eland	3	3	13	2	15	4
Kudu	3	6	12	3	14	10
Hartebeest	0	1	0	1	0	1
Oryx	6	0	4	0	10	0
Ostrich	1	1	4	2	4	2
Snake	3	2	1	4	3	5
Cattle	0	3	0	7	0	10

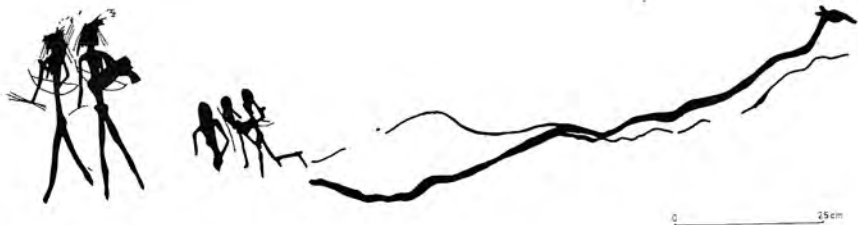
In the rock art of the Hungorob and Spitzkoppe, human figures are often directly associated with various animal species. Moreover, there are similarities in posture that clearly indicate the metaphorical nature of the animal figures. Antelope are shown with buckled legs, as in a state of physical collapse which occurs in trance, and in some cases blood is shown issuing from the nose. Although therianthrope figures are uncommon (Table 23.1), it seems that the animals in the art are largely associated with trance experience and may therefore represent healers in a full rather than partial state of transformation. However, the way in which some of the animal species appear naturally to exemplify various stages of the trance experience and attributes of the healing process, suggests that a somewhat broader interpretation is possible. Instead of illustrating the experience of trance in recollection, painting could have been part of the active preparation for trance, as objects of contemplation. It is therefore possible that the act of painting, requiring both concentration and visual imagination, was in itself an important part of the preparation for trance.

Paintings of giraffe in the Hungorob and Spitzkoppe illustrate this alternative. In its most easily recognisable form, the giraffe is represented by its backline and head, shown in profile, with the characteristic body markings against a pale background. Very often the feet are missing, and the body is painted as an open lattice. In many cases the giraffe is indicated by the backline and profile alone, without any evidence of other paint on the rock. There are examples of disembodied giraffe heads and necks in which it is clear that the rest of the body was not painted at all, but the paintings are not for that reason incomplete. Invariably, the withers of the giraffe are shown as a slight curve of the backline at the correct proportional distance from the

back of the head, thus serving as a reliable diagnostic feature. The same feature also occurs in paintings of snakes, many of which appear therefore to be transformations of giraffe, with the backline filled out and extended accordingly (Figure 23.3). Snakes are often painted as if disappearing into cracks, or into the runs of white precipitate left by rainwater streaming over the rocks. Giraffe are also sometimes found in these runs, where those painted in white are barely visible. There is no reason to believe that the surface of the rock had no coating of precipitate when the paintings were made, and the indications are that the paintings were deliberately positioned in this way. Such paintings imply an attempt to establish, through the act of their execution, a concrete association between the giraffe and the marks left by the rain.

There are clear resemblances between the form and markings of the giraffe and the initial stages of trance. The broken pattern of the giraffe pelage is highly suggestive of fractured vision in trance, and the extreme height of the animal reinforces this by apparently alluding to the feeling of attenuation in the first stages of trance. This would explain the absence of both torso and feet in some giraffe paintings. In trance, the power of the healer is said to reside in the stomach, where it is activated to rise up the spinal column (Lee 1968; Katz 1982). In the context of the other similarities between the giraffe and the symptoms of trance, the importance of the spine might therefore explain the convention of emphasising the backline in paintings of this animal. It might also explain the transformation of the backline into a serpent, such that it is worth noting the distinct similarities between the variegated body markings of the giraffe and those of the python (cf. Broadley 1983). The python is closely associated with water, and although the paintings seldom show diagnostic markings, they often depict very large snakes. The example at Snake Rock in the Hungorob is visible at a distance of nearly half a kilometre, even though much of its body is covered by a run of precipitate on the rockface (Kinahan 1991; see also Lensen-Erz 1993: Plates 3.1, 5.3).

