

# On the Body in Rock Art of the Khomas Region

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## Abstract

In many cultures, the body is regarded as a representation and reflection of their society or community. The body appears in the visual archive of rock art and takes on highly symbolic meanings. Individual organs are associated with certain emotions: the heart, the head, the nose, the womb, the penis, the stomach, hands, blood, bodily emissions and so forth. Aspects of culture were imagined to reside in the body.

This type of symbolism also holds true for San culture and spirituality, where the heart, the liver, the hands, the nose, the womb, the penis, the blood, the stomach and other body fluids are important metaphors of emotional and material conditions of shared social experiences and beliefs of culturally related people – whether these refer to witchcraft, or to special capacities and agency, charismatic or healing qualities, contagious infections, love, rain-making, anger or symbolic communion or specific rituals such as initiation ceremonies. Of all body parts, the genital organs are invested with the greatest symbolic meaning. Representations of the vulva and the phallus are to be found in many variations all over the world and have been submitted to various interpretations.

The widely-held idea that the rock art ‘illustrates’ the folklore and myths is not viable. Research over the past four decades, shows that the practice of making images was essentially concerned with different types of engagement with the supernatural realm and its beings. San image-making, as Lewis-Williams (2017:150) reminds us, “... was a ritual practice in its own right, not a secondary, merely illustrative appendage to San mythology or anything else”.

While it is undoubtedly meaningful to view rock art within a landscape framework to identify primary and secondary resource nodes as Lenssen-Erz (2004), Breunig (2019) and Kinahan (2020), among other archaeologists suggest, rock art could also be seen as a modification of the landscape and a construction of living social and cultural spaces, through altered states of consciousness, dreaming, folklore, rituals and visions.

The field of cognitive archaeology is widely associated with altered states and entoptic phenomena – altered states of consciousness induced by hallucinogenic substances – (Lewis-Williams, 1991 & 2002) and Whitley (1994), but other aspects of the mind are also important. One of these concerns the body and bodily experience.

In initiation practices, girls and boys are prepared for their gender-specific roles in society. Particular attention is paid to sexual education. Because of the perceived relationship between the body and the social order, the coherence of its parts and the harmonious communication of its members is the basis of the well-being of the community. There are numerous rock art sites in the Khomas Region and elsewhere in the country, that have images of bodies in the trance or medicine and rain dance; the most important ritual for all San groups (Lewis-Williams & Pearce, 2012). The dance promotes psychological well-being and social cohesion and is about the use of *n!um* to achieve, *!ia* (also spelled *!khia*). *N!um* has variously been translated as ‘medicine’, ‘energy’, ‘potency’ or ‘power’. The term has many meanings and refers to herbal medicines, healing, menstrual blood, pregnancy and ejaculation, among others (Lee, 1984:109).

## Introduction

The trance or medicine dance is a community activity made possible by the egalitarian principles of social organization. All pertinent rituals and taboos must be observed, even if not all people would participate in them. Various ethnographic studies of different San groups suggest that the dance promotes psychological well-being and reinforces social cohesion (Biesele, 1993), (Lee, 1968), Marshall (1969), Katz (1976, 1982), Lewis-Williams (1981a & 2002) and Loubser (2010). In the trance or medicine dance, *n!um* is activated within the stomach of a shaman and made to ‘boil’. ‘Boiling’, in turn, causes *!ia*, or ‘trance’, and through trance, one can use his/her power (most often it is men who do so) to cure the sick. Learning to achieve trance requires years of training and practice.

Lee (1968:39-41) identifies five phases of the trance performance. The first is the ‘working up’ phase. This phase is characterized by extended periods of singing and clapping on the part of women of the group, and dancing on the part of men. The second phase involves entering trance. Trance is usually achieved, either suddenly or gradually, after some 30 to 60 minutes. Lee called the third phase ‘half death’ – arguably, a rather unfortunate term. In this phase, the trance performer collapses in a state of physical and mental strain. “He, or she, may hallucinate. He/she will tremble with tension, shriek and moan, and have to be assisted by other dancers, who will rub his body to keep it warm” (Barnard, 1992:58), however, not all trance performers are capable of attaining this heightened phase of trance.