The obvious resemblances between these species and the early stages of trance plausibly explain their inclusion in the rock art, particularly when the conventions of their depiction are also taken into account. It is well known that positioning was important in the art and the use of natural features in



**Figure 23.3** Giraffe-headed serpent with human figures, Spitzkoppe.

the rock added to the significance of some paintings (Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1990). In the context of large aggregations such as would have occurred at the central sites at the Hungorob and Spitzkoppe, these paintings would support the accepted opinion that the art served as a primer for the mysteries of trance (cf. Lewis-Williams 1982). This view could also accommodate the suggestion that the paintings were aids to mental preparation for trance, by individuals or groups within an open social setting. However, there are paintings that contradict this pattern and show that the same rock art tradition was also associated with solitary contemplation such as would be found in a more specialised tradition of shamanism, hitherto excluded from consideration in the study of southern African rock art. At the Spitzkoppe, for example, one of the peripheral rock art sites precariously overlooks the surrounding terrain from a height of nearly 100 m. The fact that it is small and difficult to reach shows that the selection of sites was not determined by convenience alone. This is but one of many isolated sites with very limited floor space, a few of which might serve to show the importance of this element, at least in the Namibian rock art.

The Mason Shelter, in the upper Brandberg some 11 km northeast of Snake Rock, has an elaborate frieze painted on the low underside of an overhanging boulder. To view the painting it is necessary to crawl under the boulder and into a confined space that receives no direct natural light. The same conditions are found at Crane Rock 15 km to the west, in another part of the mountain. The paintings at both of these sites comprise small panels in different colours, separated by bold lines, giving the effect of bounded, interlocking fields, similar to a patchwork quilt. Other examples are to be found some 60 km to the north, at the site of Twyfelfontein, where a rock outcrop at the edge of the site has a very small opening at its foot, hardly wider than a man's shoulders. The ceiling of this narrow space has painted on it a headless female kudu, barely visible in the dim light. Elsewhere on the same site is an isolated engraving of an ostrich, situated in a narrow crevice between fallen boulders, where it can be viewed only at very close range from an uncomfortable prone position. If the semi-dark confinement imposed by these sites assisted in the achievement of altered consciousness required for ritual activity, the paintings would have been executed as part of this process in which they served as a focus of concentration. Sites such as these continue to baffle rock art scholars, and of one painting in the Hungorob Ravine, Lenssen-Erz states: 'One might think that a painting of this size would deserve a splendid exposition, yet it is painted on the rather low ceiling of the shelter, visible only when entering. Besides this, figures are heavily damaged by a *waterflow cutting right through the main motif*' (my emphasis) (1993: 83). Significantly, the motif in question is a complex assemblage of snake, giraffe, feline-headed therianthrope, and dense parallel streams suggestive of falling rain.

Two general propositions are supported by the evidence presented so far. The most important concerns an apparent continuity between ritual activity and the environmental setting of these sites. Not only is there close

similarity between trance experience and the habits and appearance of certain animal species, but the depiction of these in the rock art takes into account both natural features of the rock and the positioning of the site. In this way, the rock art gives the impression that it is mapped onto the physical and biotic environment of the sites. This supports the further proposition that rock art sites define a landscape mediated by ritual activity. The nature of this intervention is partly reflected in the evidence for secluded as well as public ritual. Even if the secluded sites were used in preparation for public ritual, the evidence of these sites contradicts the accepted view on the function of the rock art. In doing so, it also points to the anomalous existence of ritual specialisation in a supposedly egalitarian society.

Similarities in design, as well as the relatively fresh appearance of the artwork in the secluded Mason Shelter and Crane Rock sites, indicate approximate contemporaneity. The designs also resemble particular elements of the complex Snake Rock frieze that appear to be relatively recent, judging by their fresh appearance and superpositioning. It is therefore relevant that Snake Rock and Falls Rock Shelter were abandoned early in the present millennium when hunter-gatherers in the Hungorob adopted livestock-keeping and a different pattern of settlement. Changes in the rock art suggest the rise of specialist shamanism from within the communal healing tradition, and although the paintings are not directly datable, this development must be related to the adoption of livestock and a shift in social values. The shaman was apparently an agent of social change, and the nucleus of an emergent pastoral economy (Kinahan 1991, 1993, 1996). These changes in ritual practice and in the attendant rock art tradition would have entailed shifts in both the purpose of ritual activity and its context: while the trance dance served primarily to maintain social cohesion in the egalitarian hunting band, the specialist skills of the shaman would also have been more widely valued among neighbouring pastoral communities.

### **Hunting the elephant**

Less hostile than the Namib, but marginal by most other standards, the thornbush savannah and mopane woodland surrounding the Otjohorong granite massif 80 km east of the Hungorob (Figure 23.1) is traditionally an important cattle-raising area of the pastoral Herero (Köhler 1959). The trees provide nutritious browse throughout much of the year, and there are strong aquifers associated with the granite outcrops, accessible through shallow wells in the sandy river courses. Pastoral settlement is concentrated in the vicinity of these wells, while the more rugged massif with its rockshelters and small natural springs seems to have been favoured in the past by hunter-gatherer communities. The mountain is deserted now, save for a few isolated cattle-posts, but the large number of rock art sites clearly attests to its former importance. Among these sites, the largest found so far is the Rainman Shelter,

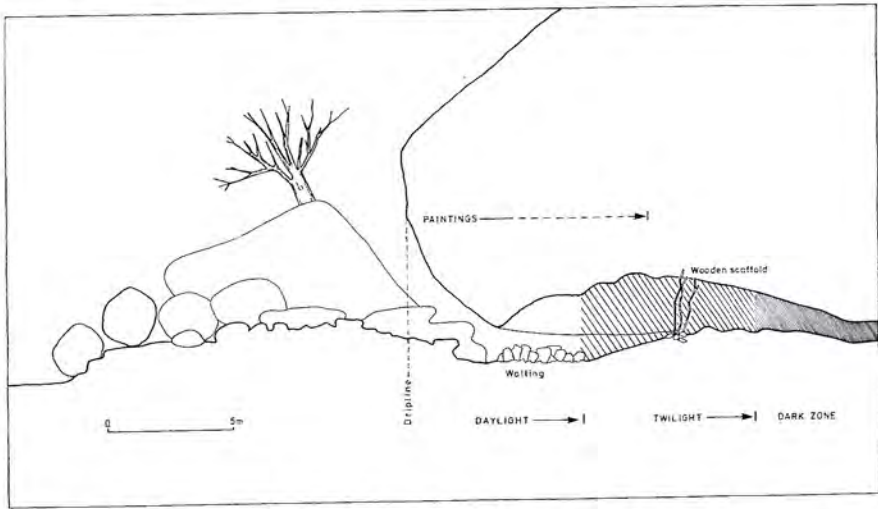
named for its rich and complex rock art friezes which, together with other characteristics of the rockshelter itself, evidence its use by a specialist rain-maker shaman.

The Rainman site is situated in a major parting of the granite which is exposed by a massive fault traversing the whole of the massif. The site is different from most shelters formed in the same way, and in many respects it is unsuitable as accommodation for even a small group of people. While its location is obvious, the mouth of the shelter is screened by large boulders and thick bush, so that it is not possible to see into it from even a few metres away. Most living sites in this sort of setting have an open approach, to the extent that sites with less accessible entrances, such as the Rainman Shelter, tend not to have been used. Although relatively large at 50 m across its mouth, the Rainman site has very little even floor space under shelter. Much of the floor area is evidently a streambed that would be in spate when shelter was most required, and the remainder is either in twilight or permanent darkness, conditions that are eschewed in the selection of living sites.