The fourth phase is what Lee calls ‘active healing’. This may last perhaps an hour, and several such curing performances, by one or more medicine men, can occur throughout the night. In this phase, the healer places his/her hands on each and every person present,



Image 1: A Shamanic figure at Rostock in the Oase Cave. Photo: André du Pisani

though sick persons are singled out for special treatment. This practice serves the purpose of binding the group as a whole and makes participants of everyone. The final phase is the return to normal. Sometimes this takes long to happen. The most memorable dances may last for one or more days. A change in personnel is possible, but the action may continue as each achieves trance, cures, and collapses in exhaustion (Barnard, 1992:58).

In the bichrome image above, the shaman is rendered in considerable detail that shows the clothes and adornments that he wore and is painted in close proximity to an image of an antelope, possibly a kudu, emphasizing the spiritual link between humans and animals in another world.

Above the image of the shaman, various Springbok (*Antidorcas marsupialis*) appear showing them as prodigious athletes.

The image 2 on the next page is shown above represents a link to mythology and cosmology. The painting of the Kudu cow (*Tragelaphus strepsiceros*) is particularly significant. Forssman and Gutteridge (2012:128) comment: “According to San folklore, with the creation of the world, the original *Jul’hoansi* decided to create supernatural power, which they used to give animals different designs. The kudu’s stripes were made using this supernatural power, which is also known as *nlom*. Kudus are one of the animals associated with the weather. When a woman’s fluids spill on the floor during childbirth, her and the child connect and are believed to cause the weather to change.” Similarly, when a dead animal’s



Image 2: *Jumping Springbok*. Photo: André du Pisani

blood reaches the floor, the animal's *n!ao* connects with the hunter, causing a change in the weather. The kudu is also linked to *n!om*. It is used to access the spirit world where various tasks are performed such as healing, warding off evil spirits, changing the weather, rain-making and fending off attacks by lions.

In the upper left part of the image, a therianthrope (human-animal transformations) depicts a shaman in the spirit world in a state of levitation. This skeletal-like depiction shows the shaman 'floating' in a different realm. The late Ernst-Rudolf Scherz; in his comprehensive and impressive survey of rock art in the country, called such images "*Tier-Mensch-Wesen or Geister*" [*Ghosts*] (Scherz, 1986: 44). Peter Breunig (2014:96) refers to "*Tier-Mensch-Mischwesen (Theriantrophen)*" to designate such paintings.

## ***N!om* (Supernatural potency)**

One of the interesting aspects of *!Kung* beliefs is *n!om* (Marshall, 1957). This is not to be confused with the Nama idea of *!nau*, which refers to a state of ritual danger at times of individual crisis. Rather, *n!om* is essentially a force which influences the weather. It is present in each human person and in certain large meat animals – sometimes painted as 'rain animals'.

Individuals require their *n!om* before birth. It is formed or implanted in the womb. There are two variants: ‘good’ or rain-bringing *n!om* and ‘bad’ or cold-bringing *n!om*. When a child is born with ‘good’ *n!om*, it rains. When a child is born with ‘bad’ *n!om* the weather becomes cold. Seemingly, the significance of human *n!om* is largely confined to the time of birth. According to Barnard, (1992:59), the only exception is that a child born with ‘good’ *n!om* may later be asked to urinate in the fire or burn some of his or her hair, in order to make it rain.

Rain itself is a matter of superstitious belief and the *!Kung* San speak of ‘male (heavy) rain’ or *!ga !go*, and of ‘female’ or gentle rain, *!ga di* (Marshall, 1957:232-233; Van Rooyen, 2015:135-150) and Kinahan (2020: 190-191). Rain is associated with hair, in the sense that in the *!Aulei* as well as in the *Zul’hoā* dialect, rain clouds are said to be ‘the rain’s hair’. Based on research conducted by Lorna Marshall (1976:70), when a torrential outpouring from the clouds is seen from a distance, the *!Kung* calls it the “rain’s hair”.

Animals which possess *n!om* are the giraffe, eland, gemsbok, kudu, hartebeest and wildebeest. When a *Zul’hoa* hunter kills one of these animals, its *n!om* is released. In a complex interaction with the *n!om* of the hunter, it creates a rainy or cold condition in the weather.