The main characteristics of the site are shown in Figure 23.4, which is a cross-section along the axis of a line perpendicular to the entrance, via what appears to have been the most likely approach. In addition to the physical characteristics already described, the section shows the main archaeological features of the site. Rock paintings, of which there are more than 150 identifiable animal and human figures stretching over approximately 30 m of the shelter, were mainly concentrated just inside the dripline, either on the overhanging roof or on other rock surfaces, in open daylight. But the section also shows that some paintings occurred in deeper parts of the shelter. Some of these paintings located in the twilight part of the shelter are difficult to see, and one showing a female kudu in white can be viewed only from a prone position at a point where the roof is too low for crawling on hands and knees.

Other features shown in the section drawing include a small enclosure of rough walling, possibly used as a sleeping area, placed under a low overhang of the roof. The enclosure contained no artefacts, but a small stone mortar was found nearby, deep inside the shelter. The small hollow of the stone and its highly polished surface suggest that it was used to grind cosmetics or aromatic herbs, rather than food, and might therefore have had some ritual function. There were few other stone artefacts either inside the shelter or on the ground outside. This is in marked contrast to most living sites or major rock art sites which usually have very dense surface scatters of stone artefact debris. In the domed hollow of the shelter, there was a rough scaffolding of thorn tree poles, probably made to suspend bags and other items above the floor. The poles showed traces of blows with a steel axe, indicating a relatively recent date, and this is confirmed by a radiocarbon date of  $350 \pm 50$  years BP (Pta-5471) for a sample of bark from one of the poles. A socketed iron point found on the floor of the shelter, and suitable for a small spear, could therefore relate to the same date. Charcoal from the smoking





**Figure 23.4** Cross-section of the Rainman Shelter, Otjohorongo.

of a bees' nest in a rock crevice nearby yielded a date of  $290 \pm 50$  years BP (Beta-69776), and this may also refer to the same relatively recent occupation of the Rainman Shelter, with a weighted average date of  $320 \pm 35$  years BP. Whether these dates refer to the paintings as well can only be surmised; however, the remarkably fresh appearance of many paintings in the site makes this a strong likelihood and points to the occupation of this site during recent centuries, when there would have been established pastoralist settlements in the same area (Werner 1980).

Near the far western end of the shelter is a small painted frieze that appears to depict an elephant hunt. Closer study suggests a different interpretation which in turn provides the basis for an understanding of a larger and altogether more remarkable frieze in the main part of the site. The smaller frieze, reproduced in Figure 23.5, shows three elephants apparently confronted by armed hunters. But the weapons are probably nothing more than a male secondary sexual characteristic, and other less obvious features must be considered in order to understand the purpose of the painting. For example, one of the bowmen is shown without legs, and one of his companions is shown with a hollow torso, both conventionalized symptoms of the trance state. The way in which the other humans relate to the elephants in this frieze is clearly unrealistic, as is the depiction of the elephants themselves. In the lower group, one of the human figures holds on to the trunk of the elephant, dragging it along with the aid of an assistant holding his legs: an unlikely hunting strategy in real life. Furthermore, all three elephants are shown with hollow areas in their bodies, the upper two with unrealistic hump-like elaborations on their backs. Some of these details are clarified by the large frieze, in the main part of the site, considered next. In the case of the smaller frieze it is

relevant to mention that the human figures are painted as if in the act of coaxing the elephant into an area of the rock that is covered with a white precipitate. There are other no less suitable painting surfaces adjacent to this, so the positioning of the frieze is clearly deliberate. The frieze seems therefore to indicate an association between elephant and rainfall, mediated by ritual activity.

The main frieze at the Rainman Shelter, reproduced in Figure 23.6, is a complex work employing a variety of colours and techniques. The painting is also obviously an abstract composition, and does not immediately bring to mind any living creature or everyday event, with the exception of the line of eleven figures, identifiable as women by their long back aprons and the absence of weaponry and male sex organs. The line of women may represent a dance which involves moving in single file with extended arms. Above the women and facing toward them is a figure wearing decoration below the knees, probably for the purposes of a dance. The lack of both lower legs and face in this figure probably represents physical symptoms of the trance state. Below and to the right of this figure is a hollow human torso, with

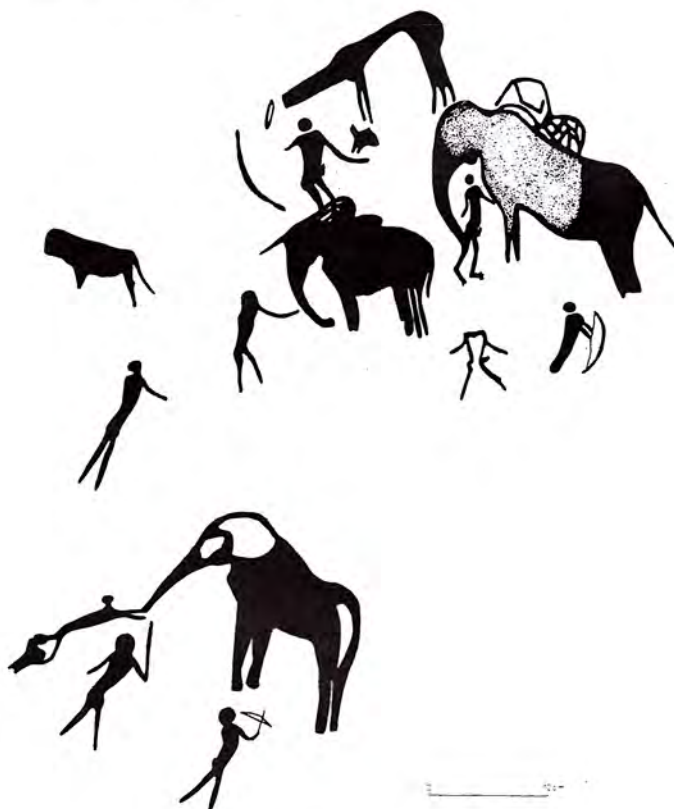


Figure 23.5 Elephant and human figures, Rainman Shelter, Otjohoronggo.

the same hook-shaped head. This figure is adjacent to an amorphous shape painted in precisely the same shade as the other figures so far described. In both colour and technique, these figures are so similar that they must form a single composition, superimposed on the rather faded painting still visible below the line of dancers.

Despite the absence of detail, the animal beneath the dancers is very clearly an elephant, or part of one. Close examination of the rock failed to locate any trace of the rest of its body, and it appears that only the belly and forelegs were painted. This is relevant because the trailing fringes in front of and behind the elephant legs were apparently painted at the same time, being similar in their degree of fading. The painting appears to have consisted of only these elements, representing the rain as the legs and underbelly of the elephant. Between the solid columns of the legs, the rain falls straight down on either side of what appears to be a bolt of lightning, shown as a meandering line with hachures at regular intervals. This must represent the centre of the rainstorm. At other points, there are similar fringes, but they are shorter and do not fall as straight. These in fact resemble fairly accurately the way in which isolated downpours seem to end before reaching the ground, with a slight curve to one side or the other indicating the force of the wind. The painting thus shows a number of easily observable features of a typical rainstorm, but conflates them with analogous characteristics of the elephant. Here, as in the case of the smaller frieze examined earlier, there is an association between the elephant, rain and ritual activity, in this case represented by the superimposed dancers.

The smaller fringes of falling rain in the right side of the frieze show that this is a single composition with a unifying theme, rather than the chance combination of different elements. This unity is important for the major reason that the frieze shows very clear evidence of being painted in several episodes. Field examination suggests that the elephant belly and legs with their fringes of rain were painted first. Next to be added were the dancers and the amorphous shape already described. Then, if it is assumed that similar but distinguishable versions of the same colours probably reflect different batches of paint and episodes of painting, the smaller amorphous shapes with fringes of rain belong to a third episode of painting. While there is no evidence that these were created at a different time from the complex of patches immediately above, there are clear traces of overpainting which suggest that this part of the frieze was elaborated on several occasions. For example, some of the bold lines within the complex are the same colour as a background layer which has been covered with a layer of chalky white paint within some of the patches. The chalky white paint appears very fresh and may represent the last of at least four episodes of painting, each a separate rain-making event.