Image 3 below shows a cloud releasing ‘male’ or heavy rain.

The above image appears in an overhang at the farm *Noab* in the Naukluft Mountains in the Khomas Region and is one of the finest renditions of ‘male rain’ in the Region.



Image 3: Photo: André du Pisani



Image 4: Photo: André du Pisani

At the farm *Harmonie* in the Khomas Region a sensitive rendition of ‘female’ rain appears, amongst other significant paintings. Image 4 above shows the image of rain at the farm *Harmonie*.

## Initiation ceremonies

According to older ethnographic studies, the *!Kung* practiced both male and female initiation (Fourie, 1928:92 and Schapera, 1930:124-125). On the first day, the boys were given no food or water but subjected instead to the ‘smoke of the devil’s fire’ and the ‘devils urine’. On the second day, their skin was blackened, and danced for many hours, with little food or water. The third day was much the same. On the fourth day, they walked through a water-filled pan, gathered veld food, and, in the evening, were ‘introduced’ to *Glaua*. Then they consume honey which he had brought. On the fifth day, they were cleaned up and permitted to move about the camp, as long as they did not speak to unmarried women. Thereafter, each day was spent in tests of hunting skills. Those boys who passed the tests were tattooed with meat from their own kill.

Lee (1979:238-9) describes the tattooing in detail. A mixture of charred herbs and fat was rubbed into ten small cuts made in the skin, on the initiate’s breast bone. Then further

cuts were made on the left side of the chest, the left side of the belly, under the left scapula, at five different locations on the left arm, and finally, between the eyes. According to Silberbauer (1965: 89, 99), among the *G!wi*, ritual tattooing of the chest, shoulders, and thighs, follows not only a young hunter's first kill, but also a young man's first trance performance, thereby marking a different aspect of 'manhood'. Tattooing continues among the San living in present-day Namibia (Polzer & Huber, 2012:163).

Female initiation is said to have been dominated by the 'Eland Bull Dance', performed at the time of a girl's first menstruation period. The ceremony is wide-spread throughout the Kalahari. The initiate is placed in a hut and attended by women of the band, while the men had to leave the area. The person (usually a man) who represented the eland bull wore horns and danced in a step which mimicked the movement of an eland, chasing the women around the fire and hut. The initiate took no active part in the ceremony, but the other women, lifting their skirts behind them as they danced, represented female sexuality, in opposition to the powerful 'medicine' of the eland bull (Barnard, 1980: 117-118) and Lewis-Williams, 1981b:43-67). For a recent photographic record of various dances by present-day San in this country, see (Polzer & Huber, 2012:128-133).

The *!Kung* San makes different fires, some are built for the ritual curing dance and for the performance of other rites. The dance takes place around a fire built in the center of the dance circle. In addition, people who are resting, or are for some other reason not dancing, sit at fires near the dance circle. The rites that require special fires include the Rite of the



*Image 5: An initiation dance for girls at Hornkranz? Photo: André du Pisani*

First Kill (performed when a boy kills his first large animal), another hunting rite, a rite for a novice medicine man, *nlum k" xau* ("owner of medicine"), initiation rites for boys and girls, and the rite for a child's first haircut (Marshall, 1976:91).

Barnard (1979 & 1980) opines that the ritual tattooing of boys might best be regarded as 'hunting magic', rather than 'initiation' (Barnard, 1979:70; 1980: 117-118). In a social context, hunting is something to be 'initiating' into, in the sense that it marks the primary identity of an adult male. Just as the female ceremony signifies a woman's roles as a potential wife and mother, the male rites acknowledge a man's hunting prowess.

The image 5 shows a number of human figures in a dancing scene. Some of the dancers wear headgear, animal skin bags and carry dancing sticks. The elongated figure may be that of a shaman. Elongated figures appear in different parts of the country, such as at *Ekuta* in the Erongo Mountains, AiAiba, and at *Omandumba-West*, all in the same mountains, and at *Hornkranz-South*. Such figures are classified as type 5 figures in the typology of Lenssen-Erz (2001:78, 114) It is not clear if it is a trance or medicine dance or an initiation dance being shown.