To summarise the observations from the Rainman Shelter, it is clear from the setting and physical characteristics of the site that it would have been unsuitable to accommodate even a small group of people. The occupation

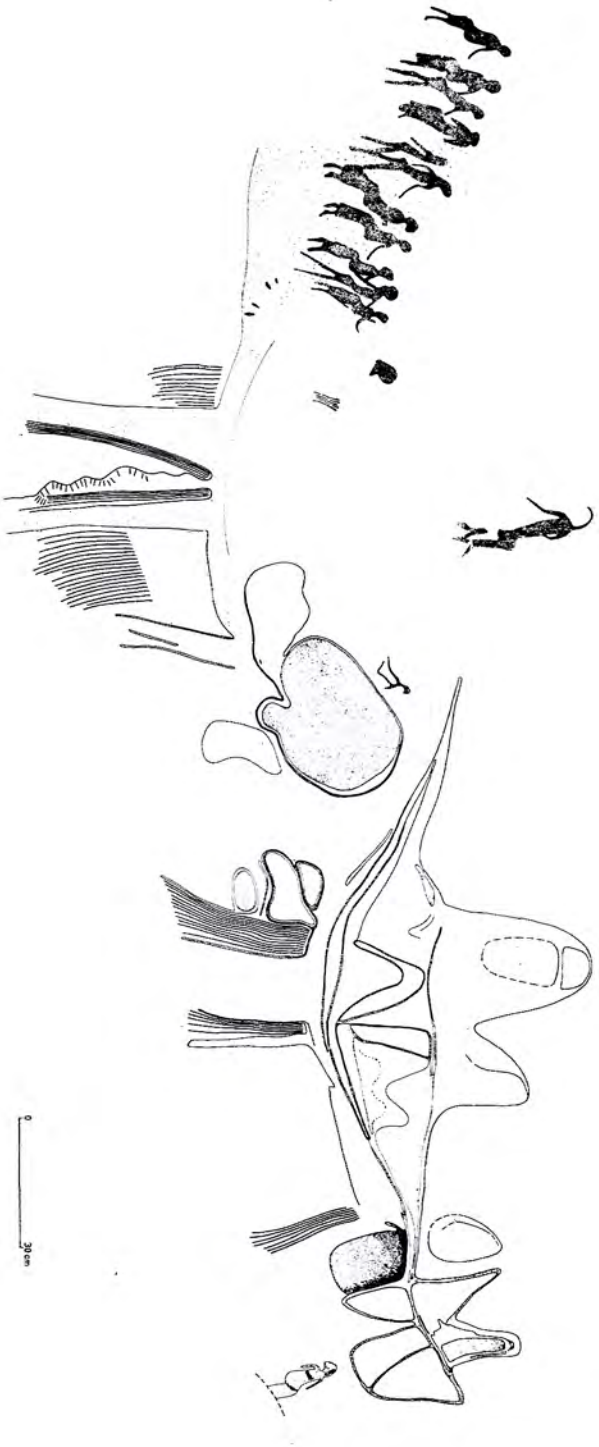


Figure 23.6 Rain animal and human figures, Rainman Shelter, Ojohoronggo.



evidence confirms that the site was used during recent centuries, as reflected by the radiocarbon dating and other associations. The paintings at the site appear relatively fresh, and given that there are no indications of more intensive occupation in the past it seems reasonable to conclude that the paintings and the other evidence date to within the last few centuries, when there was established pastoral settlement in the same area. Two lines of evidence point to a relationship between the site and neighbouring pastoral communities. One is the presence of iron, both in the form of the socketed point and in the chop marks on the scaffolding. The other is the apparent use of the site for rain-making in a specialist context rather than that of communal ritual. The most likely hypothesis is that a specialist shaman used the site to make rain at the request of local pastoralists.

In suggesting specialist, possibly individual, ritual activity at this site, it is necessary to deal with the apparently contradictory evidence of communal ritual activity in the paintings. The smaller frieze shows several men attempting to coax an elephant into the run of white precipitate. In the larger frieze, the dance involves a number of women in the conventional supporting role associated with trance. Although there is a solitary figure at the extreme right of the frieze, indicating an individual in the context of the main composition, there are a further fifty-two women painted in a continuous line to the right, and not reproduced in Figure 23.6. However, considering the nature of the site and its specialised function, there are grounds to argue that human groups in the rock art are an artistic, ritual device and that they are not intended as a record of attendance. The human group is in this sense as metaphorical as the animals associated with the same ritual event. In this context, the human groups at this site underline the association between dry season aggregation and ritual, implying that communal participation may have been a powerful ingredient in rain-making rituals prior to the rise of specialist shamanism, retained thereafter as an element of the rock art.

While it is possible to object that the positioning of the first frieze in relation to the run of white precipitate is coincidental, the association between elephant and rain is difficult to refute in the second frieze. There are also similarities in the depiction of the elephants that strengthen this view. The hollow areas in the bodies of the elephants in the first frieze are paralleled in the second. Also, the hump-like elaborations in the first frieze resemble the patchwork effect in the second frieze, not as recognisable elaborations of the elephant, but rather as amorphous, interlocking shapes. Although these are probably part of the apparent analogy between elephant and rain, and it is tempting to interpret these shapes as clouds, there is no particular resemblance. On the other hand, the shapes do recall in technique the antelope torsos that occur on this and many other sites, one very good example being the female kudu at Twyfelfontein, discussed in the previous section.

The patchwork composition in the main frieze at the Rainman Shelter recalls similar paintings at Snake Rock in the Hungorob, both in general effect and in their apparent recency. The Rainman evidence also adds weight



to the argument for ritual specialisation outside the context of communal life. While the evidence suggests that this is attributable to a shift in ritual practice during the last millennium, the basis of these changes must lie in the communal healing tradition that preceded the introduction of livestock to this region. The similarities with the Mason Shelter and Crane Rock also apply, along with some of the observations about them in the previous section. In common with the latter sites, the Rainman Shelter is a hidden site with some paintings in twilight and evidently used as a place of ritual seclusion. Considering the physical characteristics of the Rainman site in this context, it is tempting to speculate that the site itself seems to share some of the pool of suggestive characteristics that underlie the analogy between elephant and rain. The cool depths of the shelter in the dark and narrow parting of the rock evoke the same sensations as being under water. Furthermore, the partings of the rock appear to breathe in the heat of the day, a phenomenon associated with the rising of warm air. The fact that rain clouds often gather about such hills would merely reinforce this apparent link. Partings in the granite are good aquifers, so that, like clouds, the rock sheds water which leaves runs of precipitate. The runs resemble not only the rain itself, but also the way in which it is depicted in the rock art. Finally, the domed appearance and clustered distribution of the granites are themselves redolent of elephants, and it is unlikely that this resemblance, or the elephant's dependence on water, would have escaped the net of the shaman's mental *bricolage*. In this sense, the hills and the rain were also an elephant, interlocking parts of a continuity between ritual life, subsistence and environment.

## Discussion

Rain-making, as a special skill of San medicine people, has been widely recognised in southern African rock art since the earliest stages of its study (cf. Lewis-Williams 1981). Indeed, ethnographic accounts of /Xam rain-making have been verified by archaeological research which identified rain animal motifs in the rock art of the area concerned, where it was distributed on the landscape according to specific folklore accounts of the rain (Deacon 1988). However, the metaphorical nature of these and all other paintings has led to their explanation as part of the ritual concern with the promotion of social harmony, rather than as practical attempts to influence the weather (Lewis-Williams 1982). This general interpretation of the rock art has been criticised as overly functionalist (Groenfeldt 1982), although no alternative view has developed to take into account both the social role of the healer and the environmental perceptions implied by the art.