In some paintings, mostly of *therianthrope*, fluid emissions from different body parts such as the mouth, head, eyes, nose and penis appear. One such image is to be found at the farm *Gamsberg 23/3* in a shelter overlooking a small ravine that carries a fair amount of water when it rains, and retains water in the near-by water holes for several months. Sadly, the erotic elongated image is rather badly faded and difficult to see, but it may nonetheless signify a link between trance, possession and sex, particularly when considered with other images of human figures and animals that form part of the panel. It is not entirely clear if the human figure urinates or ejaculates or if sexual stimulation is involved. Whatever the case, it tells the story of a bodily experience.

The monochrome figure right is 16cm in height, carries a bow, and is painted in close proximity to other human figures, two paintings of kudu – a bull and a cow – and a delightful Klipspringer (*Oreotragus oreotragus*). The site may well have served as a place of performance. The granite outcrop provides a natural home to Klipspringer and raptors, as I can attest on many visits to the site.

Apart from other paintings on the panel, those of human figures have been executed with great skill. These human figures form a grouping and appear about 1m 50cm from the painting discussed above. Image 7 shows the series of paintings of four humans.

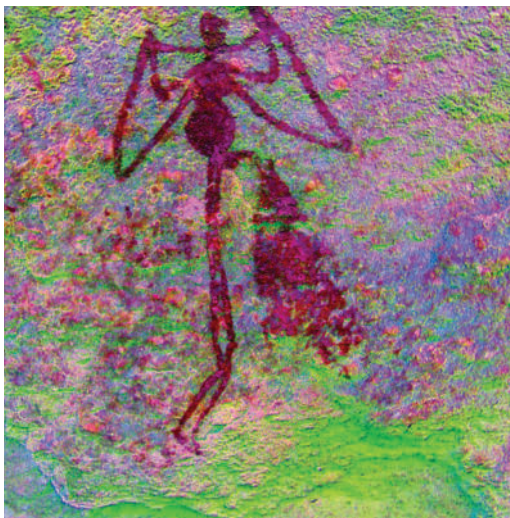


Image 6: On the body, possession and sex. Picture has been enhanced with DStretch software. Photo: Prof. Piet van Rooyen





*Image 7: Picture has been enhanced with DStretch software. Photo: Prof. Piet van Rooyen*

The four human figures have been painted as if they participated in a ritualistic procession. The detail is remarkable with special emphasis on their feet, legs and torsos.

## **Conclusion**

Since archaeologists are primarily interested in material remains, they can benefit by attempting to link such artefacts to human body movements and thought patterns. Loubser (July 2010:184) usefully remarks: “Realizing that psychological characteristics help create and constrain our interaction with the world, it is necessary to interpret material creation and interactions, such as paintings, living areas, and lived landscapes, in terms of general structural principles of the mind and body that shape the experiences shared by people globally”.

The important work of Laughlin (1997) on ‘neurognostic structures’, or what he calls “neural knowing” structures that are present in humans since birth offers a useful path for looking at some rock art. However, it seems important that specific cultural contexts make

for idiosyncratic ways in which people experience and view their bodies. Thus, it may well be more important, to study trends within cultures instead of relying solely on general principles. Rock art offers one entry point into studying bodily experiences and metaphors. The paintings may well provide a skeletal framework around which more meaningful metaphorical understandings of the body could be constructed.

The richly argued synthesis and illustrated book by David Lewis-Williams *The Mind in the Cave* (2002), offers a compelling set of arguments with reference to Southern African San Rock Art (among others) in support of combining neurological and archaeological evidence, pointing to the ubiquity among hunter-gatherer communities of what he calls ‘shamanism’ (Lewis-Williams, 2002:205).

Lewis-Williams not only argues for the widespread occurrence of shamanism, but notes “the ancient, universal, human neurological inheritance that includes the capacity of the nervous system to enter altered states and the need to make sense of the resultant dreams and hallucinations within a foraging way of life” (Lewis-Williams, 2002:206). Animals are metaphors for rituals, while the caves or overhangs within which the rock art occurs provide spaces for community and conflict.

The San mythology and folklore find powerful expression in rock art which is largely a ritual activity in its own right. The paintings as Lewis-Williams (2017) and Loubser (2010), among many other rock art researchers argue, are imbedded in the language, thought world and social circumstances of the San.

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