Although there are no ethnographic references to Namibian rock art, it clearly belongs to the same cultural tradition as the rest of southern African art. This means that while the cognitive approach is directly relevant, observations from Namibian rock art may be used to test some of its

premises, particularly those based on empirical field data. Applying the cognitive approach to the Hungorob and Spitzkoppe sites confirms the ritual content of the rock art, but it leaves unanswered some questions raised by archaeological investigations at the same sites. Attempting to answer these questions inevitably leads to a reappraisal of not only the archaeological evidence but also the cognitive approach to Namibian rock art.

The first difficulty encountered by this study has been seen to be the need to explain the presence of small, peripheral rock art sites in the vicinity of putative aggregation sites. The aggregation sites could be explained as foci of concentrated dry-season residence that also served as ritual centres, according to the notion of ritual as a communal activity. Shifts in settlement over the last five millennia might explain the general pattern of site distribution, but cannot account for the occurrence of secluded sites which point to the existence of specialised shamanism within the same tradition. Although the use of secluded sites appears to be the result of a change in ritual activity during the last millennium, this seems to have arisen from an established relationship between the rock art, ritual and the environmental setting. Thus, animals were co-opted into the symbolic repertoire of the art for reasons of their supernatural potency, evoked by their physical appearance which served as visual cues for ritual trance. The same principles seem to apply in the positioning of paintings in the sites themselves and in the selection of sites for ritual and rock art purposes. In this way, ritual and rock art permeate the environment of hunter-gatherer settlement in a way that suggests an unbroken continuity between subsistence and ritual activity.

Just as hunting and the technology of subsistence obviously held strong symbolic value, the rock art and ritual activity also held some technological and practical significance. If the secluded sites are considered in this context, it appears that they were important not only for their symbolic access to the environment of animal metaphors, such as through rock crevices, but also for their use as places of sensory deprivation to aid the achievement of trance. They were also important as rock art sites, and these examples very strongly imply that the art was not a recollection of trance, as argued by Lewis-Williams (1988), but a powerful act in itself (cf. Ingold 1993). This permits a different perspective on the rock art of the Rainman Shelter, where seclusion, thematic unity, and evidence of repeated elaboration in the same frieze combine to suggest that the paintings were done in order to make rain. The paintings were therefore practical instruments rather than documents of past experience, and their production a fundamentally poetic process (see Swiderski 1995), based on the mimesis (see Taussig 1993) of natural phenomena and the causative relations between them. For this reason, the perspective gained from the Namibian sites is doubly important, for it identifies the rock art as part of what might be seen as an experimental intervention in natural processes, and an attempt to establish concrete and beneficial associations between otherwise disparate phenomena. Rain-making should therefore be seen as part of the same process of intellectual engagement that brought the perfection

of arrow poisons, knowledge of plant foods and deep insights into animal behaviour, to name but a few of the widely acknowledged achievements of southern African hunter-gatherers.

The development of specialised rain-making adds a further dimension to the Later Stone Age archaeological sequence in Namibia. Based on detailed research in the Hungorob, I have elsewhere proposed that shamanism arose from the communal healing tradition as a specific response to the introduction of pastoralism (Kinahan 1991, 1993). This is in contrast to the ideological continuity argued by Lewis-Williams (1984) which I have criticised as unable to accommodate archaeological evidence for social and economic change (Kinahan 1994). However, my suggestion that shamanism was a short-lived institution in the establishment of pastoralism is apparently contradicted by the evidence of the Rainman Shelter. From this site it appears that specialised rain-making survived as a permutation of the hunter-gatherer rock art tradition alongside established pastoralism in the same area. By this time the hunting economy may well have collapsed, leaving only a few itinerant shamans. This would raise the interesting possibility of defining the areas in which these specialists practised, on the basis of idiosyncrasies of style and technique in painting. It is my expectation, based on the arguments set out above, that if the works of individual artist-shamans could be identified, they would exhibit great variety in form and content. Rather than the richness of an elaborate but static tradition of ritual art, this variety would reflect the continuous dialogue between the shaman and the forces of nature.

